

## **Customs and Traditions of Hitoyoshi Kuma**

The Sagara family ruled the Hitoyoshi Kuma region continuously for nearly 700 years. They provided stability and contributed significantly to the economic growth of the region. Their legacy can be felt through tangible cultural heritage that includes artwork and historical sites, as well as through the customs and traditions that still permeate daily life today. These include the distillation of shochu from rice; Unsun Karuta, a unique card game with roots in the sixteenth century; and the Sagara 33 Kannon Pilgrimage, a practice that the local community has preserved since the Edo period (1603–1867).

### *Kuma Shochu: a regional spirit distilled from rice*

Shochu distilled from rice has been produced in the Hitoyoshi Kuma region since the early sixteenth century. Master distillers maintained traditional production methods at a time when other distillers were turning to cheaper alternatives such as sweet potatoes and barley. They were able to continue to use rice despite its high cost largely because of efforts made by the Sagara to improve the local yield, which included the adoption of irrigation systems. Shochu distilled from rice is popular throughout the Hitoyoshi Kuma region, and a strong culture has developed around it that includes traditional drinking games and songs. Today, shochu from Hitoyoshi Kuma is protected by a Geographical Indication (GI) and is sold as Kuma Shochu, a premium, single-distillation brand.

### *Unsun Karuta: a 500-year-old card game*

Unsun Karuta is played with 75 cards across five suits. The game evolved from a game introduced by Portuguese traders in the sixteenth century and became popular throughout Japan. It was outlawed under a series of conservative measures (the Kansei Reforms) implemented in the late eighteenth century by the Edo shogunate, because the game can be used for gambling. Unsun Karuta died out everywhere in Japan except Hitoyoshi Kuma, suggesting the Sagara were sympathetic to the people and their pastimes.

### *Sagara 33 Kannon Pilgrimage*

Each year on the day of the spring equinox and for seven days over the autumn equinox, people visit worship sites dedicated to Kannon, the bodhisattva of compassion, on the Sagara 33 Kannon Pilgrimage. The pilgrimage was popularized in the Edo period (1603–1867), and the worship sites were selected from over 100 candidates by Iguchi

Takechika, a Sagara retainer. For the duration of the pilgrimage period, members of the community celebrate with their neighbors and with visiting pilgrims by sharing food and drink.