

## Rice Cultivation in the Kikuchi River Basin—A 2,000-Year History

Rice farming has been the driving force of life and culture in the Kikuchi River Basin throughout history. The region's weather and topographical conditions are ideal for growing this staple grain, and technological advances over the centuries have helped make the most of this favorable environment. As one of the most productive rice-growing regions in Japan, the Kikuchi area has given birth to a wide range of distinctive customs and rituals rooted in farming. Both this cultural heritage and the local rice industry remain vibrant today.

### *A bountiful environment*

Several key geographical factors have allowed rice farming to flourish in the Kikuchi River Basin. The first of these is the river itself, which flows down from mountains northeast of the Kikuchi Plain and courses across the flat landscape for 71 kilometers before emptying into the Ariake Sea. The river's source is **Kikuchi Gorge**, the convergence point of streams trickling down from the northwestern edge of the ring of peaks that surround the Mt. Aso volcano. From there, the water flows gently across the plains, carrying with it various nutrients that fertilize the soil. The climate of the plain, where days tend to be warm and the nights relatively cool, is also considered ideal for growing rice.

### *Innovation through the ages*

Archaeological sites in the Kikuchi area show traces of rice cultivation from more than 2,000 years ago, when farming began in small paddy fields scattered across the vast plain. The communities that developed around these fields were connected by the river, which also tied the region to the outside world; items made in mainland Asia have been excavated from settlement sites dating to this era. The prosperity of the rice-growing land is reflected in the more than 100 extravagantly decorated **kofun burial mounds**, dating from the fourth to the seventh century, that have been discovered across Kikuchi.

By the seventh century, the Kikuchi Plain had grown into a thriving agricultural region, prompting the ruling Yamato court to establish a supply base there. **Kikuchi Castle** was part of a network of fortifications built to guard against foreign invasion, but it was later converted into a storage facility for the large quantities of food and other supplies that were sourced from the fertile plains it overlooked.

The productivity of the fields on those plains was improved significantly in the eighth century, when the centralized state imposed a new system of **land division**. Farmland was apportioned into regular squares using ridges and ditches designed for orderly irrigation.

From the seventeenth century onward, the efficacy and extent of farming received a further boost from the construction of *ide* **irrigation canals**, built to carry water across dry or mountainous terrain so that more land could be converted into paddy fields. And in the early twentieth century, a local agricultural engineer's revolutionary **underdrainage method** for regulating the water level in paddies notably increased productivity and the total arable land not only in Kikuchi but throughout Japan and the Korean Peninsula.

#### *Rice and culture*

Life in the Kikuchi River Basin has always revolved around rice farming, a basic fact that is echoed in traditional culture and customs. Being at the mercy of the elements gave rise to **rainmaking rituals**, some of which are still performed every summer. Other ceremonies conducted at key stages of the annual farming cycle include the **Fuchinsai** ("wind-quelling festival"), held in July or early August before the start of typhoon season to seek protection for the rice crop against the coming storms, and the wintertime tradition of **Umatsukuri** ("horse-making"), in which horses are fashioned out of rice straw, thereby petitioning the gods for the health and safety of farm animals. Sacred *kagura* dances are also performed at shrines four times a year: in spring when rice is planted, in summer before typhoon season to pray for protection, in early autumn before the harvest, and after the harvest to thank the gods for a bountiful crop.

Kikuchi rice itself is rich in cultural significance. During the Edo period (1603–1867), rice grown in the Kikuchi River Basin came to be recognized for its high quality throughout the country. It was branded **Higo rice** after the old name of the area now known as Kumamoto Prefecture, used by the shogunate in ritual offerings to the deities, and sought after by the wealthy and famous in cities such as Osaka, where the central rice exchange ranked Higo rice the best in Japan. The Edo period was also a golden age for **sake brewing** in Kikuchi. Local brewers specialized in a sweet variety called *akazake* (red sake), enjoyed on occasions such as weddings and funerals and at New Year's celebrations.

### *Rice farming today*

The Kikuchi River Basin remains one of Japan's premier rice-producing regions, where the local people take great pride in their farming heritage and in the flavor of local rice. The municipality of Kikuchi ranks rice grown within its borders on a seven-point scale according to the amount of chemical fertilizer and pesticides used, with the highest rank indicating fully organic produce. Various kinds of Kikuchi rice and the wide range of products made from it, as well as fruit, vegetables, and other local farm produce, are available at places such as the Kikuchi Kanko Produce Market and the Shichijo Melon Dome Roadside Station.

In 2017, the Kikuchi River Basin was designated a Japan Heritage Site under the title "The Land's Memory of Two Millennia of Rice Farming." The site's 33 recognized cultural assets are spread across the four municipalities of Kikuchi, Tamana, Yamaga, and Nagomi.