

## **Farming Rituals**

Rituals conducted at key stages of the annual farming cycle traditionally held great significance for the people of the Kikuchi Plain. Two important customs still practiced today are the Fuchinsai (“wind-quelling festival”) in summer and Umatsukuri (“horse-making”) in January or February.

The Fuchinsai is a Shinto festival held in July or early August, before the start of typhoon season, to seek protection for the rice crop against the coming storms. As winds were traditionally believed to bring disease, the festival has the added significance of protecting the health of the community as well as its livelihood. Participants prepare for the Fuchinsai by making miniature hats and capes out of rice straw. On the day of the festival, these symbols of protection are mounted onto bamboo sticks that are placed next to paddies and blessed by a priest, in the hope that they will shield the crops from wind in the same way that actual hats and capes protect those who wear them.

Rice straw is also used in the wintertime tradition of Umatsukuri. Children twist and weave the straw into little horses to pray for the health and safety of farm animals, without which growing rice on a large scale would have been impossible. Older children teach younger ones how to make the straw horses, which are displayed in homes until they are replaced the next year. In some villages, the custom is for children to go from door to door to exchange their horses for candy or small change. Umatsukuri takes place soon after New Year’s Day or in early February to coincide with *hatsu-uma*, the first day of the horse in the traditional calendar.