

## ***Chinkoro* and the Winter Market**

Every January, the Suwacho neighborhood comes alive with activity. Four days of the month are dedicated to a sprawling winter street market that attracts residents and visitors with local food specialties, handicrafts, and unique good-luck charms called *chinkoro*.

The midwinter Sekki-ichi Market has been held in Tokamachi since the Edo period (1603–1867). The name, which translates to “year-end market,” refers to the traditional lunar calendar, under which the month now called “January” was the last in the calendar year. Residents from nearby villages brought items they had produced over the previous months, such as woven baskets or bamboo tools. Everyone spread their wares out on the snow, and residents bartered and haggled for whatever they needed.

For more than 140 years, little colored rice-flour figurines called *chinkoro* have been sold at the market. Although their name originally meant “dog” or “puppy,” the figurines typically depict flowers or auspicious figures, like animals of the zodiac, and are thus popular souvenirs and good-luck charms. Over time, the rice flour dries out and the figurines develop cracks, but residents say that the more cracks a *chinkoro* has, the better one’s fortune will be in the new year.

Nowadays, the market is more of a celebratory event than an essential swap for winter survival, but purchasing *chinkoro* remains a key part of the experience, and shoppers line up in the morning to ensure they get just the right one.