

Yamaga Lantern Festival

One of Kumamoto Prefecture's largest summer events takes place in Yamaga and draws upwards of 100,000 visitors each year. On August 15 and 16, the Yamaga Lantern Festival commemorates the legendary Emperor Keiko, who is said to have ruled the country in the first and second centuries CE. According to legend, when the emperor's retinue was having difficulty traveling along the Kikuchi River, the villagers of Yamaga brought torches to aid his passage. The lantern festival pays homage to this event and deploys the motif of the *toro*, or traditional paper lantern, to thrilling effect.

Toro as art and ritual

The Yamaga *toro* include not only traditionally shaped paper lanterns but also more elaborate constructions, including those in the shape of castles, shrines, dolls, and other displays. The lanterns are lightweight, hollow, and made entirely with *washi* paper (traditional handmade paper). No wood or metal fittings are used. The specially trained craftspeople who make these lanterns are purified in a ritual at Omiya Jinja Shrine each April. They then begin to construct the large-scale *toro* to be offered at the shrine in the Agari Toro ceremony, the pinnacle of the festival.

A celebration felt year-round

On August 15, the first night of the Yamaga Lantern Festival, the newly made *toro* are brought out and exhibited around the town. The Toro Dance Preservation Society holds a performance on the grounds of Omiya Jinja Shrine, followed by more dances at other festival venues. The first night culminates in a fireworks display over the Kikuchi River.

On August 16, a ceremony on the banks of the Kikuchi River recalls the visit of Emperor Keiko in ancient times. A torchlight procession moves through the city until reaching the local elementary school. This is the setting for the Sennin Toro Odori ("Thousand-Person Lantern Dance"), a synchronized performance by roughly one thousand female dancers wearing golden and silver-colored lanterns on their heads. The women dance and sing in unison to the beating of *taiko* drums.

After the dance, the large-scale *toro* made by local artisans are transported to the shrine as part of the Agari Toro offering ceremony. These *toro* are then displayed at Omiya Jinja Shrine for a full year, until the next Yamaga Lantern Festival. The cultural significance of Yamaga *toro* was recognized in 2013, when the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry officially designated these lanterns a traditional craft of Japan.

Even though the lantern festival only lasts two nights, visitors to Yamaga can observe the craft of the *toro* and find artifacts of the celebration year-round at Omiya Jinja Shrine, the Yamaga Lantern Folk Art Museum, and other venues.