

## Fukue's Festivals

For much of history, Fukue was separated from its surrounding islands by the sea, and its villages were separated from one another by rugged terrain. As a result, a wealth of variations on folk traditions have evolved over the years. Villages have created their own customs, tied to their particular environment and way of life. In fishing villages, for example, traditional shrine dances (*kagura*) include depictions of dolphins and other sea life. In other communities, festival costumes are woven from a rush-like plant that only grows in brackish waters near the coast.

The diverse religious makeup of the islands also contributes to a rich cultural heritage: Shinto and Buddhist festivals are held alongside Catholic celebrations, such as Christmas light displays and the feast days of saints.

### Nenbutsu Odori *Dances*

Across Japan, many summer festivals include groups performing the *nenbutsu odori*, a Buddhist practice combining ritual dance, music, and the invocation of Amida Buddha's name. Its origins are uncertain, but it may have been started by the tenth-century itinerant monk Kuya (903?–972) and was later championed by a preacher named Ippen (1234–1289) as a way of popularizing Pure Land Buddhism. Over the centuries, different locations have evolved their own versions of the *nenbutsu odori*, some of which are recognized by UNESCO as intangible cultural heritage.

In Fukue, these dances are performed as part of the summer Bon festival, during which families honor their deceased ancestors. Despite the relatively small size of the island, it is home to many variations of *nenbutsu odori*, and individual towns have unique costumes, singing styles, movements, and names. In the Fukue dialect, the dances are broadly called *chankoko* (an onomatopoeic reference to the sound of the dancers' gongs and drums), but in Tamanoura, the dances are called *kake*, while the Tomie version is called *oneonde*. Whatever name the celebration goes by, visitors will see dancers in towering ceremonial hats rhythmically chanting and moving in tandem as they strike the drums slung around their necks.

### Hetomato *Festival*

*Hetomato* is a Shinto festival held in Shimosakiyama on the third Sunday of January to mark the first full moon of the year. The specific origins and meaning of the festival have been lost to time, but it has been celebrated every year for centuries.

The day begins with an amateur sumo match held at Shirahama Shrine. Next comes a series of games. Women who have married during the previous year wear ornate kimonos and balance precariously on sake casks while playing a badminton-like game called *hanatsuki*. Next, men clad only in white loincloths and team headbands smear soot over their bodies and faces in preparation for

a raucous game called *tamaseseri*, in which they compete to move a heavy ball made of straw rope into their opponents' territory. During this competition, not only the players but also spectators end up covered in smears of black soot. The soot is considered a blessing of sorts, said to confer good luck and protection against illness for the year. Finally, the youth association and the fire brigade face off for a round of tug-of-war.

The festival's main event is called *ozori* ("giant sandal"), in which a 3-meter-long, 250-kilogram sandal woven from rice straw is carried through the streets by local men. Along the way, they snatch women from the crowd, tossing them onto the sandal and bouncing them into the air several times. Supposedly, any unmarried woman tossed on the sandal will have good luck in the coming year. The procession eventually returns to Shirahama Shrine, where the sandal is offered to the enshrined deity, bringing the festivities to an end.