

## **Tanokami Festival**

For centuries, the residents of Gero have celebrated the arrival of spring with the Tanokami Festival. Over the course of a week in February, they perform elaborate worship rituals and dedicate dances to the Shinto deities of the harvest known as Tanokami. Many of the ceremonies and events take place at Moriminashi Hachiman Shrine, near the center of town. The festival culminates on February 14.

### **The pinnacle of the festival**

Groups of celebrants wear domed hats covered with red and white paper decorations called *hanagasa* and parade through the town on the morning of February 14. From noon, the *hanagasa* teams join shrine officials and other groups at Gero Onsen Gassho Village for ceremonies and lion dancing. Highlights include a purification ritual (*misogi*) in which those with leading roles must bathe in the cold mid-February water of a pond.

The events at Gassho Village are followed by a ceremonial procession to Moriminashi Hachiman Shrine. The procession includes approximately 200 participants in traditional festival attire and historic costume. There are breaks for more lion dancing along the way.

At the shrine, the *hanagasa* groups perform dances of reverence for the deities. In some, they are accompanied by taiko drums, traditional wind instruments, and singing. In others, the dancers play the *sasara*, a percussion instrument made from bamboo.

At the climax of the festival, spectators compete to catch *hanagasa*, bamboo chopsticks, and red and white *dango* dumplings tossed into the crowd. It is said that if you catch a *hanagasa*, you will be blessed with good health and prosperous business in the coming year. Events draw to a close with the dancers leaving the grounds while performing ritual movements mimicking rice sowing and harvesting.

### **The run-up to February 14**

The Tanokami Festival officially begins on February 7 when a member of the community is chosen to lead the festival that year. Ceremonial rites and rehearsals are carried out to prepare for the main public event in the days following. On the night of February 13, Moriminashi Hachiman Shrine hosts dances and other performances leading up to a midnight purification ceremony.

### **Origins of the festival**

The festival is believed to derive from a local form of *dengaku*, a type of music and dance performed in agrarian communities in premodern Japan. The festival's rituals and celebrations are intended to ensure a bountiful harvest. It is also known as the Hanagasa Festival because of the colorful hats worn by the dancers. The Tanokami Festival is an Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property.