

Tsuchizaki Minato Hikiyama Matsuri Festival

The Tsuchizaki Minato Hikiyama Matsuri Festival is the most meaningful event of the year for Tsuchizaki's residents. It is a time to celebrate and reunite with family and friends, even more so than the New Year's holidays.

The festival officially begins on July 1 and honors the deities of Tsuchizaki Shinmeisha Shrine. The main event, however, is on July 20 and 21, when teams of residents pull decorated wooden floats called *hikiyama* through the streets.

Each *hikiyama* float is roughly 5 meters tall and weighs 3 to 4 metric tons. The front of each float is decorated with large figures of famous warriors acting out a well-known historical scene, while the back is outfitted with a covered platform where musicians play traditional music. Above the musicians' platform, a wooden plaque inscribed with a humorous poem and a smaller figure—often of a modern politician or celebrity—offer a satirical take on current events. All the decorations are remade each year and

dedicated anew to the deities of the shrine.

Given the weight of the *hikiyama* floats, a large number of people are needed to get the wheels rolling. However, the floats do not have brakes or a steering wheel. Instead, the teams in charge of the floats use flexible wooden poles to hoist and guide the *hikiyama*. By briefly jamming the poles under the wheels, they can turn or slow down the float. The wooden wheels of the floats turn on their wooden axles with a high-pitched screeching sound that is considered the signature sound of the festival. The axles must be regularly doused with oil to stop the friction of the wood from generating too much heat.

Although historical records mention that a portable shrine appeared in Tsuchizaki's festival in 1705, the first mention of *hikiyama* floats comes from a 1789 travel diary. In this diary, the merchant and scholar Tsumura Sōan (1736–1806) describes streets filled with 40 portable shrines and

floats. The *hikiyama* also caught the attention of British traveler Isabella

Bird (1831–1904), who wrote about the festival in her 1880 book, *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan*. In recognition of both its long history and its significance for the community, the Tsuchizaki Minato Hikiyama Matsuri Festival was designated an Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property in 1997 and inscribed as UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2016.