

Yonekawa no Mizukaburi Festival

The Yonekawa no Mizukaburi Festival is one of Tome's most celebrated cultural events. It centers around an ancient fire-prevention ritual in which the men of the city's Itsukamachi neighborhood parade through the Yonekawa area in costumes made of straw, hollering and throwing water on buildings. This is reflected in the festival's name, which means "dousing with water." The date of the Mizukaburi Festival varies, but it is held annually in February.

Although the festival's precise origins are unknown, oral history suggests it dates to the mid-eighteenth century. Residents have carried on with the festival ever since, undeterred by war or natural disasters. In 2018, UNESCO inscribed the festival on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Around 8:00 on the morning of the festival, men from Itsukamachi gather

at a house known as the “inn for the gods.” There, they use rice straw to make the costumes that will symbolically transform them from mere mortals into *raihōshin* (“visiting deities who bring joy”), who are thought of as incarnations of the fire god. Construction of the triangular, cape-like costumes is led by town elders who pass on their skills to the younger participants. This includes teaching them the finer details of the headdress, which varies in shape according to each family’s tradition. In addition to family identity, community identity is also important. It is said that if someone who is not from Itsukamachi takes the role of a *raihōshin*, the ritual will cause fires instead of preventing them.

Once the costume pieces are constructed, the men begin by dressing in white vests, loincloths, and straw sandals. Next, they cover their faces with soot taken from the inn’s cookstove, symbolically hiding their human identities and beginning their transformation into fire gods. They then wrap twisted straw ropes, known as *shimenawa*, around their waists and upper bodies before adding a straw ring or necklace, known as the *wakka*. Finally, they don large headdresses, called *atama*, made from single bundles

of straw.

Around 10:00 a.m., a procession travels from the inn to the Akihasan Daigongen Shrine at Daijiji Temple. The group is led by a man at the auspicious age of 60, who carries a staff with paper streamers. He ceremoniously pours water onto the roof of the shrine. Next comes the main event. The straw-clad fire deities parade through the town shouting “*hō, hō*” while throwing water onto the roofs of buildings to protect them from fire. Two masked performers, in the roles of comical stock characters as opposed to being part of the main procession, follow along to collect donations for the festival. One character, named Hyottoko (“fire man”), rings a bell, and the other, Okame, carries buckets.

The straw of the men’s costumes is thought to have a protective effect against fires. Once the water dousing begins, spectators dart through the procession to pull out the straws from the men’s costumes to use as talismans for protecting their own homes over the coming year. By the time

the procession has reached its destination, the men's costumes are in shreds, and they are sometimes left covered by little more than soot, underwear, and a few stray straws.