

Daija Matsuri

Elaborate serpent-shaped floats are paraded through the hot-spring town of Oigami Onsen every May during the annual Daija Matsuri. This “Great Snake Festival” is a celebration inspired by an ancient myth involving the deity of the nearby Mt. Akagi.

In the legend, the deity took the shape of a giant serpent and was locked in a fierce battle with the centipede deity of Mt. Nantai, a prominent peak to the northeast of Mt. Akagi in what is now Nikko National Park. One of the centipede’s arrows wounded the serpent. As the serpent retreated, it pulled out the arrow and stuck it into the ground. Hot water gushed from the hole made by the arrow, healing the serpent and allowing it to drive the centipede back.

The snake deity is enshrined at Akagi Shrine in Oigami Onsen, which was built on the site where the serpent is said to have been rejuvenated. The

Daija Matsuri is a festival of the shrine and is celebrated with a parade through the town, during which participants carry a 25-meter-long handcrafted serpent from one hot-spring inn to the other to pray for the deity's protection. The serpent has detailed scales and fearsome features that bring the myth to life, as do the three smaller likenesses (each about 20 meters long) that accompany it and are carried by children.

Historically, worshipers carried traditional *mikoshi* (portable shrines) during the Daija Festival. However, they were heavy and impossible to carry to inns that stood along the Katashina River rather than in the streets of the town. The snake-shaped *mikoshi* were thought to be easier to maneuver, and they have been part of the festival since the 1950s.

In 2001, the people of Oigami Onsen built an even larger serpent to honor the deity. This 108-meter-long, 2-ton specimen is made of polyurethane, wood, and tarps and has a carbon-fiber head. It is on permanent display in a storehouse in central Oigami Onsen but is brought out once every 12

years, when the Daija Matsuri is held in the year of the snake according to the traditional East Asian zodiac calendar. Around 200 people are required to carry the snake, and it was certified as “the world’s longest festival snake” by Guinness World Records in 2013.