

## **Daijayama Festival**

The Daijayama Festival is an eye-catching Gion festival held every year in Ōmuta on the fourth weekend of July. Gion festivals originated in Kyoto to prevent the spread of disease. During the Daijayama Festival, massive serpentine floats spouting fire and smoke are paraded through the town to musical accompaniment. Local residents place small children into the mouths of the giant snakes to ensure their good health for the year. The louder the child cries, the stronger the protection they receive.

The origins of the festival are murky, but in the early seventeenth century, the lord of Yanagawa domain established the region's first Gion shrine, which is now called Miike Honmachi Gion Shrine, to spiritually protect the region. The area around Ōmuta did not have a reliable water source, and farmers would pray to Daija, a snakelike water deity, for rain. In 1637, natural disasters destroyed the crops in the neighboring Miike domain, so the ruling Tachibana family built a dam, creating a reservoir and a stable

water supply. According to local legend, the Yanagawa domain presented a festival float to the shrine three years later.

The earliest written record of the Miike Gion Festival, the precursor to the Daijyama Festival, is from 1852. It says that about 30 people pulled a float made from bamboo and rope. This is thought to be the prototype of today's snakelike floats, and worship of the water deities is thought to have merged with the Gion festival around this time. In 1853, the Tachibana family gifted a Daijyama float to the shrine. In 1893, young parishioners of Honmachi Gion Shrine began parading their own float, modeled on the earlier float.

Coal mining boomed in Ōmuta during the Meiji era (1868–1912), bringing many people to work in the mine. Four of the new miner neighborhoods built their own floats and held their own Daijyama parades.

After World War II, 12 more neighborhoods made their own floats and

began their own Daijayama parades. Most of these floats are still in use today and are over 5 meters tall and weigh over 3 tons. In the 1950s, people created dances set to “Tanko Bushi,” a coal mining song written at the Mitsui Group-run mine in nearby Chikuhō. The song was adopted by mining families at Mitsui-run Miike Coal Mine. By the 1960s, all the parades had merged together and combined with the Tanko Bushi dances. The resulting festival has more than 10,000 participants, and the parade can stretch up to 2 kilometers.