

# 11 Festivals in Japan You (Probably) Never Knew Existed

## 1 The Laughter Festival (丹生神社例大祭) - Wakayama Prefecture -



**Legend says that...** a goddess named Niutsuhime-No-Mikoto had overslept for an annual gathering for gods at Izumo. The other gods mocked her for oversleeping, causing her to grieve and locked herself in the Niu shrine. The worried villagers, wanting to console and cheer her up, gathered outside the Niu shrine and began laughing in unison. Their laughter was said to have restored joy to both the goddess and the villagers themselves, so the town decided to gather annually at Niu shrine to celebrate the miraculous power of laughter.

**When?** Early October on Sunday following the National Athletic holiday (a holiday commemorating the opening of Tokyo Olympic Games in 1964)

### What happens at the festival

The festival itself is registered as a Prefectural Cultural Heritage asset and has been designated as a prefectural intangible folk performing art, and is famous for being one of the weirdest festivals in Japan. A festival leader called 'Suzu Furi' or 'Bell Jangler' dresses up in a humorous clown-like costume and leads the attendees in synchronized bouts of laughter with each bell jingle. On the event day, the "Demon Encounter" will kick start near Otabisho, followed by lion dance and the "bellwheel". Mikoshi will be led to the Niu Shrine.

## 2 Kanoukaen, Nagasaki's Largest Fire Festival - Nagasaki Prefecture -

**Legend says that...** this practice is a historical reenactment from over 400 years ago. The lord of the castle fought to protect the local villagers when enemy troops attacked in the 16th century and, even though he lost the battle, Kankoukaen conveyed the castle lord's wish for peace. The procession of warriors, illuminated by the red burning torches, is terrifyingly powerful, and a magnificent historical tale unfolds on the spring night, such as with brave shouts of "Iyasaka! (Prosperity and Happiness!)" and the firing of real

matchlock weapons.



**When?** Every year at the end of March

### What happens at the festival

A total of 200 warriors, each holding a torch in one hand, will parade through Tachibana Park while the cherry blossoms are in full bloom. Visitors can join in the march and wear samurai armor too!

## 3 Mibu's Hanataue Rice Planting Ceremony - Hiroshima Prefecture -



**Legend says that...** throughout the Chugoku region, there is a folk custom of beating drums and singing rice planting songs while planting rice in large numbers, called "hayashida" or "tebayashi", which is said to date back to the Middle Ages. It was a ritual to pray to the "rice gods" for peace and good harvest while planting rice, and at the same time, it was a major event with elements of comfort for those engaged in painful rice planting work and one of the few amusements in rural areas at that time. It is said that the name "Hana-Taue" was given to this ceremony because the scene is so gorgeous.

**When?** First Sunday of every June

### What happens at the festival

Some local landowners gather a large number of people at the end of planting rice on their land and hold a grand festival of musical paddy fields, which has been known as the Mibu's musical festival since the beginning of the 20th century. The cows participating in the festival are adorned with gorgeous saddles of artificial flowers, and dressed-

up maidens plant their seedlings to the sound of drums and flutes.

## 4 Hanagasa Festival - Yamagata Prefecture -



**Legend says that...** in 1963, the Zao Summer Festival was held with the aim of promoting and developing tourism in Zao with the cooperation of Yamagata Prefecture, Yamagata City, the Yamagata Shimbun, and the Yamagata Chamber of Commerce and Industry. The Hanagasa Festival has its origins in the 'Zao Summer Festival'. The 'Hanagasa Dance Song Parade', which was a part of that festival, separated in 1965 as the 'Yamagata Hanagasa Festival'.

Until today, there are four types of Hanagasa Dance:

1. Shoshou Hanagasa Women Dance (Kunpu Mogamigawa)
2. Shoshou Hanagasa Men Dance (Zao Gyokou)
- (c) Kasa Mawashi Hanagasa Dance
- (d) Creative Hanagasa Dance

**When?** 5th, 6th, and 7th of August every year

### What happens at the festival

You will see groups dancing in a perfect order and that is the highlight of the 'Yamagata Hanagasa Festival'. In recent years, a variety of dances emerged, such as the beautiful orthodox female dance [Kunpu Mogamigawa], the gallant orthodox male dance [Zao Gyokou] as well as the dynamic Kasa Mawashi (hat rolling) of the Obanzawara region - the birthplace of the Hanagasa Dance. Creative dances featuring unique choreography can also be enjoyed.

## 5 Namahage Sedo Festival - Akita Prefecture -

**Legend says that...** in Oga, the Namahage are deities who visit at the end of the year to admonish

laziness, and bear tidings of good health, good harvests, and products from the mountains and oceans. On New Year's Eve, men from each village dressed as Namahage visit homes in the district while shouting out whether there are any crying babies or misbehaving children. At the homes they visit, the Namahage deities are received courteously and served food and sake in accordance with traditional custom. The costumes that they are wearing are made up of cleaver, Gohei (stick with pleated paper streamers), mask, Kede (straw raincoat), Habaki (shin guards), and straw shoes.



**When?** The second Friday, Saturday, and Sunday in every February at Shinzan Shrine

**What happens at the festival**

Highlight of the night- the sound of taiko drums, the falling snow, the yell of Namahage on loud speakers, the massive bonfire and screaming children. People will be chasing the Namahage (ogre-like creature) away by throwing roasted mochi at them. At the end of the festival, Namahage will go around distributing the sesame mochi to the audience.

**6 Saidaï-jï Temple Eyo, Naked Man Festival - Okayama Prefecture -**



**Legend says that...** during the Nara Era (710-784), the holy priest Anryu introduced the Shusho-ue prayer of Todai-ji Temple to Saidaï-jï Kannonin Temple. Shusho-ue is the New Year's grand prayer chanted by all the priests of a temple for 14 days. They purify themselves and pray for peace, prosperity and a bumper crop of the year. Jicchu, a holy priest of Todai-ji Temple, composed the prayer and dedicated it to Go-oh, the creator of the universe in Buddhism. In 1510, a holy priest named Chuua started to use a wooden stick with the sacralized paper wrapped around it. He called it "Shingi"(God's stick) and threw it onto

his congregation from his temple window. This was the beginning of the Eyo Festival. In later years, people started to take off their clothes to move freely to get "Shingi", and their piety took the form of cold water ablutions, establishing today's Eyo. The person who gets "Shingi" is called "Fuku-Otoko", or a lucky man, and he will be blessed with good health, longevity, wealth, virtue and safety throughout the year.

**When?** The third Saturday of every February

**What happens at the festival**

Up to 10,000 men participants, dressed up only in simple white loincloths and tabi socks, spend an hour or two running around the temple grounds and through a fountain of near-freezing water, an act said to purify the body and soul.

**7 Awa Odori Festival - Tokushima Prefecture -**



**Legend says that...** Bon Dancing has been formed under the influence of folk arts such as "Kumi Odori", "Zomeki Odori", and "Niwaka (Sudden)".

**When?** 11th (eve), 12th- 15th (main festival days) of August every year

**What happens at the festival**

In Tokushima City, the birthplace of the dance, the festival consists of three parts: the Eve Festival, the Selected Awa Odori, and the Awa Odori. Groups of choreographed dancers and musicians known as ren (連) dance through the streets, typically accompanied by pleasing sound of shamisen lute, shinobue flute, taiko drums, as well as kane bell. While chanting and singing "It's a fool who dances and a fool who watches! If both are fools, you might as well have fun dancing!", the performers with traditional obon dance costumes will parade through the streets.

**8 Sawara Grand Festival - Chiba Prefecture -**

**Legend says that...** the Sawara Grand Festival happens twice a year, once in July and once in October, and has a tradition of about 300 years.

This festival has been nationally designated as an Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property. There are 10 floats in summer and 14 floats in autumn.



(Yasaka Shrine- Summer) Before the separation of Shinto and Buddhism in 1868, Yasaka Shrine enshrined Gozu Tennou, the deity of pestilence believed to cause epidemics. Epidemics would often break out during the rainy month of July and as a result, the people of Sawara would hold a festival to try to appease Gozu Tennou. This festival became the Sawara Grand Summer Festival. Yasaka Shrine now enshrines Susanoo-no-Mikoto, the Shinto equivalent of Gozu Tennou.

**When?** Summer 10 floats - Friday, Saturday, and Sunday following July 10th

(Suwa Shrine- Autumn) Suwa Shrine dates back to around 1694, when the local people began developing the land at the west of the Ono River. During this time, they transferred Takeminakata-no- Mikoto, the god of war, from Inou in Narita City to Sawara's Suwa Shrine to be this new area's protective deity. The current main building of the shrine was built in 1853. The Sawara Grand Autumn Festival is held in October to thank Takeminakata-no-Mikoto for the good autumn harvest.

**When?** Autumn 14 floats - Friday, Saturday, and Sunday on the weekend of the second Saturday of October

**What happens at the festival**

The majestic floats are pulled around the city to the melody of the Sawara Bayashi festival music that fills the air, at times in a graceful manner and at times with liveliness. The float is made of a full zelkova structure and decorated with massive Kanto carvings, and on the top is a 5-meter-high doll made by puppeteers master in the Edo and Meiji periods. The sound of the Sawara Bashi, one of Japan's three major musical instruments, reverberates throughout the town as the floats glide past the eaves of houses in the streets of a town called Ko-Edo (a nationally designated conservation area for important traditional buildings), reminiscent of scenes from the Edo period.

**9 Kasedori Festival - Yamagata Prefecture -**

**Legend says that...** the Kasedori festival originated in the 1600s, when the region was once ravaged by fire. It was said that the legendary bird "Kasedori" brought water to put out these fires. They earned

the respect and devotion of the local people. Since then, the people of Kaminoyama, Yamagata gather every winter to pray for fire prevention and a prosperous year. While dancing, participants are showered with freezing cold water – which often turns to ice in the freezing temperatures. The dancers gradually move into the city where the water throwing continues and the sake consumption begins. It's believed that the festival brings prosperity.



**When?** Mid February every year

**What happens at the festival**

The celebrations begin at the Entrance Gate Square (Kaminoyama-jou Seimonmae Hiroba) of the castle, with a prayer around the bonfire for safety and good fortune. Afterwards, men perform while donning bird-shaped straw coats, or “Kendai”. Imitating the cry of a bird, they cry out “Kakkakaa!” sound. The audience joins in the fun by spraying performers with cold water. It is believed that all who get splashed by the water will be blessed for the year. Amidst the activity, pieces of straw often drop off from the Kendai. These straws are believed to bring good fortune when tied to the hair of a young girl - blessing her with a lifetime of luscious, black hair.

# 10 Three Major Festivals of Shiranuka Ainu - Hokkaido -

**-Hometown Icharupa Festival (Commemorative ceremony)**

In this festival, offerings are made to console the spirits. Prayers are said for the safety of the people, and a vow is made to pass down the Ainu culture to the next generation.

**Credit List**

- 1. The Laughter Festival : 和歌山県日高川町役場
- 2. Kanoukaen : 一般社団法人長崎県観光連盟
- 3. Hanataue Rice Planting Ceremony : 一般社団法人北広島町観光協会
- 4. Hanagasa Festival : 山形県花笠協議会
- 5. Namahage Sedo Festival : 男鹿市観光協会

- 6. Saidai-ji Temple Eyo : © Okayama Prefectural Tourism Federation
- 7. Awa Odori Festival : 写真提供:阿波おどり実行委員会
- 8. Sawara Grand Festival : 香取市役所商工観光課
- 9. Kasedori Festival : 上山市民俗行事加勢鳥保存会
- 10. Three Major Festivals of Shiranuka Ainu : 白糠アイヌ協会
- 11. Hayachine Kagura : 一般社団法人花巻観光協会

**Apology Notice**

This is an apology notice to 小田急電鉄株式会社 and 株式会社バスモ regarding the credit copyright matter in What's Up Japan December 2020 issue.

The corrections are as follows:

“P A S M O credit to 小田急電鉄株式会社” is an incorrect information. Instead,「P A S M O」is a registered trademark of 株式会社バスモ.

We sincerely apologize for any inconvenience caused. We will be more careful and avoid repeating the same mistake.

Sincerely,  
What's Up Japan Editorial Team



**~ Humpe Icharupa Festival (Whale Festival)**

Based on the folktale of the humpe (whale), this festival is the place to emphasize the importance of living in harmony with nature and to thank the gods for the blessings they offer; a commemorative ceremony for the ancestors is also held.

**~ Shishamo Festival (for safety at sea and a good catch)**

Based on the folktale of the shishamo smelt, this festival is the place to affirm the importance of living in harmony with nature and to thank the gods for the blessings they offer; prayers are also made for the safety of shishamo smelt fishing and for a good catch.



**When?** Hometown Icharupa Festival in August, Humpe Icharupa Festival in September, and Shishamo Festival in November

**What happens at the festival**

During these events, “kamuy-nomi (prayer to the fire goddess)”, “nusaonkami (prayer at the altar)”, “icharupa (memorial service of the ancestors)”, and votive dances are performed at a commemorative dinner.

# 11 Hayachine Kagura - Iwate Prefecture -



Legend says that... Kagura literally means “entertainment for God”. There are many versions of Kagura in Iwate; the two most famous ones are Take Kagura and Otsugunai Kagura. Both of them together are referred to as “Hayachine Kagura”. It is a traditional folk performance that features a series of 40 masked dances together with live music. The two Kaguras both contain about 40 programs, and end with a dance called Gongen Mai ( Buddha Avatar Dance ). With over 500 years of history, Hayachine Kagura was registered as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2009.

**When?** The second Sunday of every month is designated as “Kagura Day”.

Three kagura performances are held on a monthly basis: Take-Kagura, Otsuguna-Kagura and Yakimaki-Kagura.

**What happens at the festival**

In the Ohasama region of Hanamaki City, Hayachine Kagura is performed 8 times a year at events such as shrine festivals. In addition, Take Kagura, Otsugunai Kagura, and Yagimaki Kagura are performed on the 2nd Sunday of each month at the Hanamaki City Ohasama Exchange Vitalization Center ( admission charged ). Meanwhile, Take Kagura Gongen Mai is performed at the top of Mt. Hayachine on the opening day of the mountain's hiking season. The performers dance while wearing masks and traditional costumes, like Japanese hakama and chihaya (for male god), and kimono and chihaya (for female god).

**EDITOR'S NOTE**

Goodbye 2020, hello 2021! It's January now, and tons of exciting events are lining up for 2021. Other than the well-known Japanese New Year, and the Bon Odori, which is also held in Malaysia annually, I want to show you some other mesmerizing festivals in Japan that are celebrated in local towns. I hope that this article is informative to you, and helps you understand more about Japanese culture!

(Vender ♥)



Excited by something we've published? Send us your experiences with a simple description coupled with a photo, and include the location to [senyum.marketing@senyumpress.com](mailto:senyum.marketing@senyumpress.com)