

Column

Annual Events in Japan

Wild Dancing at the *Namahage Sedo Festival*

The *Namahage Sedo Festival* is regularly held in the middle of February at the Shinzan Shinto Shrine in Akita Prefecture's Oga City in northeastern Japan. This tourist attraction combines the 900-year-old Shinto *Saito* ritual with the *namahage* legend in which masked troll-like demons wearing straw raincoats and wielding broad-bladed kitchen knives visit houses calling out, "Any naughty children inside?" Actually, these demons are fondly thought of by the people of Oga City as messengers from the gods sent to scold the lazy, expel evil spirits and bring good luck. With a history of over 200 years, the *Oga no namahage* event was designated by the government as an Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property in Japan in 1978, and was listed by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage in Japan in 2018. In the *Namahage Sedo Festival*, the *namahage visit* is reenacted with *namahage dances* and to the accompaniment of *namahage drums* before bonfires in the grounds of the shrine. This fantasy spectacle enthralls and amuses older onlookers.



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The *Mitsubishi Monitor* is published by the Mitsubishi Public Affairs Committee

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