

## **SATO KUMIKO**

APAN'S snow country is home to a traditional *koshogatsu*<sup>i</sup> (Little New Year) event called "Kamakura," in which snow is compacted and the inside hollowed out to create a space in which to worship the deity of water. One such Kamakura event is held in Yokote City, Akita Prefecture, where for 450 years, families have built *kamakura* (snow huts) to pray for abundant harvests and the safety of their households. Today, the tradition continues as part of the Yokote Snow Festival, an annual event held over two nights on February 15 and 16.

During the Snow Festival, more than eighty 3-meter-high kamakura are erected at the festival site, with thousands of miniature kamakura also set up on the riverbanks and elementary school grounds in Yokote City. In the evening, candles are lit inside them, creating a magical scene.

Ko-shogatsu is an event held on January 15, as opposed to O-shogatsu, which is a New Year's event held mainly on January 1. Depending on the region, Ko-shogatsu may refer to the three days from January 14 to 16. The many kamakura set up at the Snow Festival are built by local *kamakura shokunin* (kamakura artisans). They begin by drawing a circle around 3.5 to 4 meters in diameter, then collect and pile up snow inside it, treading down on the snow as they go until the mound reaches a height of around 3 meters. The kamakura is then hollowed out starting with the entrance, and a *kamidana* altar (literally, deity shelf) is carved into the wall opposite the entrance to enshrine the deity of water.

"Each kamakura is 'hosted' by three or four local children aged between 5 and 12. Children play a leading role in the Yokote Snow Festival," says Konishi Haruna of the Yokote City Tourism Association.

Although kamakura are made of snow, they are surprisingly warm inside thanks to the *shichirin* (portable clay cooking stoves) placed within. From inside the kamakura, the children call out to festival-goers in the local dialect to "Come in and pay your respects to the gods!," treating those who enter to refreshments of *amazake*, a sweet drink made from fermented rice, and grilled *mochi* rice cakes.

Even on bitterly cold nights, the soft glow from the kamakura and the smiles of the children envelop the visitors in a heart-warming embrace.

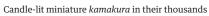
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Kamakura snow huts in Yokote City, Akita Prefecture



Festival-goers inside a snow hut at the Yokote Snow Festival





Festival-goers walk among candle-lit miniature kamakura

