

Aerial view of the *kanto* parade on Kanto Odori street in Akita City



Performers balance *kanto* strung with 46 lanterns and weighing some 50 kg

# The Akita Kanto Festival

## Illuminating the Night Sky with “Rice Ears” of Light

The Akita Kanto Festival is a major festival in the Tohoku region of northeast Japan during which *kanto*, long bamboo poles strung with lanterns, light up the summer nights.

SUGIYAMA MAMORU

THE Akita Kanto Festival is held over four days from August 3 to 6 in the city of Akita, which is located along the Sea of Japan coast in Akita Prefecture in the Tohoku (northeast) part of the main island of Honshu. The “*kanto*” of the festival’s name refers to the bamboo poles that are strung with lanterns and are likened to ears of rice. The festival has its roots in the middle of the 18th-century in an event held for a bountiful harvest and for driving away summer sickness and evil spirits. It is a national Important

Intangible Folk Cultural Property and is one of the three major festivals in Tohoku, along with the Aomori Nebuta Festival and the Sendai Tanabata Festival.

There are four sizes of *kanto*, ranging from small ones for children measuring about 5 meters long to huge 12-meter-long poles strung with 46 lanterns. The biggest ones weigh about 50 kg.

As darkness falls on the day of the festival, 250 long *kanto* bamboo poles strung with many lanterns are lined up along

All photos: Courtesy of Akita City Kanto Festival Executive Committee



Huge *kanto* with lanterns lit at the Akita Kanto Festival



the street commonly known as Kanto Odori Street in Akita (real name, Sanno Odori Street). While *ohayashi*<sup>1</sup> is played and shouts of “*Dokkoisho, dokkoisho*” (heave ho) fly through the air, the candle-lit lanterns swing about while the *kanto*, held up by the *sashite* pole bearers, bend and sway. The *sashite* take turns balancing the heavy *kanto* on their hands, head, shoulders and backs.

A member of staff on the Akita City Kanto Festival Executive Committee says, “No matter how many times I see the opening of the festival, when the *kanto* with their lanterns lit are lifted up all at once, my heart still leaps with excitement.” The rows of *kanto*, their lanterns swinging on the swaying poles, look like golden ears of rice in a wind-blown paddy field.

The Lanterns are painted with a variety of designs representing each area of Akita City participating in the festival. Some of the lanterns feature patterns and letters representative of the region, while others feature folding fans and evergreen pine trees expressing hope for future prosperity. The lanterns carry wishes for happiness, long life, and the birth of many children for the people who live in the northern lands. The candles used in the lanterns are also prized as amulets for safe birth, and it is said that the shorter the candle, the shorter the time of the childbirth.

The festival staff member says, “Around the beginning of July, you can hear the sounds of *ohayashi* practicing wherever you go in the city, and the excitement starts to build.”

Summer has come again; the light of the *kanto* raised high, *ohayashi* and calls of “*Dokkoisho, dokkoisho*” filling the air, will soon decorate the Akita night sky. 7

<sup>i</sup> The music is played during the festival. Generally, it is cheerful accompaniment music played by *fue* flutes and drums.



A *taiko* drum and *fue* flute performance (*ohayashi*)



The lanterns are decorated with images which indicate where in Akita they were made