The Omi Take-no-Karakai (Omi Bamboo Fighting Festival) is held every January 15 in front of Omi Station in Itoigawa City. The festival first started centuries ago during the Edo period to pray for a bountiful harvest and good catch of fish.

Two teams of young men representing the western and eastern sides of Omi paint their face with brightly colored kumadori makeup and meet in central Omi carrying bamboo poles. Holding their bamboo poles together, they engage in a fierce match of tug-of-war. The team which wins is said to be blessed by the gods with a bountiful harvest of rice and fish.

After the fight, the teams move to the nearby beach, where two pyres have been erected. The two teams encircle their fires and chant, warming their bodies and dispelling evil spirits.

This rare and unusual New Year’s festival is registered as a National Important Intangible Cultural Property of Japan.

More Info About Itoigawa

Sai-no-Kami is the name used in Itoigawa to describe an ancient New Year’s tradition. The Omi Take-no-Karakai is one of over 70 such events held throughout Itoigawa City every year. Sai-no-Kami festivals tend to be unique to each community, but they all feature the Sai-no-Kami pyre, a large bonfire built to burn the New Year’s decorations, old charms and other religious talismans in order to dispel bad fortune. Sai-no-Kami is also the name of a Japanese kami (god) who is said to preside over the New Year’s season. The Omi Take-no-Karakai is held each year in honor of this kami.

Kumadori Makeup
The style of makeup worn by the participants is called *kumadori* and originates in kabuki theatre. It is characterized by a white base with black, red and blue highlights, creating bold, fierce expressions.

There are several theories about the origin of this tradition, although many say it is to symbolize that for the duration of the festival the participants are separate entities from who they are in normal life.

Take-no-Karakai Bamboo Fighting
The two teams, made up primarily of young men from the East and West sides of Omi, fight in a large match of tug-of-war using bamboo poles freshly cut for the festival. The third of these three fights is usually the most intensely contested.

For the fight, the two teams align their bamboo poles together in what is called *awasetake*. This custom isn’t seen anywhere else in Japan.

Children’s Take-no-Karakai
Elementary and junior high school-aged children are invited to participate in separate teams. By taking part alongside the adults, the children have fun while learning how to continue this culturally important festival in future generations.

Fukumochi Lucky Rice Cake
After the children’s fight, event officials toss pouches of *mochi* rice cakes out to the crowd. These rice cakes are said to bring good health and fortune to those lucky enough to eat them.

Kumadori Makeup
Even the local police officers get involved in the festivities, painting their faces and donning *hachimaki* bandanas for the event.

Sai-no-Kami Pyre
At the end of the festival, the bamboo poles are added to a large pyre which is then lit. The pyre contains the previous year’s religious charms and decorations, burned to dispel bad fortune and prepare for the new year. These are collected throughout the community on January 7.