

# Report: Namahage Sedo Festival (Matsuri) 男鹿のナマハゲ



**Let's go to Oga!**

**Date** 18:00 ~past 20:00, second weekend (Friday~Sunday), Feburuary every year,

**Location** Shinzan shrine, Oga city in Akita prefecture

**How to get there** Refer to the following

## Introduction

Even if you are interested in Namahage, it is still difficult to see a real. Ritual of Namahage involve visiting a personal house, so you must gain access to the house. But if you want to see Namahage, the best approach is to visit to "Oga Shinzan Denshokan" or go to the festival, "Namahage Sedo Matsuri". The "Oga Shinzan Denshokan" reproduces ritual every day on time.



**Akita prefecture**



**Oga region**

□This time, I'll introduce the "Namahage Sedo Matsuri" (word of matsuri means festival).

□This festival is held on **the second weekend of February in Akita prefecture**. I went to Sunday last year (2019). I will describe at that time.

□First, we have three ways to approach Akita, one is **by Shinkansen** (it costs about \15,000~20,000). Second is **by airplane** (it costs about \20,000~35,000), third is by express bus (it costs about \6,000~10,000). I don't recommend the airplane in this case, because price is high and it takes long time beside. Shinkansen takes about 5~6 hours; airplane takes 1 hour (plus bus for about 40 minutes) and **express bus** takes about 10 hours. I took a night bus when I went there.

□\*In all of the above routes, the starting point is from Tokyo.



□In the morning, about 8:00, I arrived at Akita station. When

I got off the bus, the town was covered with snow. Snow continued falling until afternoon that day. It hardly ever snows in Tokyo in winter, but the Sea of Japan side has many deep snow district. If you want to go, you may need to take snow shoes. Main street is cleaned, but when you enter one step inside, the backstreets, they are covered with fresh snow especially on side steps. Whenever you put your foot on the snow, your feet would slide into the snow up to your ankles. It is hard to walk. I walked putting my feet in somebody's footprints. I remembered it took longer than I imaged.



**main street**



**back street**



### **Namahage face in Akita station**

□Akita station has a shopping center. You can look for sops to eat foods and keep yourself warm. And you may be surprised to find many goods of Namahage, not only in the the souvenir shops but all over the town. We can know that Namahage in Oga region only but it is an important tourist attraction for all Akita.





## Neburi Nagashi Hall

The festival will start from 6 pm. It takes about 1 hour from Akita station to Oga station by train and 40 minutes from Oga station to the festival venue by bus. So if you have time, though it is fine to stay in the waiting room of the station, I recommend two places. One is the “Akita City Minzoku Geino Densho-kan” (Neburinagashi hall). “Neburi Nagashi” is one of the most famous festival in Japan. It is called “Akita Kanto Matsuri”. This festival held in August every year.



**neburi-nagashi-kan**



## kantoh

Kantoh are wooden poles with many lanterns. The top of the pole is 15 meters high and the total weight is approximately 50 kilograms. Performers balance it by putting it on their heads, foreheads, waists or shoulders. You can see the Kantoh and performance on time everyday and also experience it. In addition, the entertainment of Akita city is introduced, too.





## traditional entertainment

Another place is the Akita Museum of Art. The main exhibit is the painting by Tsuguharu Fujita, called “Ritual in Akita” (height 3.65 m, width 20.50 m). This painting is worth watching it at least once. You might be overwhelmed by the power and technique. I think it is not an exaggeration to stay this museum was built for this piece of art.

## Yamahage

After leaving the museum, I entered the next building. At that time, I encountered a mysterious monster man by accident.





## yamahage

He had long golden hair, and a big wooden face like an ogre. He wore deep blue clothes (Japanese Kimono) and was walking slowly. I was surprised and took a picture quickly. He stopped in front of me. I think he glared at me. But I noticed soon the man stopped to pose for me, because another man came beside holding a flag. On the flag the word “Yamahage” was written. After taking a picture, I heard about “Yamahage”.





□The man holding a flag told me that 'yamahage' is a sacred visitor like 'Namahage' at Maesato town in Akita city. Just like Namahage, Yamahage visits each house in the town at the end of year. Tourists can watch them. I didn't know about Yamahage. There are things we can't know unless we actually visit the place. This accident was lucky for me.





## Akita station again

Time has come. I went to buy the ticket to go to the Oga station by special train. This train will leave at 15:39 from Akita, and arrive at 16:29 at Oga. But, surprisingly, all were sold out. I guess I was too optimistic. Unavoidably, I took the next scheduled train one hour later. Like the proverb goes, "When one door shuts another opens", while sitting in the waiting room, Namahage suddenly emerged in the concourse of the station.





I didn't know why they emerged. People were surprised, and a foreigner was taking a picture curiously. I decided to think this was a gift from the sky.



**entrance to Oga line**



a train of Oga line

Oga







男鹿駅 Oga station





It was 16:30 when I arrived in Oga station. From here we must get on a bus. In front of the station, there is a roadside station “Ogarl”. The shuttle bus to the venue was waiting in front of it, and guides were leading the passengers from station entrance to the bus stop. Not only in the station but also over the window of Ogarl, Namahage glared at us. I can feel this is their home. I couldn't look into the Ogarl unfortunately. This bus doesn't run on a fixed schedule. If the bus is full, it will start one by one. It costs \770 (as of 2020).





While looking over the earth all at white, after about one hour, we arrived at the parking area.



**parking area**



**road to shrine**

## Namahage Hall

From here, passengers must walk to the venue of the festival "Shimzan shrine". The snow on the ground was already trodden down on and was firm. It is easiest walk than in the city despite the fear of slipping.





On the way to the Shinzan shrine, there is the “**Namahage-kan**”. If you have time, you should drop by it. In this place, you can see everything about Namahage. The history, various masks and so on. The highlights are many statue of Namahage. There are 100. If you come into this place, you will be speechless and just stand still.









福 川







町



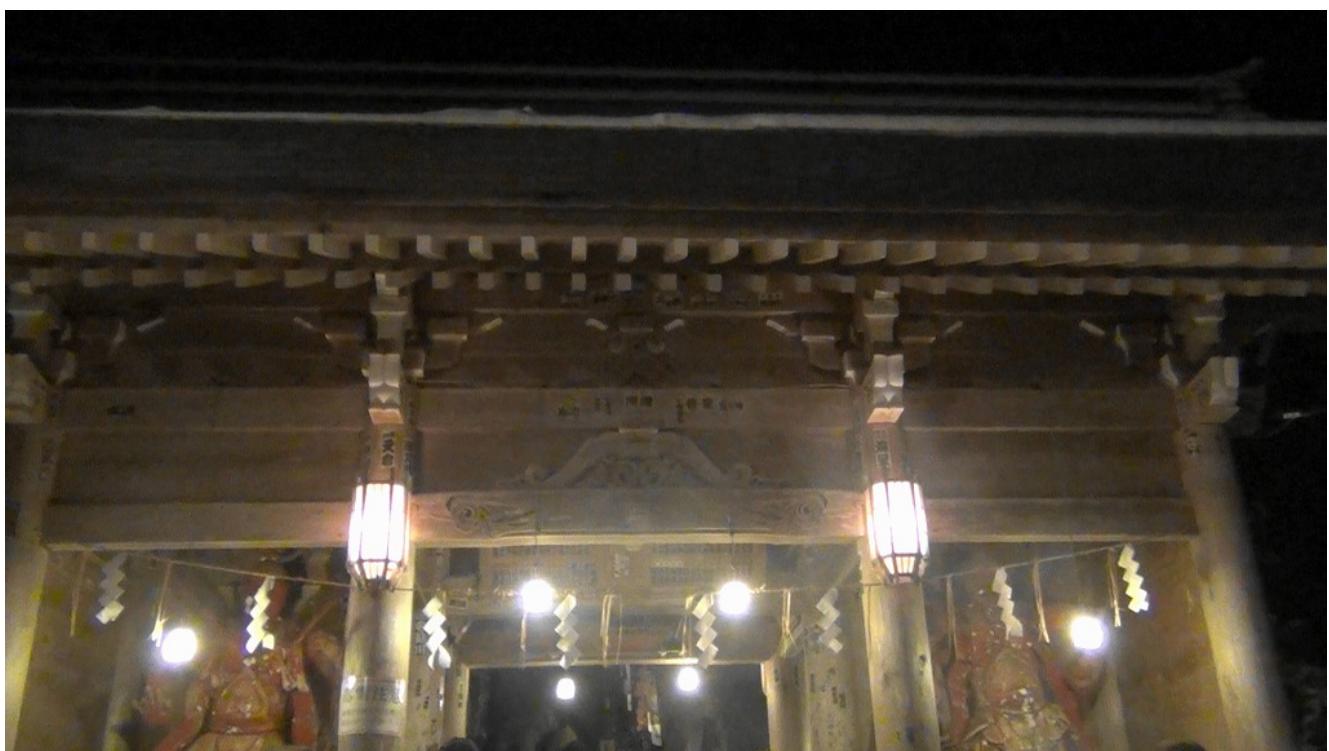






□And you will know that Namahage images are not only one. There are no two statues that are the same. Once upon a time, Japanese famous artist, Taro Okamoto praised its primitive power. You will understand it with marvel. And there is also a rich array of goods of Namahage. At this time, its 6 o'clock. We have no more time. The festival has already started. Let's hurry about.□

## Shinzan shrine



### **entrance of shrine**

After giving a considerable offering of money (\ 1,000) at the entrance, you enter the Shinzan shrine. It was full of people. Looking over this place, there is a main hall of the shrine (called 'sha-den', or 'hon-den') in the front of the entrance. If you turn to the left, the other side is a

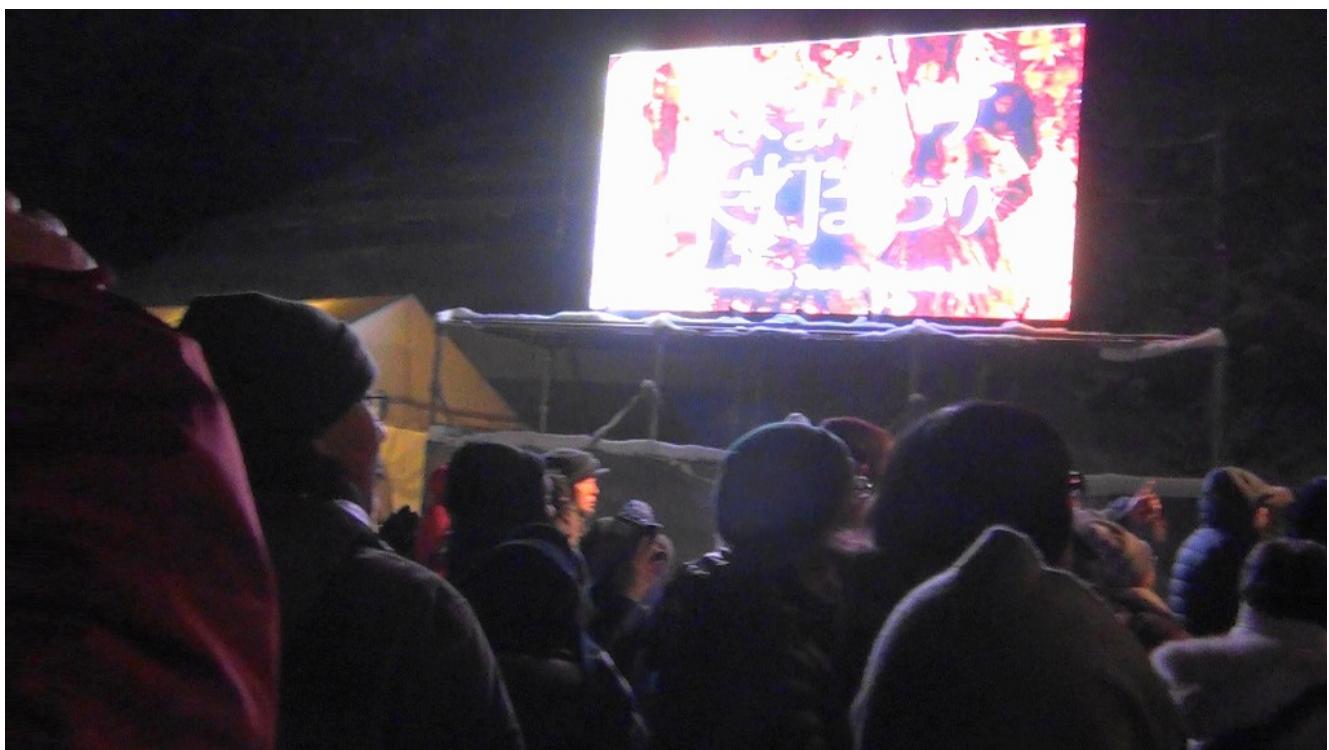
'Kagura-den', and in the center of the open space there is a fire burning. This is called "Sedo-bi". Behind the main hall, sha-den, is a mountain. A big screen is set. And two staircase stands are set. One is set in front of the sha-den, and another is beside the kagura-den. It costs \ 1,000.



**hon-den**



**staircase type stands**



When I reviewed it here, this festival was originally divided into two rituals. One is the Namahage ritual and another is the ceremony at Shinzan shrine. This is called Saito festival. During Saito festival, Shinto priests burn a fire (it is called Saito) and broil rice cakes. Then they give them to

ogres instead of humans. Priests did it like that and appeased ogres. These rituals were gathered to make a tourist industry in 1960', it has continued until today.



When I arrived, the ceremony of "Namahage nyuukon" was about to begin. The ceremony goes as follows. A Shinto priest loads masks with soul and hand them over to young men. The

young men who are given masks of Namahage wear masks and step on foot and sound it. They changed to a messenger of deity. While many people stare, young men wear masks and step their feet making lots of sounds. They changed into Namahage. After this ceremony, they went over the mountain once. So I moved to the front of the Kagura-den. Many people moved with excitement, rushing to the front.

## Namahage ceremony

[digest vol.1](#)

[digest vol.2](#)





□In Kagura-den, the ritual event reproduction was going to just begin.

□At first, the manager comes in and tells the master of family that it is almost time for Namahage to arrive. Before long, the outside becomes noisy, and two Namahages appear. They stamped their feet on the entrance and cry with loud voices.

“Aren’t there crying children?”

□They are indeed powerful, so the crying of the child happen early. When looking at them, surely, they are seen to be somewhat arrogant but in fact, they are very polite and behave property. Manners are decided according to a rule. For example, when they enter a house, they stamped feet on the ground seven times, when they sit down before dining, three times, and when they leave, five times.



After displaying the proper manners they sit down, they greet each other. Laughter happens from the audience in the gap. At first, the master treats Namahage with liquor.



"This is good sake !"

"It comes from Akita Komachi."

"Akita Komachi ? That explains why it is delicious sake."

□Akita Komachi is a brand name of rice. As is expected, it is Namahage. They don't forget to advertise Akita.

"By the way, are there not children who do bad things or the

bride not lazy ?"

"No, there are not. Grandchildren are working hard and help the family. I hear the bride is working well fortunately."

"It's OK, but is it true ? Don't you protect them ?"

"No"

"We always see all from the mountain and we write in this account book."

While saying so, he takes a book and opens it.

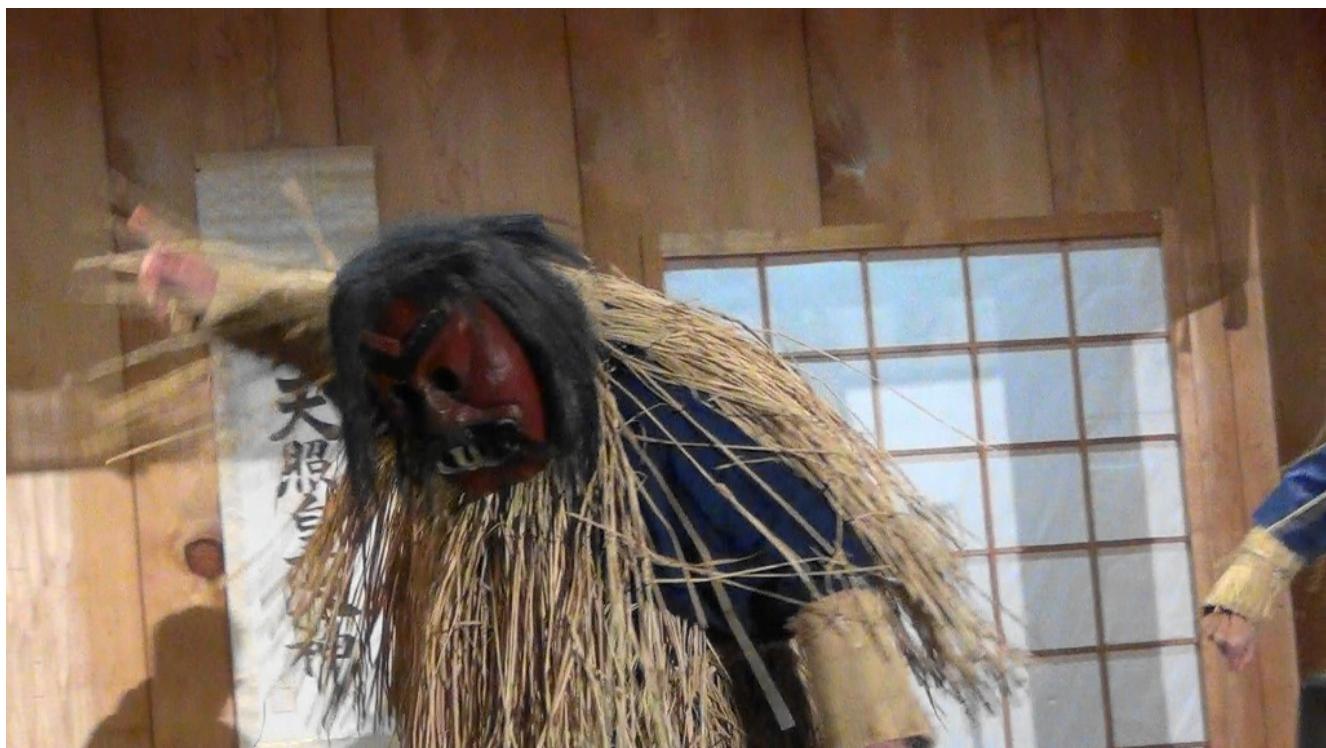
"The book says that grandchildren always play games, not study...."

Laughter happens again.

"No, no. They are good children and my bride work better than anyone."

Master intercedes desperately.

Let it be revealed from here, Namahage is not only attraction. The ceremony was intended to demonstrate the father's authority as the head of the family by exorcising demons and strengthening unity of the family.





□Would they understand it for the time being, Namahages stand up and stamped their feet on the ground three times according to the rule.

“If you’re lazy, we will take you out to the mountain !”

“Hey master, If you find lazy people , clap your hands three times. We will come down immediately from the mountain.”

□They said so, and left noisy and wildly.

## **Namahage dance and drum**



After ritual reproduction, the Namahage dance starts in front of the fire in the center of the avenue. Terribly sounding two Namahages who hold a big kitchen knife and a wooden pail dance with jumping or turning. It finished after five minutes.



When it is over, the next program is prepared in the Kaguraden again. Several Japanese drums "Taiko" were set, and a Chinese gong "Dora" sounds portentously. The Namahages drum begin. While two women beat drums, several Namahage emerge. They shout loudly, stamp on the floor with their feet, and are graring at the audience. And their raise arms in a pretentious

state, they gradually begin begin to drum.





They move violently and intensely. Lights change from red to blue, and green or other colors. That scene is enough to invite audiences to this fantastic world. This event lasts about 10 minutes. The performing group are change every day. Today's performer are "Onga". Yesterday was "Ogakko".

## Namahage go down





"Oh, Oh" loud voices echo in the dark mountain, before long the fire of torch can be seen between trees. One emerges ana two or three...the number s are increasing. Many Namahages decent from a mountain. The biggest highllight begins.

"Aren't there crying children ?"

"Aren't there lazy brides ?"

"If we find such person, we have to tear off their 'namoni' !"





□Namahages walk around the venue while boring their way through the crowd. When they came in front of stair-type stands, they stamp their feet on the ground . There is a legend that states, if a person picks up straw which fell from Namahage's cape, the person will take fortune, people get into a fight luckily. The place is extremely crowded.





While people are still excited, the next program starts. In front of "Hon-den", Shinto priests give a rice cake broiled to Namahage. This program combined originally Shinzan shrine's ceremony and ritual of Namahage that people give some rice cakes to Namahage when they leave. It is done here on purpose, when Namahages are irritated without being able to really receive holly rice cakes. By as by Namahages took rice cakes, and came back to the mountain.

## Ending





□At last, “Sato-no”namahage break into avenue. “Sato-no-Namahage” means Namahage of each regions in Oga peninsula. Namahages with various faces walk around. We can take a picture with them. So one person goes together with one Namahage, if you are alone, you can ask to take a picture with Namahage. In addition, you can place some rice cake s in front of “Kagura-den”. It is now about 8 o’clock.



□We must return soon. When I want to the bus parking area, there were several long lines for waiting for the bus. One will go to Oga station, another will go to Oga onsen (hot spring) or each hotel. But you don't have to worry. The bus will reach the station on time. In the train to Akita station, I felt that people were still excited and satisfied. The train is filled with Fantastic memories.

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# Namahage – The most famous ogre in Japan



## Namahage

Well, we'll pick up "Namahage", today.

about "Namahage Sedo Festival"→Namahage sedo Festival

"Namahage" is the most famous traditional character in Japan. At the end of 2018, it was added to the UNESCO intangible Culture Heritage List, as one of the group of 'visiting deity' folk rituals. Namahage has long hair and a demonic face, the eyes shine glitteringly, two big tusks overhang from its big mouth. It wears a traditional cape (mino), holding a big kitchen knife and a wooden pail. They come from the mountains to their territory's village at New Year Eve, in snow. Namahage walk around a village, suddenly knock on a door and get into the house while screaming "Aren't there any crying children?" "Aren't there any lazy person?" Children run about to escape and hide behind parents while crying out in a loud manner. Namahage will try to catch them. For children, they are real nightmares



□□Are Namahage demons? Are they messengers from the world of Satan? The answer is “No”. The people of this region accept them with pleasure. They recognize them as a messenger bringing regional fortune. The people treat Namahage politely with a feast with sake.

## Where is Oga ?

□□These demonic beings emerge in the Oga peninsula of Akita prefecture.



**Akita prefecture**



**Oga peninsula**

□The Oga Peninsula is isolated from the other area especially in winter because its three sides are surrounded by the sea and another side is wash land. Akita prefecture is known as a deep-snow district, cold winds blowing from the Sea of Japan. People must cooperate with each other to overcome severe natural environments. No man must be lazy. Namahage, therefore, emerge from mountains to admonish people not to neglect hard work. The targets of Namahage are newcomers in this region, children or new wives (husbands) to teach the rule of this region.

# Sacred visitor

□□In the word Namahage's "hage" ("hagu") means 'tear off'. People believe that warming at a fire for long time cause to create a callus. In this region, people call it "namomi" or "namami". Namahage come to tear it off. Namahage "hagu" (tear off) "namomi (callus). Similar events are all over Japan. People call this callus in each region, "namomi", "nagame", "nagomi" etc. For example, there is "Nagomihagi" (in another region of Akita), "Amamehagi" (in Noto peninsula of Ishikawa) and so on. We will introduce them someday in this site.



## **amamehagi**

from <http://www.notocho.jp/event/630/> Noto town



## **nagomehagi**

from

<https://www.city.noshiro.lg.jp/section/kyoiku/gakushu-sports/kominkan-bunka/16384> Noshiro city

# Legend

□□What is the origin of Namahage? Today, several legend have been handed down. Mainly there are three. One is that Wu, the emperor of Han (Han is a old name of China, about 2nd century BC) came in this region with five ogres. People say the long steps which lead five shrines named "Goshado" in this district were built by three ogres. The second legend is that a foreigner drifted here and stored to live in the mountains. The third legend is that "Shugenja", a monk who leads an ascetic life in the mountain sometimes came down to the village. The figure of the person seemed to like an ogre. Many legends have been handed down, but unfortunately, we have no sure evidence. In any case, we suppose that someone came into

the village from the mountain or sea in ancient times. When did it begin? The oldest source is recorded in 1811 (Edo period) by Sugae Masumi (菅谷昌巳) who was a traveler around the northern region of Japan. But popular folk events are not officially recorded, so we can't know for sure.



### **Goshado ごし道**

from <https://thegate12.com/spot/463> the gate



### **Sugae Msumi's(菅谷昌巳) record**

from <https://www.namahage-oga.akita.jp/english/> Oga town

The ritual of Namahage is carried out in at least 80 regions. In its heyday, there were 140 regions, but now numbers are decreasing. Here are some reason I guess. Population decrease, Lifestyle of people have changed and so on. But we can't help but wish this special ritual for children doesn't heyday vanish.

Refer→"Namahage Sedo matsuri" about namahage more information  
<https://discoverdeeperjapan.com/2020/02/07/namahage-sedo-matsuri/>