

A Guide to the Kagura Stage



Canopy 天蓋 (てんがい)

The kagura stage is a sacred space as indicated by the overhead canopy, or *tengai*. It is made up of a bamboo frame with *shide* (zig-zag paper streamers) and branches from the sacred *sakaki* ever-green tree. Each of the four corners of the canopy represents a different ordinal direction (north, south, east and west).

Mekuri めくり

The small sign on the side of the stage, known as the *mekuri*, displays the name of the current performance.

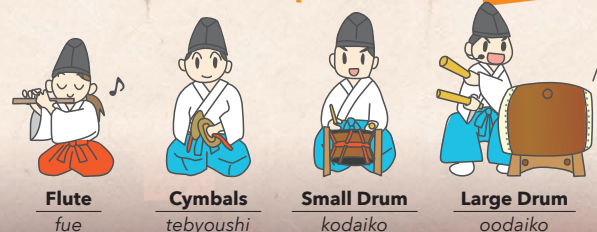
Characters

There are many different characters in kagura performances, but the most common are gods and demons. The gods usually carry a *hei* (a Shinto staff with paper streamers), a sword, or a bow and arrow. The demons generally carry an *onibo*, or demon stick. The masks also offer important clues: god masks have closed mouths while demon masks have gaping mouths.



God mask Demon mask

Musical Accompaniment お囃子



Etiquette マナー

The highest form of compliment for a performer after a vigorous dance is to clap, shout and whistle. It is also acceptable to cheer during a performance!

Sekishu Washi Paper: Iwami Kagura's Secret Ingredient.



Nishida Washi Workshop

The costumes, masks, and serpent bodies used in Iwami Kagura all share a common material: Sekishu washi paper. Recognized by UNESCO as an intangible cultural heritage item, Sekishu washi paper is made from plants native to the Iwami region and is known for its strength and durability. Skilled artisans hand sew the spectacular costumes and transform the washi paper into the expressive masks and terrifying serpents you see on stage.



Hosokawa Costume Shop

Katsuro Kakita Mask Workshop

Ueda Jadou Workshop

It takes four people about one month to create a single costume. The costumes are designed so that they can be altered as a performance proceeds. These changes often happen as the performers spin, so watch closely!

The masks and serpent bodies are constructed by gluing together overlapping sheets of washi paper. Each mask takes about one month to create.



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石見神楽 A Beginner's Guide to Iwami Kagura



What is Kagura? Why are they dancing?

Kagura, which literally means "entertaining the gods," is a sacred Japanese dance and music ritual dedicated to the gods of Shinto. The origin of kagura is not accurately known but it is believed to have originated in the Amano-Iwato story, which is one of the myths described in Japan's oldest historical record, the *Kojiki* (written approximately 1,300 years ago). In this story, Amaterasu Omikami (Goddess of the Sun) hides behind a rock. In hopes of coaxing her out, the gods exuberantly dance and play music - acts that are now embodied in kagura.

Kagura performances are based on stories from the *Kojiki* or other early historical documents and often involve confrontations between gods and demons. These myths are thought to originate from the religious belief that demons caused droughts and flooding and that, through prayer, the gods could defeat these demons. Since ancient times, it has been performed at regional festivals as a ceremony to pray for a good harvest and to ward off natural disasters.



What makes Iwami Kagura unique?

Iwami Kagura originates from the Iwami region in Shimane Prefecture in Western Japan and is best known for its fast-paced music and dance, gorgeous costumes and simple stories.

While urbanization and cultural changes in the rest of Japan have resulted in kagura

rituals not being passed down to successive generations, kagura in the Iwami region thrives as a popular form of both entertainment and ritual. In fact, there are currently more than 130 active Iwami Kagura organizations, or *shachu*.

Who performs kagura?

Usually, kagura is performed by local citizens who practice in the evenings and on weekends. These volunteer groups are invited to perform at local festivals and gatherings.

Men traditionally performed Shinto rituals so most kagura performers are male. However, it is becoming more common to see women performing as well.



IWAMI KAGURA Official video

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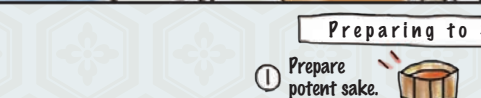
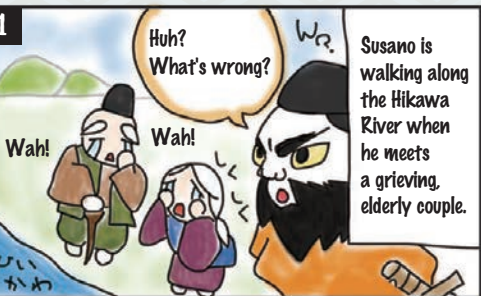
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Orochi 大蛇

Story

The god Susano tricks a giant eight-headed serpent, Yamata-no-Orochi, into drinking potent sake in order to protect an elderly couple's last remaining daughter from being eaten. He then defeats the intoxicated serpent in a ferocious battle.

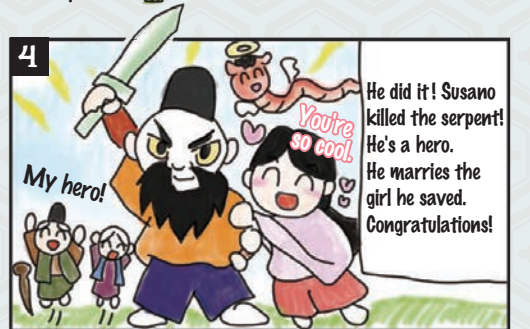


Meaning

It is said that this tale depicts the taming of a river in Japan that flooded annually, destroying crops and fields. The sword that Susano extracts from the tail of the slain serpent is said to be one of the Three Sacred Treasures of Japan, now preserved in Atsuta Shrine in Aichi Prefecture.

Highlights

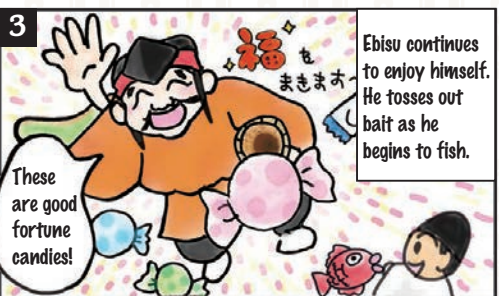
The impressive serpent dance and the battle with Susano make this piece a favorite with audiences. Yamata-no-Orochi was said to have eight heads and tails but in performances a separate person plays each part of the body.



Ebisu 恵比須

Story

Ebisu, the lucky god of merchants, is happily fishing along the seashore. He tosses bait into the water and then embarks on a comic struggle trying to reel in his catch.



Meaning

The performance is said to bring good luck to merchants and fishermen.

Highlights

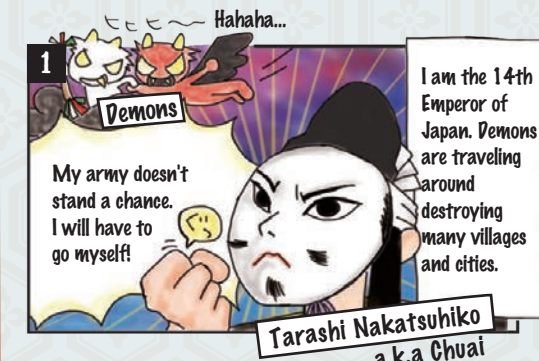
This performance is a favorite with children as Ebisu uses real candy for his bait, flinging it into the audience. If you're lucky you'll catch some.



Jinrin 塵輪

Story

Demons, under the command of the winged general Jinrin, are ransacking villages in Japan, so the 14th Emperor Chuai (192-200 AD), and his retainer Takamaro take them on in battle. Using a sacred bow and arrow, the Emperor is able to conquer the evil Jinrin.

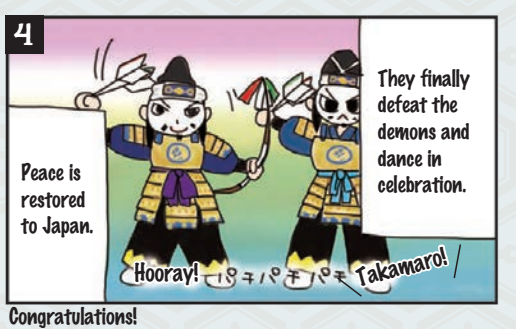
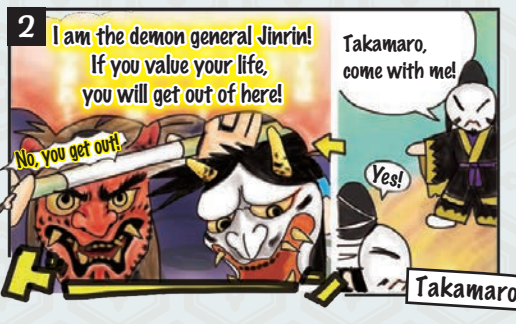


Meaning

The demons in this story are understood to represent foreign invaders who were defeated in battle by the Emperor Chuai.

Highlights

This action-packed piece features the nimble, quick movements of the white and red demons as well as a rigorous battle between the demons and gods.



Iwato 岩戸

Story

Amaterasu Omikami, the sun goddess, has hidden herself away inside a cave because of her brother's violent antics, casting the entire world in darkness. The other gods gather and decide to try to lure her out with a wild party. Curious about what she is



hearing, she peeks out from behind the rock and, in that instant, the other gods pull her out, bringing peace and light back to the world.

Meaning

The dance in this story is the often understood to be the origin of kagura itself. Some believe this story is also an explanation of a total solar eclipse.

Highlights

Uzume's dance is enough to lure Amaterasu out from her hiding place, hopefully it will draw your attention as well!

