出雲神楽

The Story of
IZUMO KAGURA

What is Kagura?

Since ancient times, people in Japan have believed that gods inhabit everything in nature such as rocks and trees. Human beings embodied spirits that resonated and sympathized with nature, thus treasured its aesthetic beauty.

The word *kagura* is believed to refer to festive rituals carried out at *kamikura* (the seats of gods), and its meaning suggests a "place for calling out and calming of the gods." The theory posits that the word *kamikuragoto* (activity for the seats of gods) was shortened to *kankura*, which subsequently became *kagura*.

In the ancient era of these mythological gods, *Amaterasu* (the goddess of the sun) shut herself in *Ama-no-Iwato*, the Gate of the Celestial Rock Cave, leading to darkness on earth and countless tribulations. It is said that as this suffering occurred, the god *Ame-no-Uzume* danced flamboyantly in front of the cave and succeeded in driving *Amaterasu* out and bringing light back to the world.

—A dance to please the gods— this is believed to be the origin of kagura.

History of Izumo Kagura

The Shimane Prefecture is a region which boasts a flourishing, nationally renowned kagura scene, with over 200 kagura groups currently active in the prefecture. Within Shimane Prefecture, the regions of Izumo, Iwami, and Oki have their own unique style of kagura.

Kagura of the Izumo region, known as *Izumo Kagura*, is best characterized by three parts: *shichiza*, *shikisanba*, and *shinno*.

Sada Shinno (a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage), developed at Sada Shrine (in Kashima-cho, Matsue), is part of the ancient *Izumo Kagura*.

Of the three parts that comprise *Izumo Kagura*, the shichiza is first performed to purify the kagura site. In this ritual dance, a *torimono* (prop) is carried by hand with the face remaining unmasked.

Shikisanba and *shinno* are believed to have been added to *Izumo Kagura* during the Edo period. Legend says, during the early modern Keicho period (1596-1615), Shinto priests at Sada Shrine went to study *Noh* in Kyoto, and incorporated it into the existing kagura upon their return. A piece from the *Kaikitsudan* (Jo-ou 2, 1653) written by Confucian scholar Sekisai Kurosawa of Matsue domain recounts a performance of *shinno* at Matsue Castle, so it appears that at the very latest, *shinno* existed by the early Edo period. *Sada Shinno* (a ritual of Sada Shrine) had a significant effect on kagura in the Izumo region. This resulted in its three parts.

In fact, there are hints that *Izumo Kagura*'s history dates back even further, with *gogyo*, etc. performed prior to the establishment of *Sada Shinno*.

Now, every fall, *Izumo Kagura* is performed as a local festive event to provide offerings to the regional deity. In some areas, "yokagura" (night kagura) is performed, extending long into the night.

Dedicated to the gods, the kagura ritual was once performed strictly by those such as Shinto priests who serve to the gods. However, at the start of the Meiji era (around 1870), kagura performed by Shinto priests was forbidden, so locals carried on the tradition in their place. This form of local kagura is performed at shrine festivals for the regional deity that protects the land.

Distinguishing Features of *Izumo Kagura*

Shichiza

This ritual dance is performed to purify the kagura site, with the performer carrying a *torimono* (prop) while remaining unmasked. Various props are carried while the dance is performed without wearing any masks. The name *shichiza* is said to derive from the seven performance steps that comprise it, but these steps vary by region.

Shiokiyome (Salt Purification)
Salt—signifying cleanliness—is used to purify the site and the attendees.

Shihoken
In the first stage, four dancers hold bells and *hei* (staffs with paper streamers), followed by swords in the second stage of the dance. This performance purifies the kagura site.

Yaotome
Within the city of Izumo, this dance is performed by four girls.

Kanjo/Norito/Kamioroshi
Within the city of Izumo, after reciting the *norito* (a Shinto ritual prayer) and reading out the *sanjubanshin* (30 deity gods), a canopy called a "*tengai*" is shaken up and down to invite the gods.

Shikisanba

This ritual *Noh* celebratory music has been incorporated into kagura. While it is comprised of three parts: *okina, chitose*, and *sanbaso*, the sanbaso has gained particular popularity as a dance performed by children.

Shinno

As a dance that is mainly based on the myths and shrine histories documented in the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*, there are numerous performances such as *Kuniyuzuri, Yama-ta-no-Orochi*, and *Hinomisaki*, which are set in the Izumo region.

An Introduction of the *Izumo Kagura* Performances

Here we will introduce several of *Izumo Kagura*'s most well-known performances. (The performance name, appearing characters, and story details differ slightly depending on the group and performance.)

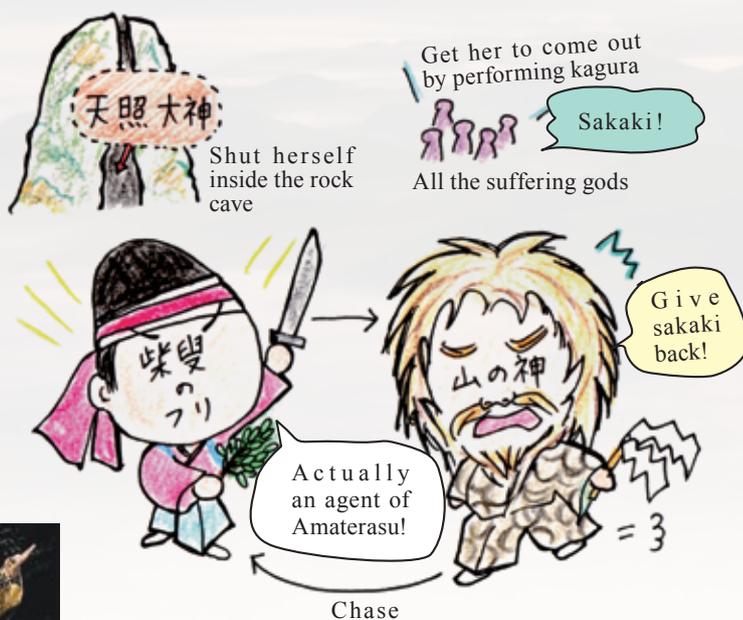## The keyword is *Sakaki* ! (sacred green leaves)   *Yama-no-kami* (God of the Mountains)

This kagura connects *shichiza* and *shinno.* We can see how the *sakaki* is used in Shinto rituals and kagura.

Yama-no-kami is the kagura rooted in the myth of *Ama-no-Iwato* (the Gate of the Celestial Rock Cave).

Legend has it that the sun goddess *Amaterasu* shut herself in *Ama-no-Iwato*, leading to darkness on earth and countless tribulations. Suffering, all the gods came together and decided to perform the kagura to get *Amaterasu* to come out. *Kasuga Daimyojin* decided to take the *sakaki* tree required for the kagura, and impersonating *Shibaso*, went to *Ame-no-Kaguyama* and took it back home without permission.

Discovering the missing *sakaki* tree, the mountain god, *Oyamazumi-no-Mikoto* pursued the man with the sakaki, finally catching him after many repeated escapes.

But when *Oyamazumi-no-Mikoto* discovered that the man who was caught was none other than *Kasuga Daimyojin*, he knelt down and gave him the tree. In return, *Kasuga Daimyojin* gave *Oyamazumi-no-Mikoto* a sword to quell the evils of the world.

天照大神

Shut herself inside the rock cave

Get her to come out by performing kagura

Sakaki!

All the suffering gods

紫叟のフリ

Actually an agent of Amaterasu!

山の神

Give sakaki back!

Chase

Kuniyuzuri Shinwa (The Land Restoration Myth)   *Kohjin* (Powerful Deities)

Kohjin is the kagura based on the *Kuniyuzuri Shinwa* (Land Restoration Myth) of the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki,* also referred to as *kuniyuzuri.*

We've come down from heaven to restore the land.

経津主   武御雷

Who is stronger?

大国主

事代主

武御名方

I don't want this!

We agree to restore the land.

Dispatched from the heavens of *Takamagahara*, the two gods, *Takemikazuchi-no-Kami* and *Futsunushi-no-Kami* plead with *Okuninushi-no-Kami* to restore the land. While *Okuninushi-no-Kami* and his son *Kotoshironushi-no-Kami* agreed, the other rough tempered child *Takeminakata-no-Kami* violently confronted them. By the end of the battle, *Takeminakata-no-Kami* had lost. Agreeing to restore the land, peace descended upon the lands of Shinshu, Suwa Province (present day Nagano Prefecture).

This fierce battle between the two messenger gods and *Takeminakata-no-Kami*, who resisted restoring the land, is a highlight of this kagura.

Final Showdown Between
Susano-no-Mikoto and *Yamata-no-Orochi* !!

Yato

Yato is a well-known kagura based on the myth of the defeat of *Yamata-no-Orochi* (an eight-headed serpent monster).

As a punishment for violent acts, *Susano-no-Mikoto* is banished from the heavens, *Takamagahara*. Upon landing at the Hii River in Izumo Province, he encounters a mourning old couple (*Tenazuchi/Ashinazuchi*) and Princess Inada. Listening to their story, *Susano-no-Mikoto* learns that *Yamata-no-Orochi* devours one of their eight daughters every year, and that Princess Inada is now their last remaining daughter. With eight heads on a single body, *Yamata-no-Orochi* is a terrible monster long enough to occupy eight valleys and mountains.

Susano-no-Mikoto promises to destroy the giant serpent on the condition that Princess Inada marry him. Using poisoned *sake* (rice wine), he defeats the inebriated monster with his sword. The sword discovered in the defeated giant serpent's tail, none other than *Ame-no-Murakumo-no-Tsuguri*, is known as *Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi*, one of the three sacred treasures which have been passed down to the present day.

Subsequently marry

Destroys

Rescues

Parents and a child

Our daughter will be eaten...

A famed Seii-Taishogun appears!

Tamura

Tamura is the kagura known for the fascinating movements of the villagers.

Meeting on the Omi Road

I will help you defeat the demon!

Alright.

Hearing that a demon is wreaking havoc in the mountains of Suzuka in Ise Province (present day Mie Prefecture), the emperor of the time orders shogun *Sakanoue Tamuramaro* to defeat it. The shogun goes to Ise Province and hears about what is happening in the mountains from the local villagers. They tell him that they will provide guidance along the mountain paths on the condition that he defeats the demon. Upon entering the mountains, the demon appears, and after exchanging their names and going back and forth with their blades, the demon is defeated, and the shogun emerges, dancing with its head in hand.

Protecting the Holy Place
Where the Sun Sets!

Hinomisaki

Hinomisaki is often performed last during yokagura (night kagura) and is also known as *Yoake-no-Hikoharu*.

Legend says that the large army, *Juragun*, led by the malevolent god *Hikoharu* which has attacked from *Tenjiku* (present day India) was defeated by the skilled archer, *Hinomisaki Daimyojin*, who was able to protect the lands of Izumo.

Repelled

Attack is ineffective...

Music, Props, and Costumes

Music, lavish costumes, and masks are essential to kagura.

Music   Izumo Kagura uses a variety of instruments including a large drum known as a *doh*, *shimedaiko* (small drums), flutes, Cymbals, and a variety of large and small hand drums. *Shichiza* uses the *doh*, *shimedaiko*, flutes, Cymbals, while *shikisanba* uses a large and small hand drums instead of the *doh*. In addition, kagura-noh most often uses *shimedaiko*, flutes, and Cymbals, with a *doh* added depending on the performance. The influence of *Noh* can be seen through the use of large and small hand drums.

Doh (Large drum)	Shimedaiko (Small drum)	Flute	Cymbals	Tsuzumi (Hand drum)

***Torimono* (Props)**   The props carried by hand vary depending on the performance.
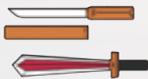
Hei (staffs with paper streamers) | Sword | Bow | Fan | *Sakaki* (Sacred green leaves) | Bell | Fishing Rod

Masks

These are called *kaguramen*. Masks are worn to transform into the gods and demons appearing in the story, allowing the audience to enjoy a more powerful performance. The masks reveal the characteristics of the region. In *Izumo Kagura*, they are carved from wood. On the other hand, in *Iwami Kagura*, which is performed in the western part of Shimane Prefecture (the Iwami region), masks are made from *sekishu washi* paper.

Costume

A crown or *eboshi* (noble headdress) is worn on the head. The princess wears a crown. In addition, they often wear red wigs called *shaguma* underneath, and fasten headbands on occasion. The costume consists of a *chihaya* (type of coat) on the upper body, and a *sashibakama* or *okuchi* style hakama (formal divided skirt) on the lower body. The costume is made from gold fabric.

The Various Forms of *Yamata-no-Orochi*

Set in the Izumo region, the story of the Defeat of *Yamata-no-Orochi* is known as one of the most famed *Izumo Kagura* performances. Incidentally, *Yamata-no-Orochi* appears in various forms in *Izumo Kagura*. In the city of Izumo, the "lizard serpent," with two legs and a tail is most common, while in the town of Iishi, a *makuja* serpent moves in a way similar to the lion dance. Further, with *Sada Shinno* in the city of Matsue, the figure appears in a unique "standing serpent" stance. The mask used for the giant serpent in *Sada Shinno* is drawn with 16 eyes to represent its eight heads.

Makuja (Makuja Serpent)

Okuiishi Shinshoku Kagura

Tachi Orochi (Large Standing Serpent)

Sada Shinno

Chochin Jado (lantern snake body)

Tokage ja (Lizard Snake)

Ohara Shinshoku Kagura

Tokage ja (Lizard Snake)

Karakawa Kagura

Akatsuka Kagura

Kagura Mask Making Process

How are the kagura masks typical of *Izumo Kagura* made? Let's take a look at the kagura mask production process for *Oyamazumi-no-mikoto*, who appears in the performance *"Yama-no-Kami"* (the Mountain God).

〈 Interview with Mr. Shigeru Sugitani (sculptor at Sugitani Workshop) 〉

Step 1 : Preparing a wood material

The masks in *Izumo Kagura* are made from wood. Paulownia trees are generally selected due to the large size of the masks. Paulownia is light and has almost no sap (which cause stains), making it a suitable wood for kagura masks, which are used for long periods of time.

First, the prepared paulownia wood is cut into the outline of the kagura mask. For the masks of *Yama-no-Kami* (the Mountain God), the thickness of the wood must be also adequately considered, since it has pronounced, three dimensional contours.

Step 2 : Rough Carving

The rough carving process is the most important step in making the kagura mask. To say it is the deciding factor in the mask would not be an overstatement. The eyes, nose, and mouth are clearly delineated in a single carving process. The expression of the cheek and brow require a skill that can only be achieved by an experienced sculptor.

Using over 20 chisels and carving knives, bold cuts are made with the chisels, while small cuts are made using the carving knives. This determines the skeletal form of the kagura mask.

Step 3 : Finishing

The entire shape is formed through slow and careful carving using carving knives and small blades to shape the surface of the roughly cut kagura mask. Then, holes for the eyes, mouth, and nose are made.

Lastly, sandpaper is used to create a smooth finish along the surface. In the past, the dried horsetail plant was used to finish the surface.

Once the surface is finished, the eyes and mouth are fitted with brass ornamentation.

Step 4 : Coloring

A mixture of whitewash*1 and glue solution*2 is applied as a base coating.

Then, the color is applied. For the masks of *Yama-no-Kami* (the Mountain God), mainly three colors: black, red, and light brown are used. Ink is used for black, while iron oxide*3 is used for red, and natural mineral pigments*4 are used for the light brown. On occasion, colors created from black tea are used instead of natural mineral pigments. Mixtures of various glue solutions are used to paint the spaces between the beards or the wrinkles, creating a fine gradation.

*1 White pigment created by baking seashell powder
*2 Glue obtained by animal skins boiled in water, dried, and hardened to be dissolved in a water-based solution
*3 Red pigment mainly comprised of iron oxide
*4 Pigment made from crushed ore

Step 5: Planting Hair

For the beard and eyebrows, long, durable horse tail hair is used. Holes are created with a gimlet or drill, and the hair is planted and secured. The work is performed while adjusting the length and volume of the hair for each position.

Horsehair is used not only for kagura masks, but for *shaguma* wigs as well.

Completion

～ Passion for making *Kagura* masks ～ by Mr. Shigeru Sugitani

I was raised watching Izumo Kagura. It has always been a part of my life.

Today, we have electronic tools and many other convenient tools. Compared to the old days, it is much easier to carve the masks from wood. But even without these modern conveniences, our ancestors were able to make many very incredible kagura masks.

Generally, things degrade over time. But the kagura masks made by our ancestors only get gradually better with age and use. It is strange.

I too am striving to use natural materials as much as possible in order to get gradually closer to creating amazing kagura masks that get better with age. It is a lifelong learning process, I think.

Q&A : Further Enjoying Izumo Kagura

◇Can anyone enjoy kagura, regardless of their religion?

Yes. While it is originally a religious performance, anyone is free to come and watch it.

◇Where can I watch kagura?

You can see kagura at festivals at local shrine, events, and recitals.

For seeing multiple kagura groups together in one place, the Izumo City Intangible Cultural Property Liaison Council holds a Recital of Izumi City Intangible Cultural Properties every autumn. Performance schedules for the recital and various group performances are published on the Izumo City homepage.

◇Approximately how long is the performance? Can I leave my seat during the performance?

Most performances are between 30-45 minutes. For shows held at halls and other venues, a single group will typically stage one or two performances. It is recommendable to leave your seat between performances, if possible.

◇How can I learn more about kagura?

You can learn more about kagura by reading the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*, which are believed to be the oldest historical books on Japan. Or consider first familiarizing yourself with it through manga.

◇Who can perform kagura? Are qualifications necessary?

Regional kagura is performed by regular locals. They work to preserve and pass down the dances in order to protect their local traditions. Depending on the group, children can also perform kagura. In this way, children are able to naturally learn about Japanese mythology.

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