The Story of
IZUMOKAGURA
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 *torimonon* (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—signifying cleanliness—is used to purify the site and the attendees.

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

**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.

**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*, *Yamata-no-Orochi*, and *Hinomisaki*, which are set in the Izumo region.
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!**

**Yama-no-kami**

(God of the Mountains)

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.

**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.

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.
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.

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.

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.
Music, Props, and Costumes

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.

Torimono (Props)

The props carried by hand vary depending on the performance.

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 ehoishi (noble headdress) is worn on the head. The princess wears a crown. In addition, they often wear red wigs called shaguma 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.
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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Support Provided By
Shigeru Sugitani, Yuuki Sugitani, Hiroo Fujihara, Izumo City Intangible Cultural Property Liaison Council

Joint Project Sponsored by the 2020 Japan Expo
Created 2021