

An Invitation to Kagura: Hidden Gem of the Traditional Japanese Performing Arts

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First Edition

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*To Mandy, for putting up with far more than her fair share
and to Valentino's for all the pots of tea*

"The quantity of civilization is measured by the quality of imagination."
Victor Hugo

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Figure i *Kagura performer, Flower Festival, Hiroshima city*



Foreword

Let's begin by clarifying what this book is not. This is not an academic thesis or a watered-down version of a thesis for a general audience. Nor does it aspire to be a dictionary of *kagura* per se, let alone a comprehensive survey of Japanese folk festivals, as if such a thing were possible.

Instead, what you have before you is a very personal attempt to provide a resource for English-language readers unfamiliar with the richness and vitality of the Shinto performance tradition. My journey into this largely unexplored facet of Japanese culture began during an extended stay in Hiroshima. As a bustling city of one million, Hiroshima is host to a respectable arts scene encompassing western-style theater, *noh* plays, and even the occasional Broadway show. But jostling for spots on notice boards and at ticketing agents, one also finds posters for 神楽大会 – or *kagura taikai*. The advertisements don't explain exactly what a “*taikai*” is, but the illustrations show costumes and masks lavish enough for the kabuki stage. The ad copy also provides a list of troupes that will be in attendance, as well as titles for the half-dozen or so plays to be presented.

I had enough background in Japanese culture to know that *kagura* was a kind of dance performed by shrine maidens. And I knew that *taikai* was translated as “convention” or “tournament”, which suggested something competitive, perhaps along the lines of theater sports. Curious to see how all of

these elements fit together, I attended my first kagura convention – and was immediately hooked.

The taikai indeed turned out to be a kind of “performance competition”, organized as a showcase for troupes specializing in contemporary Shinto theater, a stage art with roots stretching back more than 1,000 years. Enquiring further, I found that such events are run throughout the year at rural venues across west-central Japan. They are part of a larger tapestry of offerings on hand at festivals and shrines*, as well as religious ceremonies tied to the rhythms of the agricultural cycle.

I could find very little written on kagura however, in Japanese or otherwise. Eventually I ended up taking a series of road trips through the backwoods of Hiroshima and beyond, gathering photographs and pamphlets, and talking with troupe leaders. The book you have before you represents my attempt to collate as much of this information as possible, arranging it for accessibility based on themes such as costumes, masks, schools of training, choreography, staging, decorations, and special effects.

I said at the outset that this book is not a thesis. The writing does however reflect a basic premise - the assertion that kagura is a fully-mature art form, worthy of far more attention, academic and otherwise, than it currently enjoys. I would also venture to say that the disinterest of the Japanese media in general and theater critics in particular reflects a historical bias against itinerant players, as well as an unfortunate tendency to underestimate the sophistication of “folk arts”. Hopefully this book will stimulate the reader to learn more about this fascinating and largely untapped aspect of Japanese studies.

*Kagura is always associated with shrines (Shinto), not temples (Buddhist)



Figure ii *Child in training, Sakugi township, Hiroshima prefecture*



Figure iii Hero and his bride, Hiroshima Flower Festival



Introduction

Take the suburban train north from downtown Hiroshima about forty minutes and you will arrive at the sleepy town of Kabe, a whistle stop with so little traffic that the ticket gate is often left unmanned. If you time your visit to coincide with the evening of the annual shrine festival in early summer however, you will find the middle of nowhere transformed into little Tokyo. Train platforms overflow with visitors of all ages, dressed in sheer summer *yukata*¹ and carrying sparklers and box lunches. Teenage guys, wearing *hachimaki*² to hold back their fashionable blond hair, squat waiting on the steps of the station for tardy friends to arrive. Older couples and families hurry past the biker gangs that are now a fixture at public gatherings such as this, as police set up barricades to control the traffic. The crowds spill out into the car park, and press onward, up the road leading to the shrine grounds. Food stalls offer passersby fried squid, vegetable pancakes, and icy vats of canned drinks, adding to the carnival-like atmosphere.

The kagura stage at the Kabe festival is a make-shift affair, erected in a small public park adjacent to the shrine. Planks are mounted on a two-story scaffolding of iron pipes, and the whole arrangement is curtained over and protected from the rain with sheets of blue canvas. The rear of the stage is decorated with heavy fabric bearing an image of a large pine tree, a faint echo of the decoration usually found in the noh theater. The name of the troupe, the

inaugural date, and a list of sponsors is woven into the curtains, between dragon motifs and swirls of ocean waves. The ceiling struts are decorated with bamboo sprigs and fresh *sakaki* branches, and multicolored strips of paper hang down from a wooden frame suspended above center stage. Illumination is provided by a string of naked bulbs running along the perimeter, and two loudspeakers are perched on a pole at downstage right. At stage left, a long carpeted runway, flanked by red and white banners, leads off to the actors' changing tent. This ramp is the kagura version of the *hana'michi*, the space for entrances and exits in the kabuki theater. No seating is provided for the audience, and so people claim a spot by spreading newspapers or plastic sheets over the grass. Cushions and snacks are brought from home, in anticipation of the four- or five-hour performance.

The action begins at dusk with the arrival of the musicians, who make their way onstage through the back curtain. They are dressed like the clergy at the local shrine in *saifuku* (white robes), *eboshi* (black cap), *hakama* (pleated skirts) and *tabi* (split-toed socks), lending a touch of formality to the carefree atmosphere. The conductor/troupe-leader arranges a large *taiko* drum on a dais at stage right, and waits patiently for the others to get organized. While the *ko'daiko* (small drum), *chappa* (cymbals) and *fue* (flute) are being prepared, a simple wooden altar is placed upstage center for use during the opening ceremonies. It is adorned with a votive offering of rice wine, and a *gohei* (prayer wand), the wood and cut-paper hand implement that figures so prominently in many kagura plays.

When the preparations are complete, a vertical banner is posted at downstage left, indicating the name of the inaugural dance (in this case *Shiho'nuke* or the "Cleansing of the Four Directions"). The opening melody is introduced by the flute player, and is gradually embellished by the other players. The solo dancer for the piece appears, dressed in a *suikan*, a typical kagura



Figure iv *Good versus Evil, Hiroshima Flower Festival*

costume of jacket and pants, modeled on a hunting uniform from the middle ages. The lush material of the jacket is lined with red satin, and is decorated with bold geometric patterns embroidered in gold and silver. As the actor dances the ritual cleansing, he carries the gohei in his left hand and an open folding fan in his right. The intricate spirals of the choreography develop gradually, based on circular floor patterns with invisible axes running north-south and east-west. When prayers-in-motion have been made to each of the four directions, the rite is complete.

The signboard indicates that the first theatrical presentation of the day will be *Takiyasha'hime* ("Princess Takiyasha"), a relatively new work written around the end of the 19th century. The story deals with a rebellious warlord who declares independence from the emperor and ends up paying the ultimate price for his defiance. The kagura version is set in the period shortly after his execution, and centers on the fate of his embittered daughter, Takiyasha. In the play, the princess becomes crazed with grief, and in desperation turns to the black arts to satisfy her thirst for revenge. She is transformed into an evil sorceress and wrecks havoc on the simple villagers until finally being dispatched by two heroic royal guards. It is easy to understand why the troupe leads off with Takiyasha, as it provides all the color and excitement that audiences have come to expect from contemporary "Hiroshima-style" kagura. There is stylized swordplay, quick changes of costume, beautifully synchronized dances, and a climactic showdown choreographed to the frantic beat of the taiko.

As a definitive change of pace, Takiyasha is followed by an interlude of largely improvised banter, courtesy of Hyottoko, the country bumpkin. In Japanese mythology, Hyottoko is correctly speaking the God of the Hearth, but in kagura is portrayed much like the simpleminded kyogen characters one finds in the noh theater³. Tottering along, balancing on a walking stick, the actor taunts and is in turn taunted by the many children that clamor around the foot of the

stage. At rural fests the role is often played provocatively, as the trickster embarrasses the women in the audience with off-color jokes and a large wooden phallus; fortunately Hyottoko behaves himself on this occasion.

When Hyottoko has had his fun, the troupe continues with *Yumi'hachiman* ("Hachiman the Archer"), a classic kagura dating from the 17th century. This simple tale of heroism deals with an ancient leader who defends Japan from invasion by a scourge of demonic warriors from another realm. *Hachiman* is followed by *Rashomon*, a supernatural folk tale from the days when the capital was Kyoto in central Japan rather than Edo/Tokyo⁴. Warriors of the Genji clan wait at Rashomon gate to ambush Ibaraki, a demonic creature that comes down from the mountains at night to prey on Kyoto residents. The ensuing battle is played out as a choreographic tour de force, complete with swordplay, smoke, and the pounding rhythm of the drums. It ends abruptly with the adversary losing a hand, and in the final scene, the villain retreats to the shadows, vowing a rematch when the time is right.

The excitement of the kagura festival continues with a succession of plays, from about five in the afternoon until long into the night. Although the crowds begin to thin in order to catch the last train back to the city, there are still a number of locals around for the final send-off by Ebisu, the most beloved of the Seven Lucky Gods. Like a rock star, the appearance of the god generates a ripple of excitement, especially among the younger people in the audience. To the faithful who remain for this final performance, a very tangible blessing is offered in the form of sweetened rice cakes, which the actor and his assistants distribute by pitching over the heads of the audience. The good-natured scramble to retrieve the sweets is a fitting end to a satisfying night's entertainment.

Kagura: The Hidden Gem of Japanese Theater

As a concrete expression of the rhythms of the agricultural calendar and the instinct for communal celebration, kagura festivals such as this one have been a familiar aspect of rural life for centuries. More surprising is the kagura renaissance of sorts currently underway in Hiroshima and other centers in west-central Japan. Day-long conventions are now routinely organized as “performance competitions” by an enthusiastic fan base of increasingly sophisticated and well-organized supporters. These *taikai* as they are known offer the spectator a unique theatrical experience, infused with the spectacle of kabuki, the gravity of noh, and a dynamism unique to kagura.

Yet for anyone unfamiliar with this subculture of performance, theatrical kagura remains pretty much a “buried treasure”, largely ignored on the national and international level. This lack of attention is epitomized for example by the miniscule amount of material available on the topic in English, particularly in comparison to works on noh and kabuki. But even in the Japanese media, kagura receives very little coverage, with the exception of the occasional “culture piece” in local newspapers.

Location, Location, Location

Part of the reason behind this obscurity is undoubtedly the regional quality of the art form. While kagura rites and processions of various types exist nationwide, the most interesting theatrical innovations have sprung up in the rural townships of Hiroshima and Shimane prefectures. (See Appendix D, Figure D-3.) As a result, there is a considerable distance, both literally and figuratively, between the best of these performances and the artistic mainstream, as defined by the network of critics in Tokyo, Osaka, and Kyoto. Mention “kagura theater” in Tokyo and people will either draw a blank or mistakenly equate the term with



Figure v *Ebisu with lucky rice cakes*

miko kagura, the ceremonies sometimes danced by shrine maidens at Shinto weddings. While miko is a venerable tradition in its own right, it has very little to do with the day-long play cycles I will be describing in this book.

Style of Venue

Another factor limiting kagura's acceptance as a legitimate branch of contemporary Japanese theater is the lack of a set performance space. Centuries ago, kagura plays existed solely as an extension of Shinto rites and were thus guaranteed a venue (either permanent or temporary) within the shrine grounds. For various reasons however, much of the responsibility for arranging performances has passed to secular organizations within the community – clubs operating at arms-length from the religious hierarchy. The degree of independence has increased markedly over the last few decades; while artistically liberating, this means that many troupes receive only negligible financial support from conventional sources. Performers are thus forced to make do with whatever temporary venues they can arrange - a precarious situation, not unlike that in the early days of kabuki, and much earlier at the dawn of the noh theater. As a result, Hiroshima-style kagura often takes on the ephemeral quality of a happening or flash mob, as actors and fans gather at places ranging from fairgrounds to community centers, and even conference rooms rented for the day at shopping malls. Kagura's image has only suffered as a result, for as in western theater history, itinerant players tend to be dismissed as members of a lesser tradition, even if the content of their presentations is anything but ad hoc.⁵

Pedagogy

Then there is the issue of professional training. For most kagura actors, fiscal constraints preclude participation on all but a part-time basis. In most small towns, the majority of troupe members are civil servants employed with local municipalities. These enthusiasts typically finish their day jobs by early evening and then head for the local preservation society to put in a few hours of training, a routine that continues two or three times a week, for months at a time in preparation for festivals or weekend competitions. While the dedication is

laudable, this kind of do-it-yourself approach lacks prestige in comparison to the recognized educational institutions available for noh/kyogen performers and musicians, or to the venerable family dynasties guarding the heritage of the kabuki actor.

Birth of a New Theatrical Genre

Yet despite the challenges and the lack of official recognition, there is no question that kagura is enjoying an unprecedented boom in west-central Japan, as troupes and fans extend the form well beyond its religious and agricultural heritage. Ironically, the resulting instability of venues and lack of funds seem to be indirectly promoting artistic license and the discovery of new audiences. Players in Hiroshima for example may now spend only about half their time making the conventional rounds of shrine festivals – places where expectations are codified and creative experimentation is discouraged. The remainder of the performance year is spent at privately-sponsored urban conventions, where innovation is the norm, and skills are sharpened through competition with other kagura devotees. (There are also forays into the commercial world, with troupes hiring themselves out for appearances at weddings and other private functions, and even showing up in liquor ads and billboard advertising.)

The closest historical parallel to kagura's current identity crisis is perhaps the position of *sarugaku* troupes in the centuries before the establishment of the noh theater. During the early middle ages, Buddhist temples were more than happy to provide disenfranchised actors with a base of operations after the dissolution of the guild system. Payback was involved however, in the form of participation in a certain number of religious events per year, where the stage became essentially a liturgical tool for the teaching of

religious precepts. This regulation of content no doubt contributed to the search for other patronage, which ultimately led to the rise of noh as a distinct theatrical form in its own right.

In the case of kagura, the conventional limitations on content (resulting from ties to Shinto benefactors) contrast sharply with recent opportunities for creative expression afforded by secular conventions and competitions. Much of this freedom is due to the dedicated legion of fans that network over the internet in order to help make the necessary arrangements and to advertise the “space of the week” – usually a high school gymnasium, local auditorium, or convention center. There is even the equivalent of the kagura entourage: groups of supporters who travel from convention to convention by charter bus, cheering on their favorite *kagura’dan* (troupes), buying and selling memorabilia, and sharing beer and rice wine while enjoying the show. The creative impact of these gatherings is intense, as actors, writers, costume makers, and special effects artists strive to satisfy the expectant crowds, and to excel in comparison to their increasingly sophisticated rivals.

Structure of the Book

While there are no doubt volumes that could be written on specific genres such as the ceremonies of *Ise kagura*, the processional quality of *Yamabushi (shishi) kagura* and the dances of the miko, the remainder of the book will deal primarily with *Izumo kagura* - the most interesting style for anyone acquainted with western theater, and the one that I was privileged to enjoy first-hand during a four-year stay in Hiroshima. The details that follow were primarily garnered from the few texts available on the topic (mostly in Japanese), as well as materials picked up at festivals and conventions. Several troupes have also provided opportunities for me to get a backstage perspective on this

neglected branch of the performing arts, and their contributions are gratefully acknowledged.

Each of the subsequent chapters examines a specific aspect of Izumo and related kagura as practiced today in rural and urban centers in west-central Japan. Eastern Shimane receives particular attention as the birthplace of this phenomenon, and Hiroshima troupes are also given their due for providing some of the most avant-garde interpretations of classical stories. In addition to the material on Shinto theater, capsule comments on noh and kabuki are included periodically, to help provide a context with respect to other performance styles.



Figure vi *Comic interlude by a buffoon (Hyottoko)*

Notes

- 1 A thin cotton kimono commonly worn at summer festivals and in resort towns.
- 2 A headband typically decorated with the symbol of the rising sun, or a pithy Chinese saying.
- 3 Kyogen are the often humorous interludes which separate the more serious noh plays in daylong performances. Scenarios based on class differences between city and country folk, or interactions between wily servant and pompous master, began to appear in the repertoire as early as the 11th century. Hyottoko provides a similar type of comic relief with his improvised antics, which stem from the mibu'kyogen tradition, a form of entertainment relying on masks and movement rather than text.
- 4 Edo became the Tokyo region; Kansai refers to the central area on the main island of Honshu, and includes the cities of Kyoto, Osaka, and Kobe. (See the maps provided in Appendix D.)
- 5 Kagura shares with the Commedia Dell'Arte the close ties with the village fest, and more often than not, the financial challenges of the itinerant player. Plays in kagura however are generally well-scripted and choreographed.