

Diverse Influences in the Development of a Japanese Folk Drama

by Susan Asai

Susan Asai spent three weeks in Japan last summer selecting the folk craftsmen and performers at this year's Festival. Her area of specialization is Japanese folk performing arts. While continuing her doctoral degree in ethnomusicology at the University of California at Los Angeles, she was part-time production assistant at the Japan America Theatre in Los Angeles.

Her Augustness, Heaven-Alarming-Female hanging (around her self) as a sash, the heavenly clubmoss of the Heavenly Mount Kagu, and making the heavenly spindle-tree into her head-dress, and binding the leaves of the bamboo-grass of the Heavenly Mount Kagu into posies to hold in her hands, and laying a soundingboard before the door of the Heavenly Rock-Dwelling (where the sun goddess, Heavenly-Shining-Great-August-Deity had hidden herself), and stamping till she made (the board) resound and acting as if possessed by a Deity. . . . Then the Plain of High Heaven shook, and the eight-hundred myriad Deities laughed together. Hereupon the Heavenly-Shining-Great-August-Deity was amazed, and, slightly opening the door of the Heavenly Rock-Dwelling. . .

This excerpt, entitled "*Ama no Iwato*" (Heavenly Cave Door), is taken from the *Kojiki*, or Record of Ancient Matters, the earliest historical chronicle of Japan and written in the year 712 A.D. "*Ama no Iwato*" is an account from the origin myth of Japan that describes how the goddess Heaven-Alarming-Female coaxed Heaven-Shining-Great-August-Deity, the sun goddess, from the cave where she hid herself. Traditionally, the story serves to explain the beginnings of music, dance, and drama in Japan. Because the performance of Heaven-Alarming-Female is referred to in the *Nihon Shoki* (Chronicles of Japan written in 720 A.D.) as *wazaogi*, an early mimetic tradition in Japan, theater historians mark it as the origin of Japanese drama.

Kuromori kagura drama featured at this year's Festival is a form of *yamabushi kagura*, known for its emphasis on the sacred and its retention of many ceremonial elements. The distinctiveness of *yamabushi kagura* lies in its synthesis. Melded into a single genre, the diversity of performing traditions which flourished in medieval Japan survive today.

Japanese drama found both its essence and form in rituals, many of which were centered around rice production and the natural environment. These rituals became identified with Shintoism, the oldest religion in Japan.

Shinto music and dance, together called *kagura*, came into being as a form of prayer intended to prolong life. The emergence of the sun goddess from the cave in the legend is symbolic of the revitalization of life, ritually achieved through the invocation of certain

deities by prayer. Music and dance function in this prayer ceremony to increase the effectiveness of the ritual, which concludes by sending these deities back to their abode.

The ritualistic character of *kagura* is tied to Shinto's worship of spirits in nature. But in its development, *kagura* has been combined with various types of dramatic arts from both Buddhist and secular origins to form hybrid performing traditions. One such tradition is *yamabushi kagura* (*kagura* of mountain priests), which took shape in the hands of itinerant Buddhist monks, called *yamabushi*, in the first half of Japan's medieval period (1250-1350 A.D.). *Yamabushi kagura* served as an important medium for the dissemination of *Shugendō*, a religious sect that combined ancient beliefs associated with the sacredness of mountains, with Buddhism. The tenth century marks the incipient stage of this genre, which was initially created from the ascetic discipline of *Shugendō*. The knowledge and training which mountain priests acquired in *Shugendō*—practices of music and prayer dances for longevity—were also formative elements in the development of this genre.

The ceremonial beginnings of *yamabushi kagura* can also be traced to two of three basic types of *kagura*, distinguishable from each other by the way in which a deity is manifested. Of the two types associated with *yamabushi kagura*, *Izumo kagura* is based upon performances at Sada shrine of Izumo in Shimane Prefecture. This *kagura* genre is characterized by two forms of dance: the first set of dances feature objects symbolizing offerings, which are held in the hand of the dancer; the second set includes masked dances referred to as *shinnō*. The second type of *kagura*, *shishi kagura*, is distinguished by its use of a wooden lion's head (*shishigashira*) to represent the presence of a deity in a dance called *shishimai* (lion's dance). The central purpose of this dance is to offer prayers to dispel evil spirits residing in a certain locale. The dance, together with singing and instrumental music, is also intended to prevent destruction by fire.

One practice traditionally associated with *shishi kagura* is *kado uchi*, in which dances and rituals were performed at individual homes during the New Year season to exorcise the inhabitants from evil influences. During the day, *shishimai* was given separately at each house in a village, but at night, other dances were presented for all the villagers in a room at the farmhouse where the performers were lodging.

The difference between *Izumo kagura* and *shishi kagura* is that in the former the deity is believed to be present only during the performance, while in *shishi kagura* the deity is believed to reside in the wooden lion's head for the entire New Year's season, which lasts up to three weeks. *Yamabushi* adopted the *shishi kagura* custom of traveling from village to village to perform a dance of exorcism at individual homes. In the evening, other dances were performed to serve not only as a medium for spreading *Shugendō* doctrine, but also as entertainment for the local population. Such practices today are still prevalent in the northeastern prefectures of Iwate, Aomori, Akita, and Yamagata.

The repertoire of *yamabushi kagura* has also retained earlier dance types, at one time performed in Buddhist rituals by monks,



Characters commonly portrayed in *Kuromori kagura* include (from left to right) an old woman, an old man, a warrior, and a young woman. Photo courtesy Miyako City Public Library, Iwate Prefecture

The New Year's custom of *kado uchi*. Performers travel from house to house in a village to exorcise evil influences through music and dance. Photo courtesy Higashidorimura Board of Education, Aomori Prefecture



called *shushi*, who specialized in artistic performances of exorcism and magic. Their dances included magical foot stomping and other rites to ward off evil. Additional features of these early dances include symbolic hand gestures, repeated interlacing or crisscrossing of lines of dances, and details of the costuming — paper rings on the fingers, swords, bells, offering wand, a branch of the sacred *sakaki* tree, or sticks which were struck together. Because these features are all aspects of magic used by *shushi* to repel evil, the dances are sometimes categorized by scholars as incantation dances, which are believed to have grown out of Buddhist ascetic practices.

Under the auspices of Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines in the provinces, a dramatic tradition known as *sarugaku* exerted its influence on *yamabushi kagura*. *Sarugaku* was performed for popular religious services and festivals throughout Japan by performers of low status who also worked in Buddhist temples. These performers specialized in tricks, acrobatics, magic, and imitations of comic characters and situations. To these, *sarugaku* actors gradually added theatrical enactments of myths celebrated during religious services. It is believed that the use of masks soon followed as a means of representing various deities and spirits.

By the 14th century, in an attempt to make performances more attractive to the common people, comic dances known as *dōkema* were incorporated in *yamabushi kagura*. The added element of comic parody is said to reflect the medieval Japanese tendency to couple entertainment with religion and the comic with the serious.

Secular *sarugaku* troupes, performing mainly in the provinces, composed pieces that drew on various heroic legends from the medieval period. Their mimed plays were embellished with song and dance. The borrowing of these medieval tales is evident in *yamabushi kagura* beginning in the 15th century, when warrior dances (*bushimai*) depicting and glorifying heroes in battle became a part of the repertoire. A narrative art with a limited element of dance called *kōwakamai* was popular during this time and influenced *yamabushi kagura*. A reflection of the prevailing feuds and battles between powerful clans, the dances were a popular addition to the repertoire of *yamabushi kagura*, which formerly catered principally to the romantic tastes of a rural population. Other performing traditions that directly influenced the formation of warrior dances were *kōjakumai*, a style of acrobatic dancing, and plays adapted from *noh* drama, a masked dance drama tradition dating from the 14th century.

By the 14th century, *yamabushi kagura* was firmly established, coinciding with the development of medieval drama. The merger of Buddhism and Shintoism, a predominant force in medieval culture and drama, is reflected in *yamabushi kagura*. Particularly the use of masks in this genre reflects the tendency toward realism and heightened effects that characterizes medieval drama.

Suggested reading

Hoff, Frank. *Song, Dance, Storytelling: Aspects of the Performing Arts in Japan*. Cornell University-East Asia Papers No. 15. New York: Cornell China-Japan Program, 1978.

Honda, Yasuji. "Yamabushi kagura and bangaku: Performance in the Japanese Middle Ages and Contemporary Folk Performances," Translated by Frank Hoff. *Educational Theatre Journal* 26(2) (May 1974): 192-208.

Immoos, Thomas and Fred Mayer. *Japanese Theatre*. New York: Macmillan, 1977.

Inoura, Yoshinobu and Toshio Kawatake. *The Traditional Theater of Japan*. New York and Tokyo: John Weatherhill, Inc., 1981.

Kobayashi, Kazushige. "On the Meaning of Masked Dances in Kagura." *Asian Folklore Studies* 40(1) (Nagoya 1981): 1-22.

Suggested recordings

Kagura, Dengaku, to Fūryū (Columbia [Japan] AL-5030-33).

Zenkoku minzoku geinō taikai — Higashi Nihon (Nation-wide General Assembly of the Folk Performing Arts — East Japan) (Victor [Japan] JV 1006-S).