



Kagura: Theater of Tradition Amid Innovation

The day the world plunged into darkness and arose again in light

Dieter Georg Adlmaier-Herbst, Germany

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Motivation Japan is a fascinating example of the creative tension between ancient traditions and an ultra-modern culture: on the one hand a centuries old, rich, cultural heritage is epitomized by the rich genealogy of performing and plastic arts; on the other, Japan is a break-out digital leader as demonstrated by robotics. The question is how Japanese traditions like Kagura Theater might be preserved, passed along and further developed in the future.

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Objective Kagura is an ancient Japanese theater style performed throughout the land. One quite popular form was developed in the coastal region of Shimane: Iwami Kagura. Many local ensembles still cultivate their own approach and interpretation of Kagura stories – in music, movement and set design. Theater patrons have a wide range of styles to choose to enjoy. Every ensemble faces the challenge of how to maintain their style and how to communicate it to the next generation of players.

Context For Japan, as for any country, preserving cultural heritage remains a paramount challenge, especially during times of rapid changes brought on by globalization and digitalization. Cultural traditions bring people together, build communities and in turn differentiate among groups. Traditions lend togetherness meaning, provide pause and orientation in a rapidly changing world. In turn they also evolve and adapt to modern developments.

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Susanoo no Mikoto, god of wind, the sea and brother to the sun goddess Amaterasu, vanquishes the giant eight-headed snake Orochi

Long ago the world fell into a deep darkness. The sun goddess Amaterasu fled to a mountain cave to escape her brother Susanoo's violent acts – and the world plunged into darkness. So the other gods came to dance and play music outside her cave. The performance attracted the sun goddess' attention and lured her from her cave – and the world shone again under a bright light. The story became a stem of Kagura, one of the oldest of Japan's performing arts.

There are over 30 such stories, depicting gods fighting demons, in the Iwami repertoire Orochi is the most famous and most spectacular of them. It tells of Susanoos' battle against the eight-headed, giant snake Yamata no Orochi and Princess Inada's rescue from the snake's throat. Dynamic musical rhythms, churning dances, ostentatious costumes – the enactment of the death of evil and the triumph of good is an experience that touches all the senses.

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More than a few local Kagura troops have come together in the sparsely-populated Shimane region to express their joy of maintaining cultural traditions

The term Kagura is a combination of the written symbols for gods and music, Kami and Gaku. Kagura correspondingly means *entertaining the gods*, serves to calm, to sooth, and to please the gods. The origin of Kagura's scenarios are found in the Kojiki, the 1,300 year-old account of Japan's mythological past. Kagura is older than both Kabuki and Noh styles of Japanese theater albeit it less known.

Kagura originally served to honor the gods at Shinto shrines as theatrical rituals of music, dance, and song. During the Meiji Period (1868-1912) Kagura also spread among citizens and common folk as numerous Kagura ensembles arose in rural communities. Performances were held in shrines at rice harvest and during spring as cherry trees blossomed – the tales, music, dance, song, and brilliant costumes captivated viewers.

Kagura today is performed across the country; in Kyoto, Osaka, Matsue. One very popular form developed in the sparsely-populated and seldom visited coastal region of Shimane: Iwami Kagura. According to the Iwami Tourism Promotion Committee, there are more than 130 active local Kagura companies. Each troop consists of 20-30 members. Participants are amateur enthusiasts of Kagura.

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Five or so musicians welcome the dancing performers coming from the edges of the stage with rhythmic drumming, tones from bamboo flutes, and the metallic clinking of cymbals. Most ensembles need flutists, but the traditional flute play in Kagura is so complex that only a few flutists have mastered the techniques. In Iwami Kagura, young players use a new type of flute in their performances.



Every story begins with a ritual dance marked by quiet flowing movements introduced as square, triangular or circular. Even the head of the actor physically turns a dramatic circle while speaking; flowing motions and actors' expressive pantomime are distinguishing elements of Kagura. Modern Kagura is publicly performed in Yunotsu on evenings.

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Actors wear colorful, often unique masks. Passages are spoken or shown by dancing.



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Kagura employs an endless array of masks

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Creating the extremely ornamented costumes is a heavy chore



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The colorful costumes can weigh up to 10 kilos



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Actors might use any number of props; a branch, an offering or a staff. In some performances, actors hold objects like a branch from the holy sakaki tree, a sacred offering, a staff, bamboo grass, a bow and arrow, a sword, a halberd or a bowl.



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Bows and arrows can also be very imposing



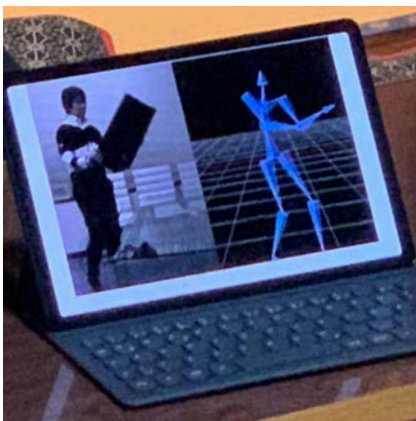
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A high number of Kagura artists are proficient in Kagura at a very early age: in more than a few families, grandparents, parents, and children belonged to an ensemble. We spoke with some artists who'd been practicing Kagura since age three. Children all adore Kagura shows, and in one school in the region, rehearsals are part of core curriculum. It's not odd for professional dancers in other genres to have begun their careers with Kagura – quite motivating for young artists.

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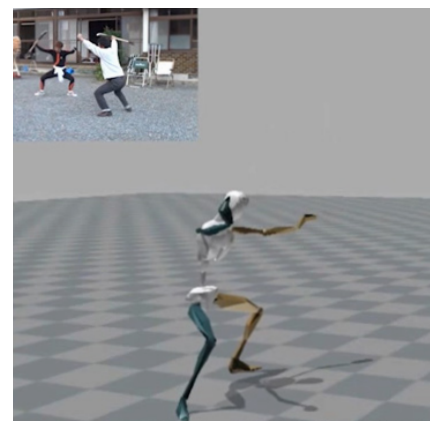
Whether traditional or modern, the spectrum of Kagura performance is vast. A common thread through all forms is how to preserve, communicate, develop, and pass them on to future generations. Recording Kagura performance today is made easy via video and DVD. Actors' movements can be reproduced digitally. Recording actors' movements on video or reconstructing them digitally allows for a precise reflection of the fundamental forms.



360-degree full video and virtual reality allow masters to show and transfer Kagura to apprentices



Many Kagura troupes already employ social media such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter to collaborate, market, announce performances, and generate excitement around upcoming shows



Actors' movements are recorded in great detail using Motion Capture technology @Watabe Lab

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Digital media can convey an authentic impression of Kagura's fantasy and invite the viewer to disappear into its rich and colorful world; masters of the craft and their students can even interact. Teachers can demonstrate a movement, pausing for the student to imitate – as if the lesson and rehearsal were occurring in the real world. My research interviews surprised me: many respondents are open to teaching Kagura via digital media – quite often the Kagura masters themselves.

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As much as modern technology contributes to the preservation and teaching of Kagura, there are limits: learning Kagura demands a close connection between teacher and student. Instructors teach students the fine nuances of dance movements. During instruction, it's the teacher's task to convey knowledge to the student. The more proficient and skillful students become, the more they develop their own interpretive style. It's then the instructor's responsibility to provide feedback in order to encourage student development. This intense collaboration on a character is integral and not easily replaced by technology.

Another example: every Kagura troupe is proud of its own style developed to interpret the Kagura canon. Groups remain together through many years of performance. A troupe's solidarity is decisive in manufacturing Kagura's catharsis. It is unlikely that such an intense bond can be formed from distant corners of the city via internet and screen.

What could Kagura's future look like? There are currently many new developments underway in modern stagecraft; sound-systems, microphones, dry ice machines. And in a long-unthinkable break with Shinto tradition, the incorporation of women. Interviews with actors again and again revealed the importance of developing the movements. It is thinkable that digital technologies could be built into performances from the outset. There is little sign of more radical or experimental developments of the craft.

Closing

Kagura is but one illustration of Japan's cultural heritage: an ancient and traditional legacy thriving in modern expressions. Viewers are fascinated in different fashions to discover their own favorite story, troupe or style. Modern technology assists to preserve, communicate, pass along and develop Kagura. At the core are shared collaboration, experience, and development of the Kagura tradition among distinct communities.

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Prof. Dieter Georg Adlmaier-Herbst is an internationally renowned expert in digital communication and branding. He is scientific director of the Berlin Management Model for Digitization (BMM) at Berlin Career College at the University of the Arts Berlin. He is a guest professor at the Latvian Cultural Academy and lecturer in global executive MBA programs at the University of St. Gallen, Switzerland. He was elected Professor of the Year (2012) by UNICUM and KPMG. He is a member of the Council of Internet Sages and has written 23 books to date.

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dietergeorgherbst.de

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Places **Kobayashi Kobo**

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Kagura mask workshop in Shimane. Regional styles of the craft are passed on from generation to generation and the masks have become a beloved gift or souvenir. Patrons can choose a mask, watch as it is made, and take it home with them. Masks can be framed for display at home.

699-2511, Shimane, Oda shi, Yunotsu cho, Kohama i 308-2

[web-site](#) (Japanese)

Ohashikan

Ohashikan appears to be a run-of-the-mill Ryokan, the Japanese inn, at first glance. But its little café with its long counter and sparse seating is a true find. Head chef James Fitisemanu serves amazing local fare prepared to each guest's particular taste. Surprisingly delicious.

690-0843, Shimane, Matsue shi, Suetsuguhonmachi 40

[web-site](#)

People **Ishitobi, Chie**

To plumb the traditional Japanese nuances of sparsely populated Shimane Prefecture and the insights of the locals, a translator is highly recommended; Ishitobi Chie is a Tottori and Shimane Prefecture certified English Tour Guide

Kobayashi, Taizou

Master Kagura mask-maker and actor Kobayashi Taizo works behind the scenes to bring fascinating Kagura performances to life in the tradition and manner of the original dances by staying true to the movements and the masks he prepares for the shows. Kobayashi says, *The best way to make the most of an Iwami Kagura show is not only to watch but also to mix with the actors after the show. If given the chance to speak with performers, take it. The actors personify their art.*

[web-site](#) (Japanese)

Kominami, Yasuhide

Japan from a guide book is one thing, but there is much more behind the curtain. Registered Tour Planner and Coordinator Kominami Yasuhide from Matsue-Works knows the hidden gems, masterfully planning and orchestrating the trips of interested visitors.

[web-site](#)

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Publications

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

Petersen, Daniel; 2007; Morrisville: lulu.com

A rich book that makes Kagura accessible to non-Japanese offering a one-of-a-kind perspective; contents include the history of Kagura, Kagura sets and stages, synopses of plays, ceremonies, music, movement, choreography, costumes, and masks, and their creation.

Izumo Kagura, Iwami Kagura, and National Intersections: Ritual, Propaganda, Tourist Attraction

Lancashire, Terence; Asian ethnology 76(2), Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, 2017; Nagoya, Japan: Nanzan University

Article that details stories of Japanese theater with an eye to non-ritualistic roles in performances; other aspects include the rise of research into folklore and the use of theater as a tourist attraction

[web-site](#)

Kagura: Shinto Theatrical Dance

Nishimura, Momoyo; Kondo, Elizabeth (translator); 2019; Kindle Edition
120-page e-book primer on Kagura that introduces the art and takes the reader on a trip through the various Japanese performing arts; also included are the summaries of several Kagura stories

WWW-Sites

Iwami – Exploring Unfamiliar Japan

Official tourism promotion website run by Iwami Tourism Promotion Committee; comprehensive guide to Kagura; included is a schedule of performances in the region

[web-site](#)

Kagura Iwami

YouTube channel listing videos on varied Iwami Kagura styles

[web-site](#)

Shimane Prefecture's Beautiful Scenery Digest Video

Beautiful film about the Shimane region with Kagura images

[web-site](#)

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WWW-Sites

Shimane Prefecture: Japan's Best Kept Secret

National Geographic photos depicting the region

[web-site](#)

Watabelab

Featuring several videos of Kagura motion-capture studies

[web-site](#) (Japanese)

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Glossary

Amaterasu

Daughter of the creator deities Izanagi and Izanami, the most prominent Shinto goddess; she embodies the sun and the light – her name can be translated as *shines from heaven*; the Japanese imperial house claims to be a direct descendant of this goddess, which gives it the divine right to rule Japan.

- ▶ Kami
- ▶ Shinto
- ▶ Shinto Shrine
- ▶ Susanoo no Mikoto
- ▶ Tsukuyomi no Mikoto

Chugoku

Westernmost region of Honshu, Japan's main island; comprises the prefectures of Hiroshima, Okayama, Shimane, Tottori, and Yamaguchi

- ▶ Honshu
- ▶ Iwami
- ▶ Matsue
- ▶ Shimane Prefecture

Honshu

Japan's main island, 1,300km long and 240km wide, lies south of Hokkaido, north of Shikoku, and northeast of Kyushu; Mount Fuji is the highest point at 3,776 meters

- ▶ Chugoku
- ▶ Iwami
- ▶ Matsue
- ▶ Shimane Prefecture

Inada

Princess Inada, also referred to as Kushinadahime, is the wife of god Susanoo who rescued her from the giant eight-headed snake Yamata no Orochi using poisoned sake – a story that is featured in many Kagura performances

- ▶ Kagura
- ▶ Susanoo no Mikoto
- ▶ Yamata no Orochi

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Glossary

Iwami

Province of Shimane Prefecture comprising the cities of Oda, Gotsu, Hamada, Masuda, and Ochi

- ▶ Chugoku
- ▶ Honshu
- ▶ Kagura
- ▶ Shimane Prefecture

Kabuki

Popular traditional Japanese theater during the Edo period. It includes song, dance, and pantomime. Kabuki is less formal than the older Noh theater of the samurai.

web-site

- ▶ Kagura
- ▶ Noh

Kagura

Ancient Japanese style of theater performed throughout Japan; the term combines the symbolic phonetic characters for gods and music. The original purpose of Kagura was to pacify and please the gods.

- ▶ Shinto

Kami

The honored spirits and gods of Japanese Shintoism; the term may also refer to gods from other religions

web-site

- ▶ Amaterasu
- ▶ Shinto
- ▶ Shinto Shrine
- ▶ Susanoo no Mikoto
- ▶ Tsukuyomi no Mikoto

Matsue

Capital of Shimane Prefecture, which borders the Sea of Japan in the western part of Honshu; with its many lakes, rivers, and canals also known as the *Water City*; Among the recommended sights are the castle and the samurai houses

- ▶ Chugoku
- ▶ Honshu
- ▶ Iwami

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Glossary

Noh

Classical Japanese dance drama, which dates back to the 14th century and is the oldest major theater art still performed today; it combines dance, poetry, song, and orchestral accompaniment to create a highly refined form of theatre

[web-site](#)

- ▶Kabuki
- ▶Kagura

Shimane Prefecture

Second least populous prefecture of Japan in the Chugoku region, bordering Yamaguchi Prefecture to the southwest, Hiroshima Prefecture to the south, and Tottori Prefecture to the east.

- ▶Chugoku
- ▶Honshu
- ▶Matsue

Shinto

Japan's indigenous polytheist religion, revolving around gods, known as *kami* that are believed to be present in all things

[web-site](#)

- ▶Amaterasu
- ▶Inada
- ▶Kagura
- ▶Kami

Shinto Shrine

Shinto buildings and altars. The Ise shrine where the sun goddess Amaterasu is worshipped is the most prominent.

- ▶Amaterasu
- ▶Kami
- ▶Shinto

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Glossary

Susanoo no Mikoto

Shinto god of storms and the sea; younger brother of the sun goddess Amaterasu and the moon god Tsukuyomi no Mikoto; a multifaceted deity of complex character

[web-site](#)

- ▶ Amaterasu
- ▶ Kami
- ▶ Shinto
- ▶ Shinto Shrine
- ▶ Tsukuyomi no Mikoto
- ▶ Yamata no Orochi Tanabe

Tsukuyomi no Mikoto

Shinto moon god and brother of Amaterasu and Susanoo no Mikoto; second of the three noble children of Izanagi and Izanami, the pair of brother-sister gods that appeared when chaos produced sky and earth

[web-site](#)

- ▶ Amaterasu
- ▶ Kami
- ▶ Shinto
- ▶ Shinto Shrine
- ▶ Susanoo no Mikoto

Yamata no Orochi

Eight-headed snake in Shinto mythology; Susanoo's successful conquering of this beast is a recurrent theme in Kagura performances

[web-site](#)

- ▶ Inada
- ▶ Kagura
- ▶ Shinto
- ▶ Susanoo no Mikoto

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Imprint

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