

1 ~ Ancient and early medieval performing arts

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A number of important Japanese performing arts (*geinō*, 芸能)¹ flourished before the appearance of the first dramatic forms, noh-kyogen, in the mid-fourteenth century. Some ancient *geinō* even offer complex stories using words, music, and dance.² Performances or rituals played at court, Buddhist temples, and Shinto shrines influenced later theatrical spectacle. Some survived, but others are traceable only through historical records, literature, or picture-scrolls.

Ancient performing arts show diversity in origin, patronage, and style. Some were imported directly from the Asian continent under the Yamato government's (fourth to seventh centuries AD) policy of progress through assimilation, while others are native to the Japanese archipelago. Some arts supported by the nobility were highly refined; others, enjoyed by the lower classes, were wild and dynamic. These arts were neither perfected nor isolated, but rather continuously mutually influenced each other. Some arts descended from and replaced older ones, while others intertwined to bring about new hybrids. This continuous recombination of court, folk, and religious genres is a defining feature of the fluid premedieval performing arts.

Continental imports: *gigaku*, *sangaku*, *bugaku*

Japan's interaction with the Asian continent was especially active during the seventh and eighth centuries, with the systematic introduction of Korean and Chinese arts that then became established in Japan via continuous transmission within permanent institutions.

¹ “Gei” originally meant “to plant” or “sow,” eventually indicating “skill” or “art”, while “nō” means “ability” or “skill.” Before the twentieth century, “geinō” included arts such as music, poetry, dance, calligraphy, medicine, horse riding, and scholarship. Today it refers to “performing arts” or “popular entertainment” generally, unless preceded by a qualifier: *minzoku geinō* (folk performance), *dentō geinō* (traditional performance), or *koten geinō* (classical performance).

² “Ancient” in a Japanese context refers to the period from mythological times to the end of the Heian period (1185); “medieval” from Kamakura to the end of Azuchi-Momoyama (1185–1603).

Gigaku (伎楽)

Masked pantomime *gigaku*, also known as *kuregaku* 吳樂 (lit., ‘music of China’s Wu dynasty [222–80 AD]’), is one of Japan’s earliest foreign performing arts. According to *The Chronicles of Japan* (*Nihonshoki* a.k.a. *Nihongi*), *gigaku* was introduced in 612 AD by Mimashi from the ancient Korean kingdom Paekche, who taught it in Nara. *Gigaku* was staged for the “eye-opening ceremony” of the Great Buddha in the Tōdaiji Temple in 752 AD and other annual, religious events.

Gigaku masks cover the entire head, unlike the smaller ones used in *noh*, and some are quite realistic and grotesque. According to the musical treatise *Kyōkunshō* (Anthology of lessons, 1223), *gigaku* was accompanied by flute, hip-drum, and cymbals. Plots described include:

- *Chidō* and *shishi* (herald and lion): A herald (*chidō*) and a lion (*shishi*) led by two boys (*shishiko*) purify the stage before a ceremony. A lion-like creature (*shishi*, 獅子) led by two boys walks around a stage. The *gigaku* *shishi*, believed to be a sacred beast capable of destroying invisible demons, inspired many types of lion dances (*shishimai*) in later folk festivals.
- *Gokō* (Lord of Wu): A Wu lord dances as if playing a flute (accompanied by an actual flute player).
- *Karura* (Garuda-bird): This character dances wearing a mask derived from the Indian sacred bird that eats snakes.
- *Baramon* (Brahman priest): Although this noble priest is from a Hindu high caste, his comic actions, such as washing diapers, satirize the earthly reality of high status.
- *Konron*, *Gojo*, *Kongō*, and *Rikishi* (the Villain, Lady, and Deva Kings): The villain *Konron* stalks and rapes the beautiful *Gojo* (a lady of Wu), before two Deva kings chase him away, pulling his symbolic phallus.
- *Suikoō* and *Suikojū* (Drunken Barbarian King and Servants): Details about these characters are not clear.

Thus *gigaku* pieces contain satiric, erotic, or comic flavors seemingly contradictory to Buddhist morality. However, these simple, easily understood *gigaku* were employed as a practical device for attracting people to temples, where they assimilated Buddhist ideology.

Gigaku declined after the thirteenth century, although there are records of its performances at Kasuga Shrine in Nara through the nineteenth century.³ Its long-lost tradition has been revived by a former court musician, Shiba Sukeyasu (1935–), with masks reconstructed at Tenri University. It was

³ Kasagi Kon'ichi, *Gagaku to Nara* (Gagaku and Nara) (Nara: Nara City, 1980), 14.

performed during celebrations surrounding the renovation of the main hall of the Great Buddha at Tōdaiji in 1980.⁴

Variety entertainments: *sangaku* (散樂)

Sangaku, also known as *hyakugi* (one hundred entertainments) or *zatsugi* (miscellaneous entertainments), was also brought from the Asian continent, mainly for performance at Buddhist ceremonies. Sangaku comprises acrobats, conjuring, juggling, and comic skits. The picture-scroll *Shinzei kogaku-zu*, depicting performing arts of the early ninth century, includes sangaku arts: entering a small jar; a monkey passing through a metal hoop; sword swallowing; an acrobat riding atop four others' shoulders; three child acrobats riding on one man's shoulder; a tightrope walker; and the juggling of balls and swords.

The Japanese court provided a position for sangaku players in governmental institutions until the late eighth century. After its abolishment, performers were rehired as palace guards to perform sangaku at imperial ceremonies. Others became affiliated with temples where they served in Buddhist rituals or as freelance players in folk agricultural rites or street entertainments, later absorbed into *dengaku* or *sarugaku* (noh) troupes.

Sarugaku (猿樂, monkey entertainments) possibly derives from sangaku. According to the *Shin-sarugakuki* (Records of new sarugaku), written by aristocrat Fujiwara no Akihira (989?–1066), sarugaku at the beginning of the eleventh century included various acts, such as *noronji* (*shushi* wizardry), a performance deriving from an exorcism rite; *dengaku* dances and plays; *kugutsu* (puppetry); *shinadama* (juggling balls) and other forms of juggling; various comical mimicries or parodies; and narrative accompanied by a *biwa* (lute).⁵

Cosmic court dance and music: *bugaku* (舞樂)

Bugaku is a dignified dance repertoire accompanied by *gagaku* (雅樂, elegant music), consisting of instruments introduced from the continent, and adopted into rituals at court, temples, and shrines. By the seventh century, music and dance of Korea's three kingdoms, Kudara (Paekche), Shiragi (Silla), and Kōkuri (Koguryo) had been imported. Together with later music from Bokkai (Balhae, present-day Manchuria/North Korea), these were reorganized into *komagaku* (Korean music). Chinese and Vietnamese music and dance,

⁴ Kyogen actor Nomura Mannojō (later Manzō VI) attempted to revitalize the tradition with “new *gigaku*” in 2001, using masks and dance styles from Asia. Yoshiko Fukushima, “Masks, interface of past and future – Nomura Mannojo’s Shingigaku,” *ATJ* 22:1 (2005), 249–68.

⁵ Fujiwara Akihira, *Shin-sarugaku-ki*, reprinted in *Nihon shisō taikei*, vol. VIII: *Kodai seiji shakai shisō* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1979), 133–52.



Fig 2 Six-panel painted screen by Kanō Yasunobu (1613–85), illustrating bugaku.

called *tōgaku* (Chinese music), and *rin'yūgaku* (Vietnamese music), later categorized simply as *tōgaku*.

A bugaku piece is constructed of several parts comprised of choreographed foot-patterns and gestures; introduction, body, and exit. Some pieces have multiple sections for the main body; the typical three-section structure is called “*jo-ha-kyū*,” which became an important concept in noh. *Jo 序* (prelude) is usually in free rhythm with a slow tempo, *ha 破* (breach) a metrical rhythm with moderate tempo, and *kyū 急* (quick) a metrical rhythm with rapid tempo. Thus *jo-ha-kyū* originally was a notion of gagaku composition focusing on rhythmic traits, later enhanced into a more philosophical concept.

Each dance consists of short choreographic patterns. For example, leg patterns include *hiraku* (open), *suru* (patter), *ochiiri* (sink down), *tateru* (stand), *fumu* (stamp), and *tobu* (jump), while those for arms include *hiraku* (open), *tojiru* (close), and *awasu* (join hands). Group patterns for four to six dancers are performed in a soft and elegant manner called “calm dance” (*hira-mai*), while solo or paired dancers perform a more active “running dance” (*hashiri-mai*).

Dancers wear ornate costumes and, for some dances, large, decorative masks. Bugaku dance is categorized either as “left dance,” accompanied by Chinese music, or “right dance,” accompanied by Korean music. Left and right dances are played alternately. Although there is neither a dramatic story nor even concrete meaning behind each choreographic motion, some pieces have a specific motif or background. The popular piece *Ryōō* employs a fierce, grotesque mask, portraying a king of ancient north

Qi (present Henan Province) who was so handsome that he wore an ugly mask when he fought. *Ryōō* was performed during sporting competitions featuring archery, wrestling, and horse riding, and on other noble, festive celebrations. In contrast, *Karyōbin* (迦陵頻; Kalavinka in Sanskrit, bird of paradise) and *Bosatsu* (Bodhisattva) are often staged during a temple service where dancers also participate in a food offering to the Buddha or saints.

In addition to each piece's character, the structure and dramaturgy of the whole bugaku ceremony deserves attention. Ceremonies at court, temples, or shrines utilize a large outdoor space in front of a main hall where personnel, instruments, and ornamental settings are placed in a symmetric position. The city plans of ancient Nara and Kyoto were themselves based on such a bilateral system. However, the principle indicates not just a pair of same or similar things but also a dichotomy of bright/dark, strong/weak, or male/female, derived from the yin/yang ordering principle. The left *dadaiko* (huge drum for outdoor performance) displays a golden disc above the drum skin, representing a sun, with dragon carving in the frame attached to the body, while the right one displays a silver moon above the drumhead and phoenix carving on the frame. Dancers' costumes also show contrasting colors signifying the dual forces of the cosmos: warm reds and oranges for left-dance costumes, cool blues and greens for the right.

During a ceremony, a host, guests, and other high-ranking nobles sitting inside the main hall gaze down into the south front yard where a pageant is performed. A Chinese-music dancer appears from the left (east) side, dances in the center of the yard, and exits, followed by a Korean-music dancer who mirrors the actions from the right (west). This series of alternate dances continues for hours, interpreted as symbolizing the rotation of sun and moon, or day and night. While the two opposites never merge into one, their circulation brings balance to the universe.

Bugaku boasts a continuous history of over 1,300 years. It has received governmental support since being instituted as the Gagakuryō in 701. However, in the ninth century, inner guards replaced the Gagakuryō musicians and since then have performed in various court rituals. These hereditary families then handed down the tradition over generations. Three large troupes established, respectively, in Kyoto, Nara, and Osaka, were active until the musicians moved to Tokyo in 1869, following Emperor Meiji. The forerunner of the current governmental institution, the Kunaichō Gakubu (宮内庁樂部, Music Department of the Imperial Household Agency), was established in 1870 in Tokyo, inviting musicians from Kyoto, Nara, and Osaka. They primarily serve in traditional court rituals, but sometimes offer public concerts. Large temples and shrines such as Shitennōji in Osaka and Kasuga

Shrine in Nara have maintained annual events showing a number of bugaku dances, performed today by amateurs.

Nowadays, tōgaku employs the *shō* (mouth organ), *hichiriki* (double reed pipe), *ryūteki* (transverse flute), *biwa* (lute), *koto* (zither), *kakko* (barrel-shaped drum), *taiko* (big drum), and *shōko* (small gong), while komagaku uses *komabue* (transverse flute shorter than ryūteki), *hichiriki*, *san-no-tsuzumi* (hourglass shaped drum), *taiko*, and *shōko*. Some gagaku instruments became popular with the public, bringing about other musical genres, such as noh. The *ryūteki* was transformed into the *nōkan* flute: the *san-no-tsuzumi* is the precursor of the *ōtsuzumi* (large drum), while *ikko*, a smaller sized *san-no-tsuzumi*, became the *kotsuzumi* small drum. The *biwa* lute became an accompaniment to narratives; the *koto* zither also became an accompanying instrument in the Edo period. Thus the gagaku ensemble can be seen as the progenitor of many later musical instruments and traditions.

Court and folk arts

Japan's native performing arts percolated up from lively folk entertainments and filtered down from court rituals, displaying a dynamic energy contained within strict forms and patterns.

Mikagura

Native music and dances have also been performed at courts, temples, and shrines, and on various secular occasions. *Kagura* (神楽; literally, “gods' entertainment”) can be found throughout Japan in many styles, roughly classified into two types:

- 1 rites to purify a place for making prayer offerings for a peaceful world and healthy harvest
- 2 theatrical to embody the mythical worlds of Japanese gods.

Mikagura is the most noble and refined among various ritual forms performed exclusively at court and certain shrines, Iwashimisu-hachiman Shrine (Kyoto), Tsurugaoka-Hachiman Shrine (Kanagawa), and Hikawa Shrine (Saitama). Consisting of fifteen songs and two dances accompanied by a *kagura-bue* (flute), *hichiriki* (reed pipe), *wagon* (six-stringed zither), and *shakubyōshi* (clappers), the plotless pieces follow a precise structure:

- 1 introduction (purification of site)
- 2 welcoming the gods
- 3 entertaining the gods
- 4 conclusion and sending off the gods.



Fig 3 Miko channel gods and purify the stage at the Wakamiya Festival, Kasuga Shrine, Nara.

In the introduction, a sacred fire is lit and “Niwabi” (Sacred fire) and “Ajime” (meaning unknown) are sung to purify the venue. The lyrics of “Ajime” employ a few unintelligible syllables, reflecting a traditional belief that a word or even the voice itself retains magico-religious efficacy. To invoke the gods, “Sakaki” (Sacred branch) and “Mitegura” (Strips of paper) are sung to praise the god’s symbols, danced by a trance-possessed leader with *torimono*, sacred implements acting as temporary abodes of the god. Then, a summoning of a god of Korean origin, “Karakami” (韓神), is sung and danced. The entertainment part includes several songs depicting sacred gods and local landscapes. The last song, “Sonokoma” (The horse) praises the sacred vehicle of the god.

The original forms, established at the beginning of the eleventh century, contained twice as many songs as now. Today, the Mikagura Rite is held annually on a mid-December evening at the Imperial Palace, requiring over five hours.

Miko-kagura shamaness rituals

While only men are permitted to perform mikagura, another type of kagura welcomes exclusively female performance: *miko-kagura* (巫女神樂) (shamaness kagura). The episode of the goddess Amenōzume found in the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* suggests that female priests have conducted important services from very early eras. In the Nara period and earlier, the Sarume-gimi family, claiming to be descendants of Amenōzume, contributed exclusively

FOCUS 1.1 *Kagura* and the heavenly rock-cave

The myth of the “heavenly rock-cave” (*ama no iwato*), recorded in the eighth-century *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*, tells of how the Sun Goddess Amaterasu hides herself in a cave, thereby plunging heaven and earth into darkness. Other deities devise a plan to entice her out:

Ame-no-Uzume-no-Mikoto bound up her sleeves with a cord of heavenly pi-kage vine, tied around her head a head-band of the heavenly ma-saki vine, bound together bundles of sasa leaves to hold in her hands, and overturning a bucket before the heavenly rock-cave door, stamped resoundingly upon it. Then she became divinely possessed, exposed her breasts, and pushed her skirt down to her genitals. Then Takama-no-para shook as the eight hundred myriad deities laughed at once.⁶

Curious, Amaterasu emerges from the cave, thus restoring light to the world. The episode suggests an actual ritual performance, taken as

the archetype of the Japanese performing arts. The tradition with the most legitimate claim to this mythic beginning, however, is the ritual art of *kagura*.

The word “*kagura*” may be a corruption of *kamukura*, meaning “god seat” or abode of the gods (*kami*), but it has long been written with the characters 神樂 (“god music” or “entertainment for the gods”). The earliest evidence of *kagura* is found in court documents of the ninth century. *Mikagura*, as the court variety is called, was performed in the eleventh month in connection with *chinkon*, a court ritual. This eventually became *mi-kagura*, a formal ceremony of music and dance, completely lacking the raucous character suggested by the rock-cave myth.

Outside the court other forms of *kagura* thrived; many local varieties are still performed. It is difficult to establish to what degree this folk or “village *kagura*” (*sato kagura*) represents a continuation of ancient ritual traditions. Nonetheless, most examples reflect the basic ritual structure of *kagura*,



Fig 4 *Kagura*: the god Susano and the bride he wins as a reward for defeating the eight-headed serpent in *Orochi*, performed by Nishimura Kagura Shachū in Hamada City, Shimane prefecture.

⁶ Donald Philippi (trans.), *Kojiki* (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1968), 84.

including the summoning, entertainment, and dispatching of kami. Although rare today, divine possession (*kamigakari*) and receiving of oracles have also been a part of the tradition.

Folk performing arts scholar Honda Yasuji devised a classification scheme for folk kagura based on ritual implements used to attract the kami or serve as their temporary resting place:

- 1 *miko kagura* (female priestess)
- 2 *torimono kagura* (*Izumo kagura*) (hand properties; *Izumo*-type)
- 3 *yudate kagura* (*Ise kagura*) (boiling water; *Ise*-type)
- 4 *shishi kagura* (lion head).⁷

Kagura typically consists of a series of masked and unmasked dances (*mai*) performed to instrumental music (flute, drum, and hand cymbals) and songs (*kamiuta*). Dances range from the solemn and ritualistic to the highly energetic and theatrical, and also the comic.

Today kagura is most often performed as part of Shinto shrine festivals, usually by the shrine association or “preservation society” of local community members. In the past, however, many kagura traditions were transmitted by itinerant religious practitioners, especially the *yamabushi* of the syncretic Shugendō cult. Thus, while many pieces are based on ancient myths, they are imbued with a religious outlook that also includes elements of esoteric and Pure Land Buddhism and even Chinese “five phases” cosmology.

The *yamabushi* also drew upon other medieval performance genres. Kagura dances can be traced to plays in the *noh* repertoire. That they lack *noh*'s more consistent dramatic structure is usually attributed to their reflecting the state of *sarugaku* before Zeami gave the art its classical form.

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to the *chinkon-sai*⁸ or *daijōsai*⁹ purification ceremonies at court.¹⁰ Later, during the Heian period, sources such as *Records of New Sarugaku* and a picture-scroll of annual events completed in the late twelfth century portray and describe folk miko-kagura.¹¹ According to *Records of New Sarugaku*, miko specialized in fortune telling, making entertainments for the gods, plucking bows for exorcisms, and channeling spirits of the deceased. The miko was said to dance like an unworldly being, sing like a heavenly bird, and play zither and drum so beautifully that everyone was attracted. Scrolls depict festival scenes at Kyoto's Imamiya Shrine in which a single miko is dancing, bell in hand, accompanied by singing and drumming. Another invaluable medieval source, *Shokunin uta-awase* (Craftsperson song competition),¹² also depicts a miko plucking a bow, with a nearby drum.

7 Honda Yasuji, *Nihon no dentō geinō I* (1993), 3.

8 A ritual held at winter solstice. As the spirit of the sun, identified with the spirit of the emperor, is weakest in the winter solstice season, ancient people thought that it must be revitalized through rites.

9 At this imperial accession, an emperor partakes of new rice and *sake* wine with the god.

10 In part of the ceremony, a female performed seated on a small platform.

11 Komatsu Shigemi (ed.), *Nenchū gyōji emaki* (Picture-scroll of annual events) (Tokyo: Chūō kōronsha, 1987).

12 A variety of song and dance genres were recorded in noblemen's diaries in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries. Scrolls describe various professions in parody of an *uta-awase*, or *waka* poem competition. Although the competition is fictitious, the detailed costumes and properties provide invaluable knowledge of medieval performers.

Popular traveling entertainments: *shirabyōshi*, *kusemai-mai*, *kugutsu*

The miko, although affiliated with shrines, also influenced popular entertainment and ritual traditions nationwide as some became itinerant prostitutes or professional entertainers.

The *Shokunin uta-awase* scroll also introduced female entertainers called *shirabyōshi* (白拍子) and *kusemai-mai* (曲舞々). They both use tsuzumi drums and hold fans. Female entertainers, including miko, belonged to a low social class and often were also prostitutes. *Shirabyōshi*, “white beat” or “simple beat,” appeared in the late twelfth century. They sang rhythmic *imayō* (今様, “trendy”) songs and sometimes danced wearing a man’s tall *eboshi* hat and carrying a sword. According to the *Ryōjinshō* anthology,¹³ most *imayō* lyrics were composed of seven and five syllables, making dances cadenced. *Shirabyōshi* performance was so popular that some performers gained the favor of extremely high-ranking nobles, similar to the marriage of leading politicians with geisha in the modern era. In *Heike monogatari* (Tales of the Heike, c. thirteenth century), one finds the names of Giō and Hotoke Gozen, favored by Taira no Kiyomori (1118–81), and Shizuka Gozen, loved by Minamoto no Yoshitsune (1159–89) (see representative plays, p. 35). *Kusemai*, possibly derived from *shirabyōshi*, popular in the medieval period, consisted of recitation and dance accompanied also by the tsuzumi drum. Unlike *shirabyōshi*, both men and women performed. Today, the tradition can be found in folk *kōwakamai*, in Ōe, Fukuoka prefecture.

Kugutsu (傀儡子, also pronounced *kairaishi*) puppeteers were entertainers similar to miko and *shirabyōshi*. According to *The Book on Kugutsu*,¹⁴ written by aristocrat-scholar Ōe no Masafusa (1041–1111), they were traveling troupes of entertainers. Female *kugutsu* wore beautiful makeup and showy costumes, sang *imayō*, and sometimes practiced prostitution, while males performed juggling, alchemical conjuring, and puppetry. Remarkably, one finds sangaku juggling and conjuring surviving in *kugutsu*. The main attraction of *kugutsu* was its puppetry, the inanimate dolls deemed not merely playthings but sacred objects in which a god’s spirit dwelled. This tradition survived through medieval times until developing into *ningyō jōruri* in the early Edo period. Today, a variety of folk puppetries can be found all over Japan.

13 Compiled by retired emperor Goshirakawa hōō (1127–92), who invited female singers of low class to stay at his residence, where he learned and recorded many *imayō*.

14 Ōe Masafusa, *Rakuyō dengaku-ki*, reprinted in *Nihon shisō taikei*, vol. XXIII: *Kodai chūsei geijutsuron* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1973), 217–22.

Rice-planting performance: *hayashi-da, ta-asobi, dengaku*

Performing arts related to rice-making rituals have flourished in Japan since at least the Nara period (710–85). The historic development of these folk performing arts is unclear. However, from the seventh or eighth century, the imperial court already held rituals associated with rice-making in which *tamai* (田舞, rice field dance) was performed.

Hayashi-da (囃子田) is a rice-planting ceremony (*taue*, 田植) accompanied by lively music, held in early summer. Female planters transplant rice seedlings while singing, accompanied by large and small drums, bamboo whisks, small cymbals, and flutes. The songs sung in call-and-response style between a male leader and female sowers include occasional erotic or comic lyrics to entertain the rice god and human participants:

Could it be my lover coming? The rear door's creaking
 Kiriri kitto, it goes. The rear door
 Maybe my beloved. Maybe a puppy howling, can't get the door ajar
 The short sword put by the pillow. The long sword against the screen
 where it folds
 I want to find you. Which room are you sleeping in?¹⁵

Ta-asobi (田遊, rice field play) mimics rice farming to pray for bounteous crops, held in early spring, prior to actual rice sowing. Farmers imitate procedures for rice farming (plowing a field with an ox, sowing seeds, weeding, scaring away birds, harvesting, and pounding rice-cakes) through mime, dialogue, song, and dance. Erotic dialogue or gestures are believed to bring procreation and prosperity both to rice fields and to humans. In one of the most famous of these fertility rites, the Asuka Onda Matsuri, a long-nosed goblin (*tengu*) chases and copulates with a farm-girl wearing a plump-cheeked mask (*otafuku*).

Another type of rice-making performing art is *dengaku* (田楽), comprising highly sophisticated singing, dancing, dialogue, and acrobatics. Today's folk *dengaku* is a local, amateur, traditional art, rather unsophisticated when compared to the popular and fashionable *dengaku* of the Heian period, performed by professionals called *dengaku-hōshi* (*dengaku* priests). The eleventh-century *Eiga monogatari* (A tale of flowering fortunes) describes a strange-looking ten-man group parading through the street, beating unusual drums attached to their bellies, playing flutes, clapping *binzasara* (bamboo whisks or plates), dancing, and singing merrily. *The Calendar of Annual Events Scroll* also reveals groups playing large and small drums, *binzasara* clappers, and flutes in procession to Kyoto's Gion Shrine and Jōnangū Shrine; at the latter, juggling is also depicted.

15 Frank Hoff (trans.), *The Genial Seed: A Japanese Song Cycle* (New York: Grossman, 1971), 144, no. 122.

Another important historical source is a record by Ōe no Masafusa, reporting that a 1096 dengaku includes performers of *takaashi* (stilts), *issoku* (single stilt), *yōko* (waist drum), *furitsuzumi* (shaking drum), *dobyōshi* (cymbals), clappers, *uemē* (planting girls), and *tsukime* (threshing girls). They drew the attention of passers-by with their extraordinary costumes of gold and silver brocade, but also through their eccentric behavior, quarreling and startling people. Dengaku seemed to gain an overwhelming contemporary popularity with no regard for status and rank, but the author commented presciently that this social “frenzy” was a sign of coming turbulent times. Such unusually showy performances given by a group wearing strange costumes and makeup were called *furyū* (風流).¹⁶

Religious performance as entertainment

It should now be clear that temple and shrine grounds offered sites for secular performances, drawing audiences through music, laughter, and outlandish behavior to religious ceremonies and rites. Actual Buddhist ceremonies have also been a cradle for many performing arts.

Shushi wizard spectacles

A spectacular performance of *shushi* (呪師), also pronounced *zushi*, *sushi*, or *noronji*, appeared in eleventh-century noblemen’s diaries or records of annual events.¹⁷ The performance included “running” (*hashiri*) or showy body movements offered by a gorgeously costumed performer. The genre is said to derive from a temple service executed by a shushi (literally, master of magic, wizard) priest. Shushi played an important role in *shushō-e* (or *shujō-e*) and *shuni-e*¹⁸ at Nara’s Tōdaiji, Yakushiji, and many other temples from the eighth century onward. Shuni-e consists of three parts, *keka-sahō* (a rite to repent one’s sins), *daidōshi-sahō* (a rite to pray for peace), and *shushi-sahō* (a rite to purify the hall and welcome the gods). This shushi-sahō contains esoteric elements such as utterance of magic words or use of symbolic hand gestures, but sometimes employs movements like bell-ringing and racing around the altar combined with sliding feet and hands holding swords to create spectacular effects.

There are several interpretations for the emergence of *shushi-sarugaku* (sarugaku played by shushi), an early form of sarugaku noh. Some claim that

¹⁶ The term is applied not only to a human performance but also to physical constructions like gorgeously ornamented floats (*mikoshi*, *dashi*, *danjiri*, *yama*, *hoko*) and umbrellas (*kasa*).

¹⁷ See *Sakeiki* (a diary by Minamoto no Tsuneyori), *Gōkeshidai* (by Ōe no Masafusa), and *Chūyūki* (a diary by Fujiwara no Munetada).

¹⁸ In big temples like Tōdaiji and Yakushiji, shuni-e is now performed in the third month of the solar calendar, a grand spectacle that attracts a large audience.

shushi priests gradually developed their ritualistic performances into entertainment forms in the medieval period; others explain that sangaku players affiliated with temples gradually took over the roles of shushi priests to perform theatrical pieces at the end of Buddhist services.

Descent of the Buddha: *raigō-e*

Another type of visually theatrical ritual, *raigō-e* (来迎会), also known as *nerikuyō*, displays the descent of Amida (阿弥陀、the Buddha of infinite light). Based on the rise of Pure Land Buddhist belief in the eleventh century, a number of rich people, wishing to be reborn in paradise, rushed to do a “good deed” by making a huge donation to a temple, or constructing a building. They often ordered paintings of the scene in which Amida, with an entourage of twenty-five *bosatsu* (bodhisattvas), descended to take a good person’s soul to heaven.

Japanese people in the medieval era realized this imagined world in human performance. In Taimadera Temple in the southern Nara basin, a temporary bridge is constructed between Shabadō Hall, likened to “this world,” and Gokurakudō Hall, symbolizing Amida’s paradise. Masked bodhisattvas enter from the Gokurakudō, parade along the bridge to the Shabadō, accept the soul of Princess Chūjō (associated with the temple), and finally return to the Gokurakudō. Local temple adherents take on the roles of the bodhisattvas, wearing gold masks and costumes, the procession accompanied by Buddhist chanting and gagaku music. The *raigō-e* ceremony is assumed to have developed by the thirteenth century, when the oldest bodhisattva mask can be dated.

Buddhist chant: *shōmyō*

Buddhist ceremonies have rich sonority. Buddhist chanting called *shōmyō* (声明) may include dialogue or storytelling. *Rongi* (論義, to debate) is a catechism for inquiring about Buddhist teachings. One priest asks questions and the other answers, not simply spoken but sung in specific musical pitches and rhythms. *Kōshiki* (講式) also employs syllabic recitation, interpreting Buddhist teachings or introducing achievements of the Buddha or saintly priests. The recitation style of rongi and kōshiki is a continuous narrative tradition shared with secular variants in *heikyoku* (recitation of the *Heike monogatari* to biwa accompaniment) and *utai* (recitation of noh and predecessor of rakugo storytelling).

Religious ceremonies as sites for sacred entertainments

In addition to their utilization of such Buddhist performing arts, temples provided access and space for a great variety of entertainments. Some were performed during services, others for amusement afterwards. *Hōraku* (法樂) are “sacred entertainments” for the gods, but also enjoyed by humans.

Shushi-sarugaku was often presented at the rear door of a hall after the main service ended. Behind the chief Buddha, facing the rear door, another Buddha or god is often enshrined, for example Matara-shin, a representative god, particularly in Tendai sect temples. Possessed of a somewhat violent character, he must be pacified, but is also regarded as a god of entertainment. Therefore, the rear area of temples has provided a significant space for entertainments since medieval times.

Ennen (延年)

Ennen (lit. “long-life”) is an entertainment performed after the completion of temple rites, not a genre *per se* but a framing event displaying a variety of performances of different styles. It was so popular during medieval times that great temples such as Kōfukuji, Tōdaiji, and Tōnomine (or Tanzan Shrine) competed as sponsors. Only Mōtsūji in Iwate prefecture and a few other temples and shrines still maintain the tradition. Mōtsūji ennen is performed as hōraku following the *Jōgyōzanmai-ku* service, extolling the name of Amida Buddha. The ennen dance genres employ various formations such as lines, squares, and circles, often accompanied by music.

Among the variants of ennen-mai are *romai* (*kara-byōshi*), danced by two children representing two mysterious, legendary boys witnessed by the priest who founded the temple, Jikaku Daishi (794–864). Song and drums accompany the dance as the boys walk with toes sliding on the floor, holding wooden plates, stamp the floor, and turn quickly. There is also *notto*, a prayer for the Matara-shin god, inaudible but indispensable in terms of religious meaning. In *rōjo*, a stooping, grey-haired woman gestures as if combing her hair, then dances holding a fan and bell. As the dance includes neither words nor music, it looks like mime. In contrast, *jakujo* presents a young woman who dances elegantly while holding a bell and fan, also unaccompanied. In the latter half, a male priest character joins in the dance.

Chigo mai (Children’s dance) features two boys reciting and dancing, sometimes accompanied by adults’ recitation. *Hanaori* (Gathering flowers) and *Obogamukashi* (Reminiscing) are staged in alternate years. Both pieces celebrate the beauty of nature. In the *chokushi mai*, Kyōdono, an imperial messenger from Kyoto, and Ariyoshi, a servant, banter and dance together. *Ennen no mai* (Long life dance) is considered an archaic style of noh by folk-art scholar Honda Yasuji, although only *Todomedori* (Staying bird) is performed today, followed by one bugaku piece, *Karyōbin*, danced by four boys.

Thus ennen has accommodated performing arts of different styles and periods, including dance, mime, and dialogue. The dialogues found in chigo mai and chokushi mai are important theatrical features that developed later in the Middle Ages into full-fledged dramatic genres.

FOCUS 1.2 Medieval variety show today: Nara's *Onmatsuri*

The Kasuga Wakamiya Onmatsuri (おん祭) in Nara is one of the oldest festivals in Japan, combining various ritual and secular entertainments, held annually in winter since 1136. Its basic structure is typical: welcoming the gods, entertaining them, then seeing them off.

The most important part of the festival is held noon to midnight on 17 December at Nara's Kasuga-taisha Shrine and Kōfukuji Temple. The god of Kasuga-wakamiya (a son of the Kasuga gods) moves from his usual residence (Wakamiya-sha) to the *otabisho* ("a place to stay during travel"). The god is carried at night by some twenty priests in white costumes holding sacred *sakaki* branches, accompanied by prayers of purification and *gagaku* music. At the *otabisho*, food, drinks, and a variety of performing arts are offered, including *miko kagura*, *azuma-asobi*, *yamato-mai*, *bugaku*, *dengaku*, *seino-o*, and *sarugaku* (*noh*).

The *miko kagura* of Kasuga-taisha is danced by eight virgins ringing bells, accompanied by song, *koto* zither, flute, and *shakubyōshi* clappers. *Azuma-asobi* (literally meaning "play of the eastern country") and *Yamato-mai* (literally "dance of Yamato") are considered a pair of

dances, one from eastern Japan and the other from the Yamato (Nara) region, both thought of as indigenous repertoire in *gagaku* as opposed to *bugaku*.

The *dengaku* at Kasuga-taisha is an invaluable living example of ancient tradition. Although it has lost its original powerful expression, it preserves elements of medieval dance, music, juggling, acrobatics, and dialogue-based skits. The gorgeous ornate decorations on the flute-player's hat are also a remnant of the *furyū* costumes that once flourished.

Seino-o, also known as "Isora-no-mai," is the most mysterious rite of the festival. Several men in white costumes hiding their faces with white cloths, walk backward and forward while playing flutes and drums. The term "*seino-o*" possibly means "a man of talent" and Isora is a sea goddess. According to Japanese myth, Isora was so ugly that she hid her face when meeting someone, but was also fond of performances by talented men. The *sarugaku* (*noh*) ritual *Okina* is also performed here.

After the service is over, the god is returned to Wakamiya-sha.

TERAUCHI NAOKO

From ritual to art

Various religious rituals are also performing arts enjoyed as secular amusements, incorporating prayers and offerings to native Shinto gods or Buddhist deities. Spectators enjoying music, dance, and play at temples or shrines unconsciously bond with gods and buddhas, which eventually leads to personal enlightenment and happiness. Therefore, Japan's performing arts have not been consumed as temporary diversions only but have been handed down over more than a millennium with respectful care. In other words, these arts have transmitted not only aesthetic techniques but also the faith of ancient and medieval people in the benevolent and procreative potency of the gods.

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