Shishi-mai: A Lively Dance Performed in a Lion Costume

Performance of the New Year's Shishi-mai dance in the snow in Izumozaki Town, Niigata Prefecture

Photo: Izumozaki Town Tourist Association

The Shishi-mai dance, a Japanese folk performing art, is performed on occasions such as New Year's celebrations and *matsuri* festivals as a traditionally event for getting rid of misfortune or disaster (*yaku-harai*)[1] and offer prayers for sound health. (See Column for more background.) The dance is performed by mostly alone or a pair of dancers wearing a costume featuring a *shishi-gashira* mask which is modeled on the head of the *shishi*,[2] an imaginary creature based on ancient conceptions of the lion, an animal not natively found in Japan. This article will introduce Shishi-mai dances performed in Izumozaki Town, Niigata Prefecture, a particularly well-known example of the event held in conjunction with New Year's celebrations.

(Text: MOROHASHI Kumiko)

Niigata Prefecture is located in the northwest area of the Japanese archipelago's central section. Once home to a successful shipping industry, Izumozaki Town is located at just about the center of the prefecture's Sea of Japan-facing side in an abundant natural setting, surrounded by the sea and hilly mountains. We interviewed OGURO Osamu of the Izumozaki Town Industry and Tourism Division about the origins and special features of the town's Shishi-mai traditions.

"Izumozaki's Shishi-mai dance traditions are said to date to around 1680. Every year on the 2nd and 3rd of January, and then the 11th and 15th, youthful dancers playing the parts of *shishi* make their way through the town, performing ceremonial cleansing to the sound of *taiko* drums and traditional Japanese *yoko-fue* flutes. Starting from various shrines, they will go door to door through the town's rows of *tsumairi*-style houses with entrances at right angles to the roofs' ridges — a traditional event that has come to represent the local culture of Izumozaki."

"The *tsumairi* style is a feature of the local architecture, characterized by a narrow frontage[3] and greater depth. Around 1680, when Izumozaki had high population density, the style was commonly adopted to help increase the number of residents the town could hold. Another reason for the town's many houses with narrow frontages like this is said to relate to tax rates being based on properties' frontages at the time. In the town's limited space of flat land surrounded by hilly

Photo: Izumozaki Town Tourist Association

Shishi-mai: A traditional event carefully maintained by Izumozaki residents

Photo: Izumozaki Town Tourist Association

A *shishi-gashira* mask is placed on a performer's head

terrain and the Sea of Japan, the houses stand in rows, seeming to almost overlap one another. Still today, processions of Shishi-mai dancers weave their way through this town setting.

"Members of different communities take part in performing Izumozaki's Shishi-mai dances, as the town is currently made up of a dozen or so districts. Pairs of dancers working in unison perform together, with one wearing the *shishi-gashira* mask and the other forming the tail end. Besides these main performers, the basic makeup of a Shishi-mai procession includes one performer each accompanying the dance on the *yoko-fue* flute, *kane* bell, trumpet shell,[4] and *taiko* drum, an assistant pulling the cart for the *taiko*, and two or three carrying *o-saisenbako* boxes for accepting offerings of money."[5]

Photo: Izumozaki Town Tourist Association

The particularly gorgeous *shishi-gashira* mask of Ame-jishi

On January 11, a special *shishi* performer known as the Ame-jishi appears,("jishi" is a Japanese phonetic change of "shishi") wearing a special *shishi-gashira* mask decorated with gold accents and a body section dyed with different showy colors.

"They say markets selling salt once opened on January 11 in Izumozaki, and then during the Meiji period (1868–1912), markets offering candy (*ame* in Japanese) for sale then appeared in their place. This is the origin of the Ame-jishi, from the *shishi* dancers who once appeared at the candy markets."

The Ame-jishi dancers present an impressive spectacle, making a daring dance through the historic town setting with its rows of *tsumairi* houses. The dancer will offer prayers for household well-being and sound health, while giving a spirited performance accompanied by *taiko* drums, *yoko-fue* flutes, and other instruments.

Photo: Izumozaki Town Tourist Association

A baby has its head "bitten" by a *shishi-gashira* in an offering of prayers for the family's safety and good health.

"Having one's head 'bitten' by the *shishi-gashira* is said to provide getting rid of misfortune or disaster. Though the weather will be cold, with snow covering the ground, I hope many visitors will make their way to Izumozaki on days in January when Shishi-mai dances are performed to enjoy the benefits of this cleansing and find happiness in the new year."

1. In Japan, misfortune or disaster is called "yaku." The act of getting rid of such misfortune is called "*yaku-harai*" or "*yaku-barai*" (disaster prevention). This usually involves praying to gods and Buddhas.
2. While "*shishi*" generally refers to the lion in Japanese, the word can also refer to an imaginary creature based on ancient conceptions of the lion, an animal that was not found in East Asia. This imaginary *shishi* has traditionally appeared at temples, shrines, and other locations as a form associated with protection from misfortune.
3. The width of a house or property
4. *Horagai*: a type of large spiral seashell, also known as a conch. Characterized by the depth of its tone, it has been used as a trumpet-like ceremonial instrument in rituals and traditional events at temples or shrines.
5. A box used for accepting offerings of money. In Japan, they are often found installed in front of the main hall of a shrine.

JAPAN'S SHISHI-MAI DANCE

The Shishi-mai dance is a traditional performing art seen throughout Japan, involving dances by alone, in pairs or with several performers wearing a costume with a mask which is modeled on the head of the *shishi*, an imaginary creature based on ancient conceptions of the lion. Often performed on occasions such as New Year's celebrations and *matsuri* festivals, the dance signifies getting rid of misfortune or disaster (*yaku-harai*). Associated with good fortune, it is popular still today. It is believed that the dance originated in ancient India and was introduced to Japan as a form of *gigaku* dance, involving drama-dance performances performed by masked dancers with musical accompaniment, a genre thought to have been brought to Japan from continental Asia during the Asuka period (late 6th century to early 8th century).

One of the oldest surviving masks associated with the dance is a carved wooden *shishi-gashira* used in a *gigaku* performance for a ceremony held at Todai-ji temple (Nara City) in 752, for the newly constructed statue of Great Buddha's eye-opening. The mask is in the collection of the Shosoin.* The dance is thought to have gained widespread popularity in the Edo period (early 17th century to mid-late 19th century), after performing arts teams called *daikagura* began performing it in locations throughout Japan.

* Shosoin: A storehouse for items of special importance, thought to have been built around the mid-8th century. Currently managed by the Imperial Household Agency, the Shosoin has over 9,000 items in its collection, including imperial relics such as personal items once cherished by Emperor Shomu (45th emperor of Japan from 724 to 749).