Vibrant Hagoita Decorations for the New Year

In Japan, one of the indoor decorations to celebrate the New Year is the *hagoita*. To learn more about its history and origins, we spoke with SHIMIZU Yumiko, who continues the tradition of *Hakata Okiage* craft techniques in Fukuoka Prefecture to create *hagoita*. (Text: TANAKA Nozomi)

The *hagoita* is a wooden paddle originally used in Japan for the New Year's game *hanetsuki*. It has a slender handle and a shape similar to a badminton racket. In *hanetsuki*, players use the *hagoita* to hit a shuttlecock-like object made by inserting bird feathers into seeds from the soapberry (*mukuroji*)[1] tree. SHIMIZU explains more about the *hagoita*: "The act of hitting the *hane* (feathers)[2] with the *hagoita* symbolizes the wish to drive away bad luck and prevent disasters. Around the 16th century, the *hagoita* gradually changed from a practical play item into a decorative piece with beautiful designs. Today, it is mainly displayed as a vibrant decoration during the New Year, symbolizing good health, protection from evil, and the removal of bad luck."

An illustration of playing *hanetsuki* with *hagoita*.

Photos: PIXTA

An example of a practical *hagoita* used as a toy, along with various types of feathers.

The decorations on *hagoita* originally featured paintings directly on the wooden paddle. However, in the 16th century, three-dimensional decorations were introduced using thick paper, fabric, and cotton. This allowed for the creation of *oshie* (raised cloth pictures), which depicted people, flowers, or scenes from nature. In Fukuoka, the technique of *oshie* is known as "*okiage*" and has been passed down as a traditional craft to this day. *Okiage* involves attaching fabric to thick paper or, alternatively, creating parts by wrapping cotton to add thickness to the fabric, which are then assembled to form a three-dimensional picture. It is said that luxurious silk fabrics, such as those in gold or vivid red, commonly used in kimonos, are incorporated for a rich, vibrant finish.

"By the 19th century, Kabuki[3] became immensely popular, and *hagoita* featuring famous actors began to serve a role similar to that of collectible photo cards, becoming beloved by the common people," says SHIMIZU. "The *oshie hagoita* also became highly popular."

SHIMIZU, the third-generation successor of the traditional *Hakata Okiage* craft, occasionally holds exhibitions of her works. These exhibitions attract many visitors from overseas who enjoy the displays.

"We often receive comments expressing admiration for the intricate craftsmanship and designs created by hand. Many also mention being drawn to the charm of the fusion between tradition and modernity, with some saying they would like to take the pieces home as souvenirs for their own countries," Shimizu explains.

Why not celebrate the New Year by decorating with Japan's vibrant *hagoita* as a wish for good health and well-being in the year ahead?

1. A deciduous tree that can grow over 15 meters tall. It produces fruit with black, hard seeds, which are used to make the shuttlecock for *hanetsuki* (a traditional game played with *hagoita*).
2. The seed of the *mukuroji* (*soapberry*) tree, with feathers attached, is struck with a *hagoita* in the game of *hanetsuki*.
3. A traditional Japanese performing art that combines music, dance, and drama. It is believed to have originated in Kyoto around the early 17th century.

Photo: Hakata Okiage

A *hagoita* (92 cm in length) created using the traditional craft technique of *Hakata Okiage*. It depicts scenes from Japanese dance and Kabuki performance[3]

Photo: Hakata Okiage

An exhibition showcasing *Hakata Okiage*, featuring some large pieces measuring up to 1 meter in length.

A *hagoita* (1 meter in length) created using the traditional craft of *Hakata Okiage*, with even the hair of the Kabuki actor depicted in three-dimensional detail.

Photo: Hakata Okiage

Photo: PIXTA

In Asakusa, Tokyo, the annual Hagoita Fair is held every December, where *hagoita* are sold as New Year decorations.