

Tsuchie Kodomo Kagura perform at Tsuchie Shrine in Oda City, Shimane Prefecture



# Tsuchie Kodomo Kagura

## The Gods' Young Entertainers

**Tsuchie Kodomo Kagura, a “village kagura” dance group in Shimane Prefecture comprised entirely of children, continues to entertain local crowds – as well as the nation’s Gods – some 140 years after it was formed.**

**ROB GILHOOLY**

**S**USANO-O, the fearless deity from ancient Japanese mythology, is tasked with saving Princess Kushinada, but first must get past Orochi, a fire-spewing serpent with eight heads and tails and a body long enough to span eight peaks and valleys. Japan’s twinkle-toed superhero

escapes the serpent’s smothering coils, and with graceful swishes of a sword severs their heads one by one amid appreciative cheers from the audience, who watch on transfixed from the shrine courtyard.

The play, *Orochi*, is a mainstay of a dance genre known as “kagura,” widely considered the earliest Japanese performing art. On this occasion, the performance at Tsuchie Shrine in Oda City, Shimane Prefecture is distinct from conventional offerings: The cast of dancers and musicians is made up entirely of children.

They are part of the Tsuchie Kodomo Kagura group (“*kodomo*” means “children”), which was officially established in 1879, but is believed to date back significantly further.

Indeed, surviving examples of kagura artifacts, such as *taiko* drums and the distinctive masks, have been dated back more than 300 years, according to group director, Yoshiyuki Kaji.

It’s a custom that continues today, he says, though there have been interruptions along the way, including during wartime.

Nineteen years ago, organizers were forced to retire the group due to a more contemporary issue – a declining birthrate. “There simply weren’t enough



Susano-o in battle with the eight-headed serpent Orochi

All Photos: Rob Gilhooly

The children perform a variety of plays in the local, Iwami-kagura tradition

children for it to continue,” says Kaji, adding that while there had been five children’s kagura troupes in the region, all of them folded.

When it came to trying to revive the group several years later, Kaji decided they needed to find a way to ensure its longevity and enlisted the help of residents in the area who were seasoned performers at the region’s countless kagura events and festivals. In 2000, the children’s kagura troupe was revived as the Tsuchie Kodomo Kagura.

Subsequently, while in previous times there had been a playful element to the children’s performances, they became more authentic, which appealed to many young people.

That real-deal kagura is highly revered in western Shimane Prefecture, home ground of the Tsuchie Kodomo Kagura. According to legend, kagura was first performed by Ame-no-Uzume – the goddess credited with introducing revelry to the world – to lure the reclusive sun goddess Amaterasu-omikami out of her cave and bring light and warmth to the world.

Over the years, many varieties have evolved, most



Tsuchie Kodomo Kagura director Yoshiyuki Kaji (right) with performer Honoka Moriwaki

incorporating elements of Shintoism and Buddhism, Japan’s dominant faiths. The most traditional, and earliest forms are ritualistic, while others are highly theatrical, occasionally verging on farce.

This latter style, known under the umbrella term *sato-kagura* (village kagura), was officially encouraged during the Meiji period (1868-1912) during which time the government forbade Shinto priests from performing kagura, and residents increasingly assumed roles traditionally played by shrine priests and attendants.



It subsequently flourished and today an ever-evolving repertoire of dances are performed at festivals around the region, particularly in the fall.

The local sato-kagura variety performed is known as Iwami-kagura, which is performed by some 145 troupes in a province of western Shimane Prefecture historically known as Iwami, which incorporates Oda.

The Tsuchie Kodomo Kagura group is the only one made up exclusively of children, who not only perform the plays and provide the accompanying music, but also design the dance programs and some of the dance moves themselves, Kaji says.

The problem of dwindling participant numbers seems to have abated, with members, who are aged between 3 and 15, eager to get involved. Indeed, after “retirement” many continue to attend the twice-weekly rehearsals to help the younger members, Kaji says.

Honoka Moriwaki, 12, who started kagura when she was 4, inspired by her brother who also was a member, says the element of kagura that attracts her the most is the dynamism of the dances.

“There’s other entertainment, like video games, that are dynamic, too, but some things can only be done by people and I want to cherish the power of human expression that is such an integral part of kagura.”

Fellow member Koga Yasui, 14, says the complex and sometimes high-tempo dance moves are further complicated by the ornate costumes, some of which weigh up to 30 kg.

“The plays can be quite long so it can be pretty tiring,” says Yasui, who also started when he was 4. “Like everyone else, when I was little I used to copy the adult kagura performances, so I have been watching and dancing kagura for many years. For most of us, it’s second nature.” **J**

