

The *kagura* stage at Hamada's Sanku shrine



Kagura, Japan's oldest performance art, still has the power to make them laugh.

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# THE OLDEST JOKES IN THE BOOK

**E**BISU, the God of a good catch and business prosperity, is having a bad day. He has cast his fishing line in the hope of hooking a jumbo fish, but none is biting.

“Yare-yare” (jeez!), he says as he reaches into his basket to pull out more bait, causing a ripple of excitement among his audience - in particular the younger members, who know what’s coming next.

In this comedic play during an evening of Iwami-kagura drama, held at a 450-year-old shrine in the city of Hamada, Shimane Prefecture, the forty members of the audience are in effect Ebisu’s fish and the bait is not grubs, or herrings, but candy, which he flings by the fistful into the audi-



Audience participation is an important element of comedic *kagura*.

ence to hearty applause and squeals of laughter.

“It was funny, but a little scary,” said a four-year-old girl, who had joined Ebisu on the makeshift stage to lend a hand reeling in the papier-mâché sea bream.

The girl’s contradicting response is almost germane to *kagura*, a genre of dance that is Japan’s oldest performing art.

Although *kagura*’s exact origin is unknown, its earliest form is believed to have been a ritual derived from the legendary tale of the sun goddess Amaterasu and the entertaining way in which the goddess Ame-no-Uzume performed dances to persuade the reclusive, cave-dwelling Amaterasu to shed light on the world once more.

Over the years, many types of *kagura* have evolved, incorporating Shinto and, to a lesser degree, Buddhist elements. Some are highly ritualistic, such as the *miko-kagura* performed for the Imperial court by *miko* shrine maidens – descendants, it is said, of Ame-no-Uzume – while others are highly theatrical, almost kabuki-esque.

This latter style, known under the umbrella term *sato-kagura* (village *kagura*), was officially

- 1 Enter the dragon
- 2 Monkey business
- 3 Expressive masks help to keep the tension high.

encouraged during the Meiji period (1868-1912), when local residents adopted the roles previously played by shrine priests and attendants, who had previously been the sole purveyors of the ritualized, Shamanistic plays that are often referred to as “Shinshoku-Kagura.”

Sato-kagura subsequently flourished and today a variety of dances and music are performed at many local festivals and other public events around the country. Some of the events last not more than an hour; others, such as those held in the fall as part of harvest festivals, continue overnight.

Today there are hundreds of kagura troupes throughout Japan performing numerous types of the dance, including Ise-ryu kagura and Izumoryu kagura.

Iwami-kagura alone is performed by some 150 troupes in a district of western Shimane Prefecture once known as Iwami.

Iwami-kagura features a repertoire of around 100 dances, invariably accompanied by flutes, percussion and voice. It is believed to originally date back to the Muromachi period (1336-1573), according to Takashi Shimono, who played the part of Ebisu at the performance at Hamada’s Sanku shrine.

“It was originally a ritual dedicated to the gods that was performed by shrine priests but was handed over to parishioners and turned into a kind of show,” he said. “Today the plays are close to kabuki in style and created with the objective of enjoyment for those who come to watch.”

A major distinguishing feature of Iwami-kagura is its fast tempo, called *hacchoshi*, the elaborate dress, which can weigh in excess of 30 kg, and striking *washi* paper masks.

“Another feature is that the plays are visually impactful and easy to comprehend even if you don’t understand the words spoken,” says Kenji Asaura, who heads the Mikawa Nishi Kagura Hozonkai troupe, whose members include local public servants, fisheries employees and workers at a local auto parts manufacturer.

This is particularly true of the comedic plays.



Ebisu’s feeble fishing exploits and plodding, almost vaudevillian dance moves, are given an extra humorous touch by his mask, featuring an oval face, slightly drooping eyes and permanent grin.

“Just looking at that face makes me want to laugh,” said another member of the audience at Sanku shrine. “Not all kagura plays are comedic, but they are all highly entertaining.”

The age-old power of kagura to captivate an audience remains undimmed. **17**