A UNIQUE COMEDY CULTURE
Features

6
Atsugiri Jason: Character Assassin
American comedian Atsugiri Jason has risen to stardom poking fun at the Japanese language.

8
Rakugo: Enriching the Imagination
Sanyutei Ryuraku has a story to tell the world.

10
Concentration and Release
Actor Manzo Nomura talks kyogen.

12
Clowning Around
Physical comedy duo Gamarjobat’s shows transcend language barriers.

14
What’s Manzai?
We ask manzai-shi fall guy Stephen Tetsu.

Also

4
PRIME MINISTER’S DIARY
Keeping the Peace in South Sudan

120
TOPICS

22
SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY
HIGH CO GENERATION EFFICIENCY, ULTRA-COMPACT DESIGN

WHERE TO FIND US
Tokyo Narita Airport terminals 1 & 2 ❌ JR East Travel Service Center (Tokyo Narita Airport) ❌ JR Tokyo Station Tourist Information Center ❌ Tokyo Tourist Information Center (Haneda Airport, Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building, Keisei Ueno Station) ❌ Niigata Airport ❌ Chubu Centrair International Airport Tourist Information & Service ❌ Kansai Tourist Information Center (Kansai Intl Airport) ❌ Fukuoka Airport Tourist Information ❌ Foreign Press Center/Japan ❌ Foreign Correspondents’ Club of Japan ❌ Delegation of the European Union to Japan ❌ Tokyo University ❌ Waseda University ❌ Ritsumeikan University ❌ Kokushikan University ❌ University of Tsukuba ❌ Keio University ❌ Meiji University ❌ Osaka University ❌ Kyushu University ❌ Kyoto University ❌ Tohoku University ❌ Nagoya University ❌ Sophia University ❌ Doshisha University ❌ Akita International University ❌ International University of Japan
In this month’s Feature story we dissect Japan’s distinctive comedy culture, introducing some of the range of genres, both old and new, that make Japanese people laugh. We also interview two non-Japanese people working in the comedy industry, and talk to Japanese comedians and storytellers who have taken their art forms overseas.

16 The Oldest Jokes in the Book
Kagura still has the power to make them laugh.

18 Art that Wears a Smile on Its Face
Japanese art has always had its humorous side.

20 From Osaka to the World
Japan’s best-known comedy production line now extends into Asia.

26 SMEs OVERSEAS
Concrete Improvements

28 WASHOKU
Sweets for All Seasons

30 NATIONAL PARKS
Aso-Kuju: The Power of Nature
From May 26 to 27, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe attended the G7 Summit held in Taormina, Italy. About a half of the G7 leaders, including President Trump, were participating in the G7 Summit for the first time. The leaders held candid discussions on securing global peace and security and realizing inclusive growth of the global economy, amid “a time of change” for the G7, and the deepening of issues such as North Korea, countering terrorism and violent extremism, and refugee issues.

Prime Minister Abe, based on his experience as the Chair of the previous G7 Summit, strongly emphasized the significance of G7 solidarity, as the first speaker, while also leading discussions on issues such as North Korea, the global economy and trade, and maritime security.

The leaders deepened their relationships of personal trust with one another, and agreed that the G7 that shares universal values will respond to the various issues they face with greater solidarity than ever before, as champions of the rules-based international community.

On May 19, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe held a summit meeting with H.E. Mr. Mauricio Macri, President of the Argentine Republic.

Prime Minister Abe expressed his support for the President’s leadership in driving Mercosur and South America by promoting various free and open reforms.

Additionally, Prime Minister Abe explained that in light of the 120th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations in 2018 next year, he hopes to establish a new Japan-Argentina relationship.

As for the bilateral relations, Prime Minister Abe explained that as “strategic partners” that share fundamental values, he hopes Japan and Argentina will accumulate concrete outcomes through venues such as policy consultations, the World Trade Organization (WTO) Ministerial Conference and the G20 Summit that will be held in Argentina toward next year.

Prime Minister Abe mentioned that the Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC) resumed loan operations to the government of Argentina for the first time in twenty years, and stated that he hopes to continue promoting quality infrastructure investment. Prime Minister Abe also welcomed the creation of a “Roadmap for strengthening trade and economic relations” for the Japan-Argentina Joint Committee on Promoting Trade and Investment, the establishment of a bilateral dialogue on agriculture, livestock, fishing, forestry and agroindustrial sectors, as well as the progress with discussions on trade of agricultural products.

Prime Minister Abe welcomed the signing of a memorandum of cooperation on a working holiday program, which is Japan’s first agreement of this kind with a Latin American country, along with stating that he intends to further advance exchanges of nationals, including people-to-people exchanges, sports and tourism, toward the success of the 2018 Youth Olympic Games and the 2020 Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games.
Comedy in Japan can be a hard thing to understand for those unfamiliar with the deep culture which surrounds it, irrespective of the obvious difficulties a foreign observer might have with the Japanese language itself. Japanese comedy is not however impenetrable: it is accessible with a little effort and brilliantly funny once the codes are understood. Indeed, a number of non-Japanese residents have made their name on the domestic comedy circuit, while a number of Japanese comedians have made their breakthrough overseas. In this month’s Feature, we look at Japan’s unique comedy culture, the traditions which inform it and the multi-faceted nature of the broad comedy genre today.
A UNIQUE COMEDY CULTURE

Feature

Atsugiri Jason
Character Assassin

A MERICAN Jason Danielson, better known in Japan as “Atsugiri Jason,” has captured the public imagination with his hilarious high-energy skits ridiculing the complexities of the Japanese language.

You have been living and working in Japan since 2005 as the corporate officer of a Mothers-listed IT company. How did you make the breakthrough in Japanese comedy?

A few years ago I started a weekend course at Watanabe Entertainment Comedy School. I enjoyed the comedy on TV and thought I’d like to give it a try. The course lasted for a year and at the end of it a couple of TV shows picked me up for auditions. It just kind of blew up from there.

Your skits have a common theme...

My routines mostly point out the inconsistencies or paradoxes in Japanese kanji characters and language phrases. A character is usually made up of multiple little characters. If you take the meanings of those little characters separately and compare them with the meaning of the overall character, there often seems to be a contradiction. For example, the character for “hunting,” "狩,” comprises a character for “animal” and the character for “protect.” The character for walking, “歩,” means to “stop a little.” Those are single characters; when characters are combined, it can get even more ridiculous. The character for socks, for example (靴 下), means “under the shoe,” but you’d get really dirty socks if they were under the shoe. The
strangeness extends to phrases. If you do something bad, in Japanese as in English you “get your hands dirty.” But when you stop doing something bad, in Japanese you “wash your feet of it.” I don’t understand. Your feet were never involved.

How did you hit on the catchphrase “Why Japanese people!”?
By chance actually. At comedy school, when I was not used to performing in front of a lot of people, I would sometimes panic and forget what I was going to say. In one of those moments the phrase just popped out. One of the Watanabe people told me the phrase in itself was funny and that I should pay more attention to it. From then on I made it a point to put that phrase in every skit. “Why Japanese people!” fits in with the stereotypical persona of an American getting overly excited and is simple enough English for most Japanese people to understand that he’s confused.

How would you characterize Japanese comedy.
There are two main kinds. There’s the visual kind – people like [the comically made-up female double act] Nippon Elekitel Rengo or [swimsuit-clad] Kojima Yoshio – involving funny movements or other elements that are visually stimulating or surprising. The other kind would be the Osaka style of word-play comedy [manzai]. Comedy in the United States by contrast is more politically charged and tends to focus on social or political issues using exaggeration and sarcasm. You don’t really see that in Japan.

What comedy show would you recommend to readers who are studying Japanese?
“Enta no kamisama” [The God of Entertainment] is one that I used to watch when I first came to Japan. [Atsugiri Jason is now a regular guest.] The show is a sequence of very short skits [by a variety of established and emerging comedians]. The skits are characterized by repetition and a bridge line marking out the laugh points in the same way that canned laughter is used in situation comedies in the United States. Subtitles run along the bottom of the screen.

How do see your career in entertainment evolving?
My focus recently has been less on comedy and more on commentator type roles connected with my IT and business background. I have two regular shows on NHK’s education channel: “Eigo de asobo” [“Let’s Play in English”] and “Why!? Programming,” which teaches children basic computer programming. So, less random comedy and more purposeful edutainment.

Do you enjoy your entertainment work?
I do. You get to meet a lot of interesting people and do things you’d never be able to do otherwise. For example, I went deep-sea fishing. We’re talking deep, deep sea. I was pulling up these weird monsters, and because the water pressure is so different near the surface, the fish were exploding as I pulled them in. I was getting big reactions like, “Oh! What’s this fish!” and then [makes hand-to-mouth gesture] I had to eat it. So you get blessed with all these opportunities.

Interview by ALEX HENDY
Rakugo is Japan’s comic storytelling art, and it has a history dating back around 250 years. It is characterized by a rakugoka (storyteller) sitting alone on a mat on stage and playing multiple characters in a story. Performances are held every day in yose (storyteller theaters) in Tokyo and Osaka.

Sanyutei Ryuraku, a rakugoka, gives performances not only in Japanese, but also in French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, German, English and Chinese. He has visited about fifty cities overseas and given more than 170 performances of rakugo in these foreign languages.

Ryuraku began giving performances in foreign languages in 2008.

Ryuraku said, “The teacher from whom I learn sado (the Japanese art of the tea ceremony) was going to make a presentation of sado at the Japan Festival in Florence, Italy. He suggested that I should also give a performance of rakugo. This was the beginning of my performances in foreign languages.”

He memorizes the foreign language version of the rakugo by rote. He asks native speakers he knows to translate rakugo in Japanese into foreign languages and to record the foreign language version on a tape. He writes it in katakana, which is often used for loan words, and he reads it aloud repeatedly to learn it by rote.” However, Ryuraku said that in rakugo performed in foreign languages, words only form part of the expression.

“It sometimes happens that the more I describe the culture and customs indigenous to Japan with words, the more difficult they are to understand. The important thing is to stimulate the imagination of the audience using gestures and facial expressions. I think that words are just a tool for encouraging the imagination.”

“For example, in a scene where a character in a story is smoking a cigarette, if a rakugoka explains what a kiseru (a Japanese pipe for smoking) is, the audience will pay attention to the explanation and fail to enter into the story. However, if he or she brings a Japanese paper fan to his or her mouth, saying ‘I am going to smoke a cigarette,’ the audience imagines a pipe based on their own experience, and continues to enjoy the story. With only a Japanese paper fan and a towel on stage, a rakugoka is able to cross cultural barriers easily. This is the advantage of rakugo, ‘the art of imagination.’”

Ryuraku said that the stories that are popular overseas are those that express the characters in the stories with gestures and facial expressions. Take a well-known classic rakugo-story, “Chiritotechin.” A man wants to teach a lesson to one of his friends...
who has a know-it-all attitude, and offers him rotten tofu (bean curd) as chiritotechin, a rare Chinese delicacy that does not actually exist. As expected, the friend says that he knows it, and eats it in agony as he keeps saying, “This is delicious!” This is a scene that attracts loud laughter.

“The scenes described in rakugo are the everyday lives of ordinary people. The characters in rakugo are people who can be found close by, anywhere in the world. The laughter that rakugo expresses is ‘humor that every one of us has.’ This is common around the world, beyond borders and cultures.”

Ryuraku is confident of the possibilities of rakugo on the basis of his numerous performances overseas.

“In rakugo, the storyteller plays multiple characters as he or she turns left and right, and each member of the audience imagines the face, figure and clothes of the characters, and the background. The storyteller says to the audience inwardly, “Imagine. Let’s make a story together,” and the audience gives the story liveliness in response. Many of the things that are currently happening in the world, including terrorism and conflicts, are caused by “the lack of imagination for others.” Ryuraku believes that spreading rakugo to the world will foster “rich imagination” and bring relief to the world.

In 2020, Tokyo will host the Olympics and Paralympics. Ryuraku says that he is currently preparing a new style of rakugo for this opportunity, when many people from overseas will visit Japan.

“I am thinking of placing a screen on the back of the storyteller performing the rakugo and projecting ukiyo-e, Japanese woodblock prints onto it. The imagination of the audience will be enhanced as a result. For instance, a scene of watching fireworks in the Edo period (1603-1867) is easy for Japanese people to imagine, but it is difficult for people from other countries. However, when ukiyo-e depicting a scene of watching fireworks are projected onto the back of a storyteller, the audience will be taken to the city in the Edo period instantaneously. Last year, I performed it in France, which was highly successful.”

People around the world have an image of Japanese people as “serious people who do not understand humor.” However, rakugo, which has been making serious Japanese people laugh for 250 years, has undergone a new kind of evolution and is currently spreading a new type of laughter around the world.
KYOGEN is a form of comic drama in which characters are played in an exaggerated style going about their everyday lives or recounting an anecdote. The original form of kyogen was created during the Heian period (794–1185) along with noh. Its evolved style was established in the Muromachi period (1336–1573).

Noh, a masked, dance-based form of drama, shares its roots with kyogen. The two are inextricably linked as performance arts and are often performed together. They are in a kind of yin-yang relationship: if noh, which represents yugen (the subtle and profound), is the moon, then kyogen takes the role of the sun. Both have developed as shinji (rituals related to the gods), first and foremost as holy performance arts for the gods to enjoy. These are the major characteristics of nohgaku, the combination of noh and kyogen. On the other hand, kabuki and other performance arts that were created after noh and kyogen, have developed separately as pure performance arts.

“The laughter of kyogen comes from the world of traditional Japanese music, that is, comfort and enjoyment,” says Manzo Nomura, a kyogen performer of the Izumi school. “Life has high points and low points. The laughter of kyogen makes people feel like living strongly and positively even when they are worried about many things. A kyogen performance does not just make the audience laugh, but does so through implied meanings that connect to the subleties of life. This kind of laughter is universal. That is why kyogen produces laughter not only in Japan, but also around the world, even as times have changed.”

Noh is a solemn musical drama in which the characters played by performers wearing noh masks are people in high positions and gods, while kyogen is an optimistic story in which a wide range of characters are played, including ordinary people with various professions, animals, spirits, and very human gods.
and ogres. Basically, kyogen is a dialogue drama with almost no music and performers play characters without a mask. There are about 400 pieces of music (plays) of kyogen and its expressions contain the energy of its 600-year history.

“In kyogen, performers place an importance on the pulling power, as in archery, for both their lines and acting (movements),” says Nomura. “While maintaining their tension and concentration, they release their power all at once as expression. This concentration and release is the basic movement of kyogen, which is exaggerated so that the audience can imagine and understand what is expressed in those few movements.”

Nomura performs kyogen overseas, mainly in Europe, where he is held in high esteem. On May 12 and 13 of this year, he performed with his father, Man Nomura, a Living National Treasure, at the Japan Foundation’s Japan Cultural Institute in Paris (Maison de la culture du Japon à Paris) in France and earned high praise. The three plays performed were “Sanbaso,” “Kanaoka dainagon” and “Futari bakama.”

“Sanbaso” is a pure ritual in which a god is called on and there is prayer for a good harvest. This play is ceremonial art consisting of utai (chanting of a text) and mai (dancing) without any story, which is exceptional. “Kanaoka dainagon” is a love story about a first-class painter serving in the Imperial Court and “Futari bakama” is a slapstick drama about a father and his son under the theme of a ritual for a bride-groom marrying into the spouse’s family. The performance began with a symbolic play and then proceeded gradually to plays that were more comedic and easier to understand. Subtitles were also used in the performance in France.

“I chose these three plays because I hoped that the audience in France would be able to get a sense of the breadth of kyogen”, says Nomura. “The plays began with a 100% ritual related to the gods, and then moved down from the Imperial court to ordinary people. I thought that as the plays progressed, the audience fully enjoyed themselves with the laughter of comfort and enjoyment from kyogen.”

“A kyogen performer is a Shinto priest handling religious services and, at the same time, a dancer, singer, actor and performer of a comedy skit as if he were a chameleon,” says Nomura.

While performing in Japan and overseas, Nomura is also involved in a wide range of activities, such as the launch of “Yokoso kyogen (welcome kyogen),” a kyogen meeting for people from overseas living in Japan, and the initiatives of “Gendai kyogen (modern kyogen)” alongside a comedian in which kyogen and a comedy are integrated. He will present a new play, “Nobunaga Fortune-telling,” a collaboration with a historian, this summer.

Kyogen is a traditional performance art that continues to evolve. In this scene from the popular kyogen play “Boshibari,” two servants attempt to drink sake despite being tied up by their master. Photo: KUMI AKASAKA / YOROZU KYOGEN

Manzo Nomura on stage in Tokyo
Photo: YOSHIFUSA HASHIZUME

In this scene from the popular kyogen play “Boshibari,” two servants attempt to drink sake despite being tied up by their master. Photo: KUMI AKASAKA / YOROZU KYOGEN

Kyogen is a traditional performance art that continues to evolve.
The silent comedy of Gamarjobat has won them legions of fans around the world. Indeed, the pair’s physical comedy shows, which feature expressive grunts and other noises from the performers, along with sound effects, but no words, saw them win fame and acclaim overseas before their native Japan.

Their shows are packed full of stunts, parodies of magic tricks and assorted tomfoolery, all delivered at a frenetic pace and bursting with energy. Usually decked out in matching suits and dark shades for their performances, the easiest way to tell the two apart is the color of their distinctive mohawk hairstyles: Ketch! sports a red one and HIRO-PON’s is yellow.

“I did mime for a long time, mostly serious stories, but when I did funny material, the audience reaction was immediate and I enjoyed that,” says HIRO-PON. “I’m a Charlie Chaplin fan and that was a factor too. But mime is very minor in Japan and the audiences are quite small. So I started to bill my shows as ‘silent comedy’ and then more people came.”

After working solo for years, they came together in 1999 and soon ventured to Europe.

“We didn’t really aim at performing overseas, but because we don’t use words in our act, it can...
be appreciated anywhere, so it just sort of happened naturally,” explains Ketch!. “We received many offers from overseas; however, we had no offers to perform in a theatrical style emphasizing the narrative. We wanted to perform at festivals and went there by ourselves. When we do a theater show, we need a crew, so just the two of us went at first and did street performances at festivals.”

In 2000, the duo began doing street shows at the famous Edinburgh Festival Fringe in Scotland, a hotbed of performing talent from a range of genres.

“We took a video of our theater show with us, but nobody invited us to do it. Then in 2004, we spent our own money to take the theater show to Edinburgh and won the double act award,” recalls Ketch!. “The show was a complete sell-out, which was great promotion for the following year.”

“I thought when we arrived back at Narita Airport there would be photographers waiting for us, but nobody was there,” says Ketch! with a laugh.

Gamarjobat won another award at Edinburgh in 2005, followed by awards in the next two years at the Brighton Festival Fringe on England’s south coast. The success of their Edinburgh shows led to an appearance on the “Comedy Rocks with Jason Manford” UK television show in 2011.

They found their unique, wacky brand of humor worked far better in Europe than it did in the United States.

“Tastes are completely different in Europe and the United States,” says HIRO-PON. “One big difference between the UK and the States is the taboos. In the UK and in Europe, risqué material is fine, but they don’t like too much violence, whereas in the States, it’s the other way around.”

“We got told off for raising the middle finger on a ‘robot hand’ in a show in New York,” says Ketch! “But in the UK, they like dark humor and kind of mean jokes.”

However, not everywhere in Europe welcomed them with open arms.

“We went to do a few nights in Norway about ten years ago at a 400-seater venue and there were only about thirty people in the place. We were laughing when we came on stage and the audience saw the funny side too. The second night there were about thirty-five people; some of the audience from the first night had brought their friends,” says HIRO-PON.

Back in Japan though, they were yet to make a big splash.

“Then in 2007 we did a sell-out show in Yokohama for about 800 people. And at the end we got a standing ovation from nearly everyone, and that was from Japanese people,” says Ketch!. “I thought, ‘yes, we finally made it in Japan.’”

They now tour every year in Japan, but still want to do more shows overseas.

“I like traveling so I want to do a show somewhere I’ve never been, like Peru,” says Ketch!

“We’ve performed in thirty-five countries so far, so there are still a lot of places to go,” adds HIRO-PON. ❖
A UNIQUE COMEDY CULTURE

Far and away the most popular style of comedy in Japan is manzai, a form of performance that can trace its roots in New Year celebrations back around a thousand years. The basic premise is similar to comedy double acts seen across the globe, with a tsukkomi “straight man” and boke “funny man/fall guy,” but with the emphasis in manzai heavily on rapid-fire delivery, puns and deliberate misunderstandings.

The particular style of manzai now dominant in Japanese show business hails from Osaka and was brought to the fore by Yoshimoto Kogyo, which is headquartered in the city. The popularity of the style helped turn Yoshimoto into a giant entertainment company with most of the famous comedians in Japan on its roster.

So when American-born Stephen Tetsu decided to undertake the ambitious challenge of becoming a manzai-shi (as performers are known) he knew that Yoshimoto’s New Star Creation school was the place to go. The year-long course molds aspiring comedians into shape, teaching them skills such as voice control and comedy writing, as well as dancing and stage sword fighting.

Tetsu, who grew up in California but got a taste for the style via his Japanese mother, says he was, “taken off guard” by the dance classes and sword fighting, but found performing routines in front of the demanding instructors, “taking notes and not laughing” the toughest element.

Forming and breaking up around ten double acts during the course, Tetsu — who plays the boke role — linked up with his current partner, Leo Togawa, to form “Iruka Punch” (“iruka” means dolphin in Japanese) shortly after its completion. The duo have been signed up by Yoshimoto Creative Agency, part of the entertainment conglomerate, and are currently paying their dues and honing their craft by performing on the manzai circuit.

In spite of the challenges, being one of less than a handful of foreign manzai performers in the field has brought advantages to Tetsu and Iruka Punch. Yoshimoto Kogyo has a content creation partnership with Netflix, and Tetsu became the narrator and star of What’s Manzai?, a documentary for the global online video platform last year. The film followed Tetsu through his training at the manzai school as well as...
introducing the form, how it works and how it differs from Western comedy.

“Japanese and Western comedy start from different places. Japanese comedy is more about just making people happy, whereas Western comedy is about saying what you want to say, a kind of confession,” says Tetsu in an interview at Yoshimoto Creative Agency’s Tokyo offices.

“There are a lot of political jokes in the United States, but Japanese comedy steers away from politics,” notes Tetsu, who admits his attempts to include political elements in his act have not gone down very well with audiences.

“I don’t know if it couldn’t work, but in Japanese comedy and manzai you want everyone to laugh. With political jokes there will always be someone who’s mad at you,” he adds.

While acknowledging the advantages that being a novelty brings, Tetsu says he “doesn’t want to be considered funny just because I’m American.” Nevertheless, he does use his otherness in his shows. “I tried not to play on it at first, but we got a lot of pressure from producers and other people to use it more, and the truth is that it does work,” he says.

With his career still in its infancy, Tetsu’s future goals include to perform at the Namba Grand Kagetsu (NGK) Theater in Osaka, a manzai Mecca, operated by Yoshimoto, and to win the M-1 Grand Prix contest. The end-of-year competition, broadcast nationally, and naturally organized by Yoshimoto, comes with a 10 million yen (90,000 US dollars) prize and the potential to catapult winners to manzai stardom.

“And in terms of performing, I want to see if manzai would work in English,” says Tetsu. “I would really like to know if it could.”
Ebisu, 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 audience 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
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 Izumo-ryu 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.
Art that Wears a Smile on Its Face

The origin of emojis and emoticons, tools we cannot live without when using SNS, may have their roots in early Japanese art.

KYOKO MOTOYOSHI

Since ancient times, Japanese people have embodied humor in their own unique way through pictures and figurative art forms. The roots can be traced back to the earthen figures made of clay that were produced throughout Japan during the Jomon period (15,000-2,300 years ago). There are various views as to why these earthen figures were produced. Some say they were produced as children's toys. Others say they were statues and amulets of the gods. The majority of them appear to be females and have smiles on their faces.

Mami Hirose, who curated the exhibition “The Smile in Japanese Art” that was held at the Mori Art Museum in 2007 as well as “WARAI: L’humour dans l’art japonais de la préhistoire au XIXe siècle” (WARAI: Humor in Japanese Art from Prehistory to the 19th Century) that was held at the Japan Foundation’s Japan Cultural Institute in Paris (Maison de la culture du Japon à Paris) in 2012, explained the expression of humor in the history of Japanese art as follows.

“In Japan, there is a proverb that says ‘Warau kado niwa fuku kitaru’ (Fortune comes to a merry home), and people believe that good fortune gravitates naturally to..."
homes in which smiling people live. In other words, they believe that the smile itself has the power to purge evil, and that is clearly demonstrated in the burial mound figurines produced in the Kofun period (c. 250–538)."

Burial mound figurines are unglazed pottery, and each depicts an image of a house, equipment, a person or an animal. They were buried alongside old tumuli where persons of power were laid to rest. One of these large burial mound figurines, known as “tatemochibito,” which was unearthed in Saitama Prefecture, is approximately 1 meter high, and stands with a broad smile on its face and a shield in its hand. This is because people believed that the smile would prevent evil from entering and protect their master from the attacks of foreign enemies.

Since the Muromachi period (1336–1573) and up until modern times, many renowned Japanese artists have repeatedly painted Hanshan and Shide, both legendary monks from the Tang Dynasty period (618–907) in China. They have been adored as popular subjects of works of art, and their trademarks are their meaningful yet eerie smiles. In fact, they have been referred to as a reincarnation of Fugen and Monju, two figures worshipped in Buddhism. They are icons that explain one aspect of the religious beliefs held by Japanese people.

“I believe that ‘smiling gods and Buddha’ is a distinctive means of expression that originated in Japan. Contrary to the meaningful smiles of Hanshan and Shide, Hakuin (1685–1768), who was a high priest of the Rinzai school, one of the schools of Zen Buddhism, applied humor as a method in order to spread the difficult Zen teachings and educate illiterate members of the public on the topic.”

One of the Buddhist pictures painted by Hakuin, Hamaguri Kannon (Kannon emerging from a clam shell), depicts anthropomorphic sea creatures including prawns, octopuses and an old lady with a turtle on her head, all surrounding and worshipping the Kannon Buddhist who rises above a hard clam. What Hakuin was trying to do was to teach illiterate people the important message of Buddhism, which is to save all living creatures, through happy smiles on the faces of sea creatures. Another picture, Hotei Sutasuta Bozu (Hotei as a begging monk), which was also painted by Hakuin, depicts Hotei, who is one of the Seven Gods of Good Fortune, as a Buddhist monk of the lowest religious rank with just straw ropes around his waist while saying his prayers. Walking around with a broad smile on his face, he appears to exude endless love and affection.

Enku (1632–1695), who is believed to have carved a staggering 120,000 Buddhist statues for the people he met during his ascetic journeys throughout his life, and Mokujiki (1718–1810), a monk who spread the teachings of Buddhism while traveling around Japan, also continued to carve out smiling Buddhist statues. Some of them now have shiny, smooth surfaces because they have been stroked so much by the devout.

The incorporation of a humorous element into sacred images that are objects of worship is a unique means of expression found only in Japan.

“Another means of expression characteristic of Japan is the personification of animals. Nezumi konreii (Wedding of mice), a painting by Jakuchu Ito (1716–1800), who has gained popularity lately, shows mice that are drunk and arrive late at a wedding reception for another mouse. They are all painted with a humorous touch.”

Since ancient times, Japanese people have experienced the effect of such humor and expressed it in various forms, which have been passed down to the present.
Japan’s best-known comedy production line now extends to audiences overseas.

GAVIN BLAIR

THE Japanese government has energetically promoted measures to advance the overseas development of Japanese content. In May, policies for overseas expansion of content and strengthening related industrial infrastructure were included in the “Intellectual Property Strategy Program 2017.” On 9 June 2017 the Cabinet approved the “Investments for the Future Strategy 2017,” which includes the government target of increasing overseas sales of broadcast content to 50 billion yen (450 million US dollars) by 2020 from 28.85 billion yen (260 million US dollars) in fiscal 2015.

Yoshimoto Kogyo is one example of how Japanese companies are developing their content business overseas.
Yoshimoto Kogyo is a major entertainment group with operations across numerous fields and representing many of Japan’s biggest celebrities.

According to Hiroyuki Tanaka, vice president of Yoshimoto Kogyo, the company has expanded its entertainment business chiefly through the manzai double-act style of public entertainment which it was instrumental in popularizing — this based on celebratory performance traditions backed by music and using a sensu fan as a prop — but is also involved in everything from movie and TV production to venue and artist management.

Yoshimoto Kogyo has long been active overseas, and in 2008 signed an agreement with Hollywood’s giant Creative Artists Agency (CAA) for the mutual promotion of programs and talent. “When the company set out its vision for the next 100 years at its centenary in 2012, one of its pillars was to further boost its presence abroad,” explains Shizuko Yokote, president of MCIP Holdings.

MCIP is a joint venture, founded in 2014, between Sony Music Entertainment, Dentsu, Dwango, Aeon Mall, Jikei Group of Colleges and Yoshimoto Kogyo (Space Shower Networks joined the following year), with backing from the government’s Cool Japan Fund (founded in November 2013 as a public-private fund), to promote Japanese content in Asia.

In 2008, Yoshimoto announced a partnership with Second City, the Chicago group which is well known for its successful fostering of many famous comedians. Yoshimoto plans to nurture talent for overseas audiences by learning the know-how, particularly in improv, which is rare in Japan, through this agreement. However, it is not easy to disperse Japanese content. One problem is how to overcome the barriers of language and culture.

“Taking comedy, which relies on language, overseas is a major challenge, and is one of the reasons that other forms of entertainment produced in Japan have expanded more quickly into international markets,” says Yokote.

“One of MCIP’s first projects was “Sumimasu Asia Geinin” (comedians living in Asia), which entails sending performers overseas to live and learn not just the local language, but also the local culture and sense of humor,” explains Yokote.

Sixteen Yoshimoto comedians have been living in Thailand, Taiwan, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines for the last two years. The five who live in Indonesia — where the project has been named Y-Boyz (Yoshimoto Comedian Project from Indonesia) — are two solo artists, Genki (Sokorahen Genki in Japan) and Akira Continental Fever, along with trio The Three. The trio has won fans among local audiences with its combination of “Japanese Reaction Performance” sketches and “Rhythm Comedy,” which utilizes music. “Rhythm Comedy,” in which the trio dance and get caught up in the beat, became very popular and led to The Three being invited onto local TV shows, where they won yet more fans.

The key phrase of Yoshimoto’s expansion overseas is “Laugh & Peace.” The company has continued to develop its business in the region, such as through the launch of the Huashan Laugh & Peace Factory in May of this year, a “J content” exhibition center in the Huashan 1914 Creative Park in Taipei, Taiwan. The Park is known as a cluster of the arts and pop cultures of Taipei. Meanwhile, a school of entertainment is scheduled to open in Okinawa, which is close to Taiwan, in April 2018, with the plan to accept students from both Japan and Asia.

Next year will also mark the 10th anniversary of the Okinawa International Movie Festival (OIMF), founded by Yoshimoto. The festival is now called “Shima Zenbu de O-kina Matsuri” (Big festival for all the Okinawan islands) and promotes not only film, but also comedy and other content both locally and across Asia. The “Laugh & Peace” slogan also applies to the OIMF.

Yoshimoto plans to continue developing its business across Asia and beyond by overcoming differences in language, culture and laughter. These efforts will play a key part in the expansion of Japanese content around the world.
In the twenty-five years since the Act on Cooperation for United Nations Peacekeeping Operations and Other Operations (PKO Act) was enacted in June 1992, Japan has been actively engaged in cooperation with UN peacekeeping operations, International Humanitarian Relief Operations, and International Election Observation Operations, providing both human and material resources in the name of international peace, chiefly through the UN. In fact, since sending personnel to Cambodia to monitor the election in 1992, the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) have had a hand in fourteen UN peacekeeping operations (UN PKO) and refugee relief activities, in locations such as Mozambique, Goma (Democratic Republic of the Congo), the Golan Heights (Israel, Syria), Indonesia, Pakistan, Timor-Leste, Jordan, Nepal, Sudan, Haiti and — as in the focus of this story — South Sudan.

“Peace and Unity”

On 16 January 2016, a national sporting event took place in Juba, the capital of South Sudan, a city ravaged by many years of civil war. Based on the theme “Peace and Unity,” the South Sudanese government designated this occasion as “National Unity Day,” as a sign of hope for the future. Around 350 male and female athletes from nine cities nationwide took part in the event, competing through to January 23.

Behind the scenes of this national sporting event, Japan’s UN PKO unit was hard at work.

With South Sudan struggling to secure funds to cover even basic government services, including health and education, the condition of the three venues for the event was very poor. Officials were worried about the risk of athletes injuring themselves during the competition.
With that in mind, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), which provides Official Development Assistance (ODA) in South Sudan, approached the Japanese PKO engineering unit from the Self-Defense Forces.

Second Lieutenant Yoshinori Takahashi, leader of the 3rd Engineering Platoon of the 9th contingent, recalls, “Members of my platoon were very excited about this.” Compared to their daily activities in the camp, this was a chance for them to do something that would directly bring smiles to the faces of South Sudanese people.

Members of the platoon improved the track at Brook Ground, one of the venues for the event, for nine days from January 7 to 15.

“Sports are a symbol of peace and unity,” says Takahashi. “We all said to one another that we wanted to do the best possible job, so that the ground would become a place long loved by South Sudanese people.”

Under scorching temperatures of over 50˚C during the day, Japanese peacekeepers embedded 200 straight concrete blocks and 1,000 curved concrete blocks for the corners in the ground by hand, one by one, to create the inner track of a 400-meter course that would be durable for many years.

A senior official from the South Sudanese government gave a speech at the opening ceremony for the event, commenting, “we need peace and unity now more than ever.” There were also teary eyes among some cabinet members as the athletes entered the venue, with their national flag in hand. The government sincerely hoped to call for the national unity of the people of South Sudan, having athletes from different regions and ethnic groups compete in the spirit of fair play. Holding this event was symbolic of one of their heartfelt desires for South Sudan.

Although members of the 3rd Engineering Platoon were unable to attend in person, as they were busy with another assignment, they were able to share in the joy of the event through their colleagues who played traditional Japanese drums at the ceremony, commenting, “the athletes gave it their all, transcending differences between regions and ethnic groups.”

Platoon Leader Takahashi had the following to say.

“In 2020, Tokyo will be hosting the Olympic and Paralympic games. It’s exciting to think that South Sudanese athletes from this ground could be performing on the world stage in Tokyo.”

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe touched upon these support activities in a policy speech in January this year.

“What the SDF members built isn’t just a sports ground. It is a place where peace is created. Without any doubt, each and every activity engaged in by the SDF in South Sudan connects directly to the country’s self-dependence and peaceful nation-building.” The Prime Minister went on to make an appeal to “contribute as much as we can to global peace and prosperity.”

Twenty-five years since getting involved in UN PKO, Japan is set to keep on contributing to peace and stability for the international community in the future.
In recent years, residential fuel cells combining heat and power (CHP) called “ENE-FARM” have spread widely in Japan. ENE-FARM is a CHP system generating power through the reaction of hydrogen and oxygen in the air. The hydrogen is made from natural gas and LPG supplied to homes. ENE-FARM offers many benefits from both an environmental and economic standpoint.

Not only does ENE-FARM offer high power-generation efficiency compared to existing thermal-powered generation and transmission systems, but also the transmission loss of electric power is small, enabling it to achieve exceptional energy availability (total efficiency) as it uses the heat produced during generation to supply hot water.

With many manufacturers locked in fierce competition to develop ENE-FARM, a new product has emerged that dramatically improves the performance of existing models and offers world-leading power generation efficiency, whilst also being the world’s smallest system to date. The product is called “ENE-FARM type S,” launched by Osaka Gas in 2016. We asked Sana Hosokawa of the Fuel Cell Development Team at the Residential Energy System Development Department of Osaka Gas about the new system.

“The biggest obstacles to further market penetration were price and ease of installation. Basically, we needed to cut the product cost and make it more compact. In order to achieve that, enhancing power-generation efficiency was critical. We reduced electrical resistance in the cell stack, which enabled us to reduce the number of cells whilst still achieving...
a sufficient voltage. This gave us a world-leading power efficiency (in residential CHP systems whose rated power is less than 1kW) of 52% (Feb. 2016). However, it also created durability issues as the metal parts used to connect cells became too hot to ensure ten years’ lifetime because reducing the number of cells had increased the load per cell.

“A unique ceramic coating jointly developed with Kyocera was the key technology to solve this difficult technical challenge. Both high power-generation efficiency and ten years’ lifetime were achieved at the same time due to this coating technology. The technology enabled us to strike a balance between high power efficiency and durability.”

By improving power generation efficiency from 46.5% in previous models to 52%, the amount of waste heat has been reduced. The hot water storage tank could therefore be smaller and built into the power generation unit. The company could then combine the power generation unit with conventional gas water heaters and not only reduce prices but also produce the world’s smallest design.

“We estimate that a typical four-person household can reduce their annual energy bills from around 249,000 yen (US $2,243 dollars) to 135,000 yen by installing the new ENE-FARM type S. And the price is reduced by almost 800,000 yen compared with the original model,” explains Hosokawa.

What is more, Osaka Gas has purchased surplus power generated by the residential CHP systems since April 2016, following the deregulation of the power retail market. This means that the new ENE-FARM type S can maintain high power generation efficiency twenty-four hours a day, and the household can sell to Osaka Gas the surplus power that is not used by the household itself. In this way the new ENE-FARM type S can reduce energy bills.

The eco-friendly and budget-pleasing new ENE-FARM type S has been highly evaluated not only by end users but also by home builders. Downsizing can reduce the installation space from 1.9 m² to 1.4 m², so it becomes easier to install the system in small detached houses and condominiums.

The innovative CHP system received many awards in 2016, including the Director-General of the Agency for Natural Resources and Energy Award, and the Minister of the Environment Award for Global Warming Prevention Activity.

Hosokawa spoke of the company’s future goals.

“In May 2017, the total number of ENE-FARM in Japan exceeded 200,000 units. The government has set a target of 5.3 million systems by 2030, equivalent to roughly 10% of all households in Japan. In order to achieve this target, we need to continue to make the systems smaller and more efficient.

“We try to implement a positive growth cycle. Cost reduction by R&D activity leads to market expansion, and market expansion leads to R&D investment in turn.”

Envisioned sales of surplus power

Osaka Gas has purchased surplus power generated by the residential CHP systems since April 2016, following the deregulation of the power retail market. Households with the new ENE-FARM type S installed can sell to Osaka Gas surplus power that is not used by the household itself.

Courtesy of Osaka Gas
ITTO Construction, Inc. is a construction company with capital of 20 million yen and sixty employees. Its head office is in Omu (population: 4,500), a small town facing the Okhotsk Sea in the northern part of Hokkaido. Its name is widely known overseas among people involved in the civil engineering industry due to the Concrete Test and Surveyor (CTS), a unique product developed by the company. We asked President Hajime Kubo how Nitto Construction developed this groundbreaking product and expanded its sales channels in Japan and overseas.

“I thought of developing a concrete tester in 1999. That year, the Japanese construction industry was facing tough conditions due to a decline in public works projects. I felt that it would be difficult for a small company like us to survive if no steps were taken,” said Kubo. “At that time, a concrete block fell from the inner wall of a tunnel on the Sanyo Shinkansen line. I watched a news video about the accident and thought about the fact that the life cycle of the concrete used for a huge number of buildings and facilities built in the high growth period after the war would end in the near future and that equipment for diagnosing the state of degradation would be needed for repairs.”

In Japan, there was large-scale equipment for diagnosing the state of the inner portion of concrete structures. However, it was impossible in terms of time and cost to diagnose multiple structures using this expensive equipment. Meanwhile, a manufacturer in Europe sold portable testing equipment, but the accuracy of the measurement of the degradation of concrete using the equipment was inadequate. Moreover, the hammering test method, which is still widely used, requires high skill.

“I came up with the idea that a lower-priced, accurate concrete testing device that anyone can handle easily was needed,” said Kubo.
Kubo asked researchers at the Department of Civil Engineering of Tokai University, his alma mater, for cooperation and began to develop new testing equipment. He focused on the “impact force waveform” generated when concrete is hit by a metal hammer. Although precise measurement was very difficult technically, he succeeded in completing a high-precision device that can automatically measure compressive strength, surface deterioration, and surface delamination when the surface of concrete is tapped with a hammer.

This new testing device began to be sold in April 2005 as a concrete tester. The device consists of a hammer incorporating an acceleration sensor and a measuring instrument (body). When concrete is tapped, data is displayed on the body in a second. If data from different points that have been tapped are fed into the personal computer, the strength distribution of the measured structure can be displayed. The device was a breakthrough non-destructive concrete testing device. Its total weight is only 940 grams, and the device is portable.

“I initially thought of selling this device only in Japan. But when we created our English website in 2011, telephone inquiries from overseas increased rapidly, and we had a hard time responding to them all,” laughs Kubo. “After the increase in inquiries, we expanded our sales channels into foreign countries.”

That year, Nitto Construction was selected as a company to be supported in the promising export discovery program of the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO). With guidance and advice from expert advisors, Nitto Construction expanded its exports rapidly. In March 2014, Nitto Construction’s project for promoting and demonstrating a technique using a concrete tester for inspecting concrete structures incidental to roads in Nigeria was accepted as a Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) project. Nitto Construction dispatched three engineers to Nigeria for technical assistance. The company has established a department dedicated to overseas operations and is working to improve employees’ foreign language skills. It is strengthening its internal system for global operations and has distributors in eight foreign countries.

“I would like to demonstrate that even small companies in rural towns can conduct business in the international arena, and I want to revitalize the construction industry in Japan,” said Kubo. “We aim to make contributions to infrastructure maintenance in local communities and worldwide through sales of concrete testers.”
ONE by one, Masahiko Mizue kneads and rolls different colored balls of dough, and with the palm of his hand expertly eases each one through a sieve-like rattan implement called a “toshi.”

After several gentle taps with his fingertips, flakes of fragmented dough flutter down onto the work surface below like a silent fall of psychedelic snow.

Using chopsticks, he deftly transfers each one to decorate a small oval dumpling made from tsu-bu-an (a coarse sweet paste made from azuki beans), adding a few tiny cubes of transparent kanten jelly to put the proverbial “icing on the cake.”

Within seconds his culinary creation is complete: a namagashi confectionery named “Ajisai-kinton,” which depicts a blooming hydrangea with drops of morning dew nestled between the purple, white and pink petals.

“I still find this sieving part of the process captivating,” says Mizue, who has worked as a confectionery artisan at Kyoto sweet maker Tsuruya Yoshinobu for thirty-five years. “It does require a certain amount of skill, but the main thing is it just looks so lovely.”

Beauty is an inherent characteristic of namagashi, a type of Japanese confectionery...
handed down from the Edo period (1603-1867) that is regarded as cake royalty in Japan. Indeed, the form alone is a veritable feast for the eyes.

While “wagashi” is an umbrella term for Japanese confectionery, namagashi refers to a more refined, high-end sub-category called “jo-gashi.” An unornate variety of jo-gashi is neri-kiri, the colorful concoctions that Mizue molds with such dexterity.

“The ingredients are uncooked and the cakes best eaten immediately,” explains a Tsuruya Yoshinobu staff member, in reference to the word “nama” in “namagashi,” which literally means “raw” or “fresh.”

“One of the most charming points about neri-kiri is how they portray scenery from the seasons. Their colorful, evocative designs enrich the spirit and have been handed down through the ages.”

In Kyoto, jo-gashi were originally creations favored by heads of schools teaching cha no yu (tea ceremony), which explains their continued association with Japanese green tea, in particular matcha, a high-grade powdered green tea that is traditionally served with the confectionery to provide an astringent counterpart to the sweet’s sugary taste.

The seasonal designs are changed frequently, with those made in the summer months depicting cooling images such as waterfalls and fresh greenery, water lilies and water lotuses resembling underwater peonies.

Another exquisite creation is called “hoshinegai,” which skillfully portrays the milky way dividing two celestial stars, Orihime and Hikoboshi, who, according to legend, are lovers who are allowed to meet only once a year during the Tanabata summer festival.

Such seasonal and cultural connotations tend to distinguish Japanese confectionery from Western “cake,” though a more tangible difference can be found in the ingredients used.

Namagashi in general and neri-kiri in particular employ a sweet paste made from azuki beans and a dough whose ingredients can vary depending on the product being made. To give summer treats their frosted glass-like cooling look, artisans use kuzuko—a starch found in the root of the kuzu plant (Japanese arrowroot) which is also used as a thickening agent in some Japanese sauces.

And whereas in other parts of Japan the dough tends to be made from mochi rice, in Kyoto it also contains flour and is steamed. Indeed, few people in Kyoto actually refer to the high-grade confectionery as neri-kiri, preferring the names konashi (which also refers to the dough) or mushigashi (steamed sweets), explains the staff.

“Today, however, the terms have become interchangeable and in addition to matcha, people can enjoy them with other drinks, such as black tea and coffee.”

“It’s an old tradition, but there are no hard and fast rules. Just cut a piece off with the kuromoji (stick-like wooden forks) and enjoy.”

Your writer needed no second invitation to do just that.
DRIVING is not just the best way to enjoy the vast Aso-Kuju National Park in central Kyushu; it is in itself a singular pleasure. The roads here are smooth, curvy and uncongested, and lead the motorist through some of the most beautiful and distinctive countryside in all Japan.

Aso-Kuju National Park is named after volcanic Mt. Aso and the Kuju mountain range, but the visitor’s first taste of the park is pastoral. Five minutes’ drive from Kumamoto Airport puts the traveler on Milk Road, where Jersey cows and Japanese Browns graze blissfully on the rolling grasslands.

Milk Road runs along a section of the outer rim of the huge Aso caldera — the world’s largest — which formed here some 90,000 years ago after repeated
eruptions finally drained the magma chamber and caused the ground to collapse. The five peaks of the still-active Mt. Aso take center stage in the caldera basin and can be viewed from numerous designated observation points along the rim.

One of the most spectacular views is that across the Kusasenrigahama plain, a former crater, with the peak of Mt. Nakadake venting smoke in the near distance. Owing to the continued risk of volcanic activity following the explosive eruption of October 2016, Mt. Nakadake's lake-filled crater is closed to visitors at this time.

A close-up volcanic experience can nevertheless still be had in a variety of ways within the park. At Komatsu Jigoku (Komatsu Hell), for example, sulfurous steam rises amid the stubby pine trees as water and mud bubble angrily in pools at the surface of the wood's rocky terrain.

By contrast with the “hell” of Komatsu Jigoku, Tadewara Marshland delivers a most heavenly encounter with nature. Through an annual process of mowing and controlled burning of old plants over a period of more than a thousand years, a rich and rare biota peculiar to this area has been nurtured and maintained. The marshland was designated as a wetland of international importance under the Ramsar Convention in 2005. A boardwalk accessed via the Chojabara Visitor Center leads the walker over the vast marsh through a forest trail and into the mountains beyond.

There are many excellent walking and climbing courses in this neck of the woods. The three-hour hike up Mt. Ogigahana would be one to recommend most highly in June, as wild Kyushu azaleas blanket the mountain's slopes and foothills with their distinctive pink flowers.

At Shirakawa Suigen fountainhead, cold spring water bubbles quietly into a pristine collection pool at a rate of sixty tons a minute before spilling over the edges and rushing away to form the head of the Shirakawa river.

But for total immersion and appreciation of the joys of this volcanic landscape, nothing can beat a hot spring bath. There are many onsen hot-spring resort towns in the Aso-Kuju area, from the quaint and upscale Kurokawa Onsen to the gloriously ramshackle Tsuetate Onsen. Soaking in hot water at the end of a long day in the park, the weary traveler is moved to reflect on the remarkable diversity and power of nature.
In this early haiku by Masaoka Shiki, the twenty-four-year-old poet juxtaposes the vibrancy of hydrangeas in a summer downpour with the suggestion of a dilapidated and disintegrating wall. Unlike manmade structures in need of repair, hydrangea flowers look at their best in the rain and return with vigor every year. Cool blue mopheads and lacecaps refresh the eye and lift the spirit during the tsuyu season of wet weather that begins in early June and continues until mid July.