

Takachiho Yokagura: Overview

Yokagura, a ritual dance tradition passed down at Takachiho Shrine and the district of Takachiho, is linked to Japanese mythology. In one of the myths, the sun goddess Amaterasu retreats into a cave after a quarrel with her mischievous brother, the storm god Susano O, and blocks herself in with a boulder, plunging the world into darkness. Other deities gather and endeavor to lure her out, but to no avail. Finally, Ame no Uzume, known as the Divine Goddess of Revelry, performs a humorous and bawdy dance. Soon peals of laughter can be heard among those gathered outside the cave. Amaterasu grows curious to learn what is causing the commotion and moves aside the boulder. As she does so, light spills out, filling the world once more with light.

The Takachiho district is widely believed to be the place where such myths originated, and its traditions of *kagura* (literally, “god entertainment”) dance may trace back to such beginnings. *Kagura* is today considered Japan’s oldest performing art, and Takachiho’s *yokagura* (“night kagura”) is an important branch of that tradition. *Yokagura* is performed, suitably enough, from sundown to sunrise, between mid-November and early February. The performances are part of the harvest festivals of numerous villages around. Each village has its own renditions of dances depicting 33 episodes of the myth, presented in honor of the deities worshipped in the Takachiho district.

Takachiho Shrine also presents nighttime performances throughout the year of four key episodes of the myths at its Kagura Hall (Kaguraden). Equally engaging are the dramatic masks worn by performers, which are all handcrafted by local artisans and can be found not just at *yokagura* venues, but displayed in various places throughout the district.