***Takachiho Yokagura*: The Stories Behind the 33 Dances**

Takachiho *yokagura* is a regional version of ritual shrine dances called *kagura* that can be traced back to the myth about Amaterasu Omikami, the goddess of the sun and a dance performed by the goddess Ame no Uzume. This myth is relayed in Japan's oldest extant chronicles, the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*, both dating back to the early eighth century, while *kagura* itself dates back to the Heian period (794–1185). Takachiho *yokagura* was designated an Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property in 1978 and its legacy is carried on by local villages in the area that host overnight performances in selected homes from mid-November to early February. The dances depict 33 episodes of the ancient myths centering around how Amaterasu Omikami, angered by her mischievous brother's pranks, blocked herself inside the Ama no Iwato cave with a boulder, plunging the world into darkness. When the other gods gathered to decide what to do, Ame no Uzume began to perform a humorous dance, much to the amusement of the gathered deities, causing the Sun Goddess to peek out at the revelry. The powerful god Tajikarao breaks the rock door to allow Amaterasu to leave her cave, and as she emerges, light is restored to the world once more.

At Takachiho Shrine's Kagura Hall (Kaguraden), four of the 33 episodes are danced year-round: The Dance of Tajikarao, who is depicted seeking Amaterasu's hiding place; Ame no Uzume's hilarious dance to entice Amaterasu out of the cave; the Totori Dance, when the red-faced Tajikarao shatters the rock blocking the cave; and the Goshintai Dance, performed by a couple representing the husband and wife deities Izanami and Izanagi, who legend says gave birth to the islands of Japan, as they prepare rice as an offering to ensure a good harvest, a happy marriage, and healthy children. The couple performs the dance while drinking rice wine, and their inebriated tumbling and stumbling among audience members is thought to transmit divine protection to the participants.