

Namahage Performance, Part 1: Introduction

Thank you for visiting the Oga Shinzan Folklore Museum today. Before we see the Namahage of the Shinzan region in action, a guide will give a brief explanation of what the Namahage are.

The Namahage are considered incarnations of the mountain deities of Oga. They go from house to house in the nearby villages on New Year's Eve, driving away evil and impurity, imparting blessings to ensure a plentiful harvest or bountiful catch, and promising health and safety for the household in the year to come. They also chastise the lazy and disobedient in a folk ritual that has been passed down through generations.

The word *namahage* comes from *namomi*, a term in the Oga dialect that means "heat blisters." It referred to spots or rashes on the hands and feet caused by overexposure to heat. Lazy people who spent most of their time inside by the fireplace would develop these blisters. *Namomihagi*, then, emerged as the word for the act of removing (or, more literally, "peeling off") such signs of idleness. *Namomihagi* was eventually shortened to *namahage*, and this term came to refer to both the embodied deities themselves and the annual ritual performed in Oga at least since the early nineteenth century.

The Namahage historically appeared on the evening of Koshogatsu (the "little New Year"), a festival that celebrates the first full moon of the new year. This corresponds to the 15th day of the first month of the traditional lunar calendar, and usually falls in mid-February in today's terms. After Japan implemented the Gregorian calendar in 1873, the Namahage also had to adapt to the new order. Today they visit settlements in the Oga region on December 31.

Of the approximately 140 settlements in Oga, about 90 have their own Namahage traditions, which are expressed through the appearance, behavior, and possessions of the embodied deities. Here in Shinzan they do not carry tools or weapons, nor do their masks have the horns seen on Namahage in most other settlements. The size of the Namahage party, which makes its way from house to house, also varies locally. In Shinzan it is a group of three: two Namahage and one messenger who announces the arrival of the group beforehand.

Upon arriving at a house, the messenger enters first and asks the residents whether the Namahage can come in. Namahage customarily avoid homes in which a child has been born or a member of the family has died in the past year.