

Namahage Museum: About the Masks

Almost all of the masks displayed here have actually been used over the years, and about 30 of them are still worn in Namahage rituals on New Year's Eve. You will notice that the disguises, some of which are more than 200 years old, differ significantly from each other. This is because they are made from a wide variety of materials, including wood, bark, paper clay, plywood, tin, and plastic. Traditionally, the residents of each village would use whatever resources were available to them to make Namahage masks, so the finished product would be influenced by the surrounding natural environment. For example, while the hair of most masks is made of horsehair or hemp fiber, villages by the sea would often use seaweed instead. Other locales employed rope or even human hair.

Namahage are sometimes associated with the intricately carved and painted wooden masks sold at gift shops throughout Akita, but those were originally developed for touristic purposes and are not, strictly speaking, traditional. They are quite durable, though, and some villages now use them for actual Namahage visits on New Year's Eve in place of the customary disguises, which tend to break when the Namahage run in and out of houses, sometimes hitting their heads on door frames as they go.