

Namahage Museum: What Are the Namahage?

The Namahage are believed to be incarnations of the deities of mountains such as Mt. Shinzan and Mt. Honzan, which have been worshiped in Oga since antiquity. Historically, they would appear 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; usually mid-February in today’s terms. After Japan implemented the Gregorian calendar in 1873, the Namahage also had to adapt to the new order, and today their visits take place on December 31.

On New Year’s Eve the Namahage go from house to house in the villages, driving away evil and impurity, imparting blessings to ensure an ample 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 for at least two centuries. As of 2018, the Namahage tradition is practiced in some 90 settlements throughout Oga.

The disciplining of children by the Namahage is intended to instill morals and proper behavior in them as members of the community. Adults, in turn, are taught diligence—a critical trait in traditional agricultural societies like Oga’s, in which the people must work hard to endure the long, cold winter and other harsh natural conditions. Before the Namahage leave a house, they demand that the family members promise to be good in the new year. This pledge is comparable to a New Year’s resolution.

Oga no Namahage (“the Namahage of Oga”) were designated an Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property of Japan in 1978. In 2018, they were added to the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list as part of the “Raiho-shin, ritual visits of deities in masks and costumes” designation, which also includes nine other similar traditions across a total of eight prefectures in Japan, from Akita in the north to Okinawa in the far south.