

## **Centipede Lion Dancing (Mukade Shishimai)**

Shishimai (Japanese lion dancing) is a traditional performing art, common throughout Japan, in which dancers wear a lion costume complete with a head represented by a mask. The choreography, costume, and number of participants vary significantly by locality. In Shirakawa-go, the lion is always represented by four dancers, whose eight feet are what give this version of the dance its name: mukade shishimai, or centipede lion dance. In mukade shishimai, the lion is opposed by two brave warriors called shishitori (or hanatori). This role is traditionally performed by children. The performance consists of two main acts: In the first, the lion battles and eats a snake, considered a symbol of calamity; in the second, the shishitori rise to oppose the lion, which here represents disasters, disease, and various other ills. The shishitori defeat the lion, which in the climax, however, rises up to dance together with its vanquishers. The closing act reminds us that because nature cannot be tamed, humans must learn to live in harmony with it. Performed locally since at least the late eighteenth century, mukade shishimai is unique to Shirakawa-go, but it incorporates influences from similar dances performed elsewhere along the Sho River. The parts that feature the lion dancing alone are similar to varieties of shishimai common in the Hida area, which is located upstream from Shirakawa-go, whereas the involvement of the shishitori is thought to have been adopted from traditions practiced in communities downstream, in what is now Toyama and Ishikawa Prefectures. Even mukade shishimai itself differs slightly from village to village; there are currently seven village associations that perform their own versions of the dance. Their talents can be appreciated in October, when mukade shishimai is danced throughout Shirakawa-go as part of the annual Doburoku Festival.