

Nachi-no-Dengaku

Nachi-no-Dengaku is a dance performance involving stylized movements symbolizing rice farming and set to percussion and flute music. It is performed on the morning of Kumano Nachi Taisha Grand Shrine's annual Fire Festival on July 14. Afterward, participants carry torches and portable shrines to Nachi Waterfall to offer prayers for a peaceful year of bountiful harvests.

Dengaku and Nachi Taisha

Dengaku is a performing art derived from songs and rituals performed in rice fields to ensure the success of the year's crop. It dates back over a thousand years, though it is overshadowed today by other traditional forms of music and dance. In its livelier, more elaborately costumed form, *dengaku* was the single most popular performing art of the Kamakura period (1185–1333). In later years, it had a strong influence on Noh theater.

Rice farming had close connections to local Shinto shrines, and *dengaku* performances were often considered sacred offerings. Nachi-no-Dengaku, which means simply “the *dengaku* of Nachi Taisha,” is one such performance.

The first recorded performance of *dengaku* in Nachi was in 1403. The shrine was then part of Nachisan, a syncretistic Shinto-Buddhist complex, and the Buddhist priests helped keep the tradition alive. After the Meiji Restoration of 1868, the government ordered that Shinto and Buddhism be kept strictly separate. The shrine's administration underwent radical changes, and one unfortunate outcome was the breaking of the *dengaku* tradition.

In 1921, Nachi-no-Dengaku was revived through careful study of preserved notation in consultation with older shrinegoers who remembered the earlier performances. Since then, it has been performed at the shrine every year.

Performing Nachi-no-Dengaku

Nachi-no-Dengaku is performed on a stage on the shrine grounds by members of the Association for the Preservation of Nachi-no-Dengaku. These members also have the honor of carrying the Fire Festival's portable fan shrines later in the day—a role that

indicates the importance of the *dengaku* performance in the festival. The troupe includes eight main dancers, four playing small drums and four playing *binzasara*, a rare percussion instrument made of dozens of small wooden slats bound together with a cord and played with a rippling motion. There are two additional dancers called *shiteten*, who only take the stage for two dances, and one or two flute players, who remain seated throughout. As there are no singers, the flutes are the only melodic element of the ensemble.

The Nachi-no-Dengaku repertoire includes 23 distinct pieces, two of which are performed by the *shiteten*. The entire repertoire is performed at the festival, and takes around 45 minutes to complete. Onstage, the troupe divides, reunites, and redivides into smaller groups, moving back and forth and circling each other with elegant movements that symbolize the planting, tending, and harvesting of the rice crop.