

Kurokawa Noh Preservation Society

Noh classical dance-drama has been performed since the fourteenth century, making it one of the oldest forms of traditional performing arts in Japan. Its roots are in *sarugaku* (a form of theater pre-dating noh), mime, and acrobatics. Today there are five contemporary schools of noh: Kanze, Konparu, Hosho, Kongo, and Kita.

Noh was first performed at Buddhist temples. It originated in a period of war and upheaval, and the frequent appearance of ghosts and the use of masks by performers reflect those beginnings.

Kurokawa Noh is a type of noh handed down in the Kurokawa area of Tsuruoka, Yamagata Prefecture. Some of its stylistic elements are similar to those in the five contemporary schools but its expressions are unique. It is performed not by professionals, but by parishioners of the Kasuga Jinja Shrine, who are mostly farmers.

It is not clear how noh came to Kurokawa. There is one theory that Prince Ogawa, the third son of Emperor Gokomatsu (1377–1433) stayed in the district and introduced *sarugaku* to the local people. The daimyo of the local domain strongly supported the practice of noh, and generation upon generation of domain lords gave it their backing. For five hundred years, the traditions of Kurokawa Noh have been preserved and handed down by performers and local people.

Efforts to Preserve Kurokawa Noh

The Kurokawa Noh Preservation Society was established in 1961 to protect the traditions of Kurokawa Noh. It was chaired by the then-mayor of Kushibiki, a town southwest of Yamagata Prefecture's city of Tsuruoka and run by town officials, members of the two main troupes of performers, and personnel of Kasuga Jinja Shrine.

The leadership cooperated with other shrines and noh performance groups to arrange for visitors to view performances of Kurokawa Noh at the Ogi Festival, held annually in February to celebrate the lunar New Year and pray for peace and a bountiful upcoming harvest.

Kurokawa Noh was designated a National Intangible Folk Cultural Property in 1976. Ten years later, the Kurokawa Noh Preservation and Traditional Project Promotion Association was established, headed by the mayor of Tsuruoka, and supported by those involved in Kurokawa Noh as well as municipal officials and folk entertainment professionals. The association facilitated the preservation of Kurokawa Noh using donations from members and other individuals in Japan.

In the succeeding decades, the Kurokawa Noh Preservation Society and Kurokawa Noh Preservation and Traditional Project Promotion Association collaborated on a variety of activities including responding to requests for cooperation from research institutes, promotion in the media, funding support for the performer troupes, and managing requests for performances. In 2013, the existing organizations collaborated to form the Kurokawa Noh Preservation Society, which became a public interest incorporated foundation with the goal of supporting this cultural treasure.

The main activities of the Kurokawa Noh Preservation Society are threefold: to survey, catalog, repair, and replace noh properties such as masks, costumes, and historical materials; to promote Kurokawa Noh and its performances; and to train successors to carry on its preservation efforts. It also maintains the Kurokawa Noh-no-Sato Ogi Kaikan (Kurokawa Noh Village Ogi Hall).

Kurokawa Noh has a rich 500-year history, so learning the songs, movements, dances, dressing methods, and so on requires not only first-hand lessons but also the study of records, videos, and other resources. The society maintains these materials to facilitate these endeavors. It maintains, repairs, and replaces noh costumes that have been damaged by decades or even centuries of wear, including several designated as national and prefectural cultural properties.

The Kurokawa Noh Preservation Society appreciates all the donations to preserve Kurokawa Noh for future generations and hopes for the public's continued support. The society is a specified public interest promotion corporation under the law of Japan and donations in support of its charitable purposes are recognized by the tax incentive system.