

Video 2 - Text

Kurokawa Noh Practice Throughout the Year

Kurokawa Noh is a local tradition of noh drama that has been passed down from generation to generation in Kurokawa for some 500 years. Kurokawa Noh was designated an Important Intangible Cultural Property by the Japanese government in 1976.

Kurokawa noh is performed on two different occasions. One type is dedicated for the deities. At some festivals and rituals held at Kasuga Jinja Shrine, Kurokawa noh is performed as a ritual noh. The other type is performed for many audiences on casual occasions such as Suien no Noh (torchlight noh on the water) and Rosoku Noh (candlelight noh). There are many performances of these kinds of noh throughout the year in various locations.

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It is winter in Kurokawa and dawn is yet to break. Preparations are underway for the Ogi Festival, Kasuga Jinja Shrine's biggest and most important festival of the year. The festival begins with a procession transporting the object representing the deity of the shrine, called Ogi-sama, from the shrine to a resident's home.

The festival is held every year on February 1 and 2. It is dedicated to prayers for a good harvest and celebrates a new, peaceful year ahead.

Kurokawa Noh is performed into the night. The performances begin with a speech and dance performed by a young boy, followed by noh performances of legendary tale and a comic interlude.

[Performance]

In addition to local people, noh fans from around Japan gather at the festival to catch a glimpse of the performances of Kurokawa Noh in the traditional candlelit setting.

The next day, festival participants compete to return the deity to the shrine through its small window as quickly as possible. The lively challenge is followed by another noh performance. The somber atmosphere of the festival becomes energetic.

{Fade to black}

In mid-October, young actors and musicians perform Rosoku Noh performances by candlelight.

In 1994, Kurokawa Noh began to be held as a way to attract visitors to the community. Its slogan was "Experience Kurokawa Noh in Kurokawa."

[Speech and murmuring]

A local specialty dish called *shimi-dofu* (roasted and frozen tofu) is served with *sansai* (wild mountain vegetables and mushrooms) and seafood sourced from the city of Tsuruoka. Noh performers and local people enjoy eating together.

In the evening, there is a lottery. Prizes include the candles and props used during the noh performance of that day. Recipients celebrate their wins with shouts and cheers of excitement.

[Fade to black]

On March 23, Kinen-sai, a commemorative ritual of prayer for a good harvest, is held at Kasuga Jinja Shrine. In the days that follow, spring arrives, bringing a welcome flood of cherry blossoms on the hills and fields.

As most of Kurokawa is inhabited by farmers, the fields are full of people planting rice. Even the performers of Kurokawa Noh practice farming as well as their art.

Kasuga Jinja Shrine holds another festival on May 3 to pray for an abundant harvest in the autumn.

[Performance]

After the initial Shinto ritual, several stories are performed on the noh stage.

[Black out]

Dewa Sanzan Jinja Shrine has been a site of mountain worship centered on the practice of Shugendo since ancient times. Shugendo is a form of mountain asceticism incorporating Shinto and Buddhist traditions.

The Hanamatsuri Flower Festival at Mt. Haguro is one of the major festivals held at Dewa Sanzan Jinja Shrine every year. It marks the end of a 96-day period of placing flowers in front of the deities to ward off evil. Held on July 15—when rice plants are typically beginning to flower—participants pray for a good harvest.

A float in the image of a rice flower and housing the spirit of the flowers is drawn by young shrine parishioners. It is believed that if a person can get hold of one of the artificial flowers displayed on the float, he or she will be granted a good harvest, the safety of his or her family, and other wishes.

[Performance]

Local people's dedication to preserving the traditions of Kurokawa Noh is evident every year during this festival.

[Black out]

On the first Saturday of August, candlelight noh on the water (Suien no Noh) is performed on an outdoor stage located in Sogo-undo Park in Kushibiki. The tradition began in 1984 to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the establishment of the town. The upper troupe (*kamiza*) and lower troupe (*shimoza*) perform in alternate years. Held at night amid the stifling heat of midsummer, the performance can be exhilarating. The unusual atmosphere of the performance amid the flickering torches and their reflection on the water attracts many attendees every year.

[Black out]

Once the rainy season has passed at the end of July, costumes and masks used in noh performances are hung in the sun to dry to prevent mold and damage from insects. This is a regular annual custom practiced by local residents who work tirelessly to protect the art form.

Some of the costumes used in Kurokawa Noh have been designated as Prefectural or National Tangible Cultural Properties, adding to their value. Heirloom costumes and masks have been treasured through generations alongside the performing arts of noh and *kyogen* (comic interludes accompanying noh plays).

[Black out]

Farmers are busy gathering in the abundant harvest.

The bounty of the fields and orchards carefully cultivated throughout the year—rice, persimmons, soybeans and so on—are harvested. Local people give thanks to the deities for providing bountiful produce.

The Niiname-sai, a festival thanking the deities for a successful harvest, is carried out at Kasuga Jinja Shrine on November 23.

[Performance]

Kurokawa Noh is performed to express joy and give thanks to the deities for a good harvest.

[Fade to white]

The harsh winter has arrived. It is time for the Ogi Festival, which marks the start of another year for Kurokawa Noh.

[Fade to black]