

Kurokawa Noh and Food Culture

Noh drama is one of the oldest major forms of theater art performed today and Kurokawa Noh is the local tradition that has been preserved for more than 500 years. Generations of parishioners of Kasuga Jinja Shrine in Kurokawa have worked to preserve this local of the art.

Kurokawa Noh is similar to the contemporary five schools of noh (Kanze, Konparu, Hosho, Kongo, and Kita), but has its own traditions. Performances retain unique aspects of Shinto ceremonies.

It is unclear when noh arrived in the Kurokawa area. However, there are records of *tayū* (troupe leaders) practicing the art at the beginning of the Edo period (1603–1867). Further evidence points to the practice of noh here at the end of the Muromachi period (1336–1573).

Three extant noh costumes, woven during the latter Muromachi period, are designated National Important Cultural Properties. Kurokawa Noh itself was designated an Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property in 1976.

The parishioners of Kasuga Jinja Shrine are divided into two groups, the upper troupe (*kamiza*) and the lower troupe (*shimoza*). Together they comprise the performance troupe, which is managed mainly by the group's chairman. There are approximately 150 performers, including adults and children, who utilize some 250 traditional noh masks and more than 500 costumes to perform 540 noh stories and 50 *kyogen* (comic interlude) stories.

Food and performance woven together

Kurokawa Noh is performed as an offering to the deities enshrined at Kasuga Jinja Shrine. During the shrine's main festival, the Ogi Festival, which is held annually on February 1 and 2, Kurokawa Noh is performed through the night. Performers enjoy a celebratory meal (*gyoji-shoku*) of festive foods based on local religion and culture, the traditional vegetarian cuisine based on the ideals of Zen Buddhism. *Gyoji-shoku* uses ingredients that are common in local kitchens, such as vegetables from the farms and dried fruits from the garden.

The dishes served during the Ogi Festival also incorporate regional seasonal ingredients, such as *sansai* (wild mountain vegetables and mushrooms), which have been foraged in the mountains by local residents for centuries. The dishes are intended to express the participants' prayer for the happiness and well-being of their families.

Generations ago, the dishes were presented as offerings to the deities of the shrine as a sign of gratitude for past blessings. Their preparation and presentation also involved rituals of prayer for plentiful future harvests. Today, the dishes have become symbolic foods to be eaten at the time of the festival.

Preparations for the festival meal are highly labor intensive. Some of the ingredients take as long as a year to grow, harvest, and prepare. Tofu, a central component of the meal, has a particularly important spiritual meaning. In years past, villagers would prepare *shimi-dofu* (roasted and frozen tofu) to eat instead of animal protein during the harsh winters, and this practice was believed to demonstrate their devotion to the deities of the shrine. The Ogi Festival is known locally as the Tofu Festival due to this special tofu, which is served as part of the festive meal.

Ahead of the festival, as many as 10,000 pieces of tofu are roasted over hot charcoal on a large open hearth and frozen, a process that dates from around 1500. This tofu along with boiled burdock root is the focus of two dishes served at the festival. The upper troupe (*kamiza*) serves the tofu hot, with a sauce that includes walnuts and *sansho* (Japanese pepper, *Zanthoxylum piperitum*) while the lower troupe (*shimoza*) serves the tofu cold, and pours a hot soup seasoned with sake, soy sauce, and *sansho* over it.

Additional dishes served at the festival include *kiria* (chopped red ostrich fern fiddleheads, walnuts, and green beans), which is also served differently by each troupe. The *kamiza* dresses the dish with locally sourced miso

while the *shimoza* dresses the dish with soy sauce. Other dishes include pickled vegetables, dried persimmons harvested in the autumn, and boiled *sansai* (wild mountain vegetables and mushrooms) seasoned with soy sauce.

Because the food is an integral part of the ceremonial aspects of the festival, parishioners of the shrine work with collaborators to preserve the techniques used to prepare the dishes. Similar techniques are used to prepare the regionally important *shojin ryori*, which relies heavily on edible wild plants.