

Sada Shin Noh Theater

Sada Shin Noh is an annual series of ritual purification dances performed over two days in late September at the Sada Shrine in Kashima, northern Matsue. The performances are part of a ritual celebrating the changing of the woven-rush floor mats (*goza*) upon which the shrine's gods are invited to sit. These dances blend aspects of the lively and colorful traditional Shinto *kagura* dances with more refined elements taken from Noh theater, and are performed to the accompaniment of chanting, flutes, and drums. The Noh aspects were introduced in the early seventeenth century by a Shinto priest from Sada Shrine named Miyagawa Hideyuki, who traveled to Kyoto to learn the then-current styles of Noh and returned to Sada to develop this local version.

Open-Air Performances

The actual date of the founding of Sada Shrine is uncertain, but it is known to have existed in the early eighth century, when it was mentioned in historical records. It has an unusual configuration of three main halls (*honden*) standing side by side that are connected by a shared roofed corridor and gates. These halls were built in 1807 in the *taisha-zukuri* style, and are designated Important Cultural Properties. The September dances take place on the roofed, open-air shrine stage near the halls, with performances by local residents, priests, and attendants from other local shrines. There are about fifteen dances, and though they are performed by nonprofessionals they are of very high quality.

Shinto Mythology in Dance

The first day of the ceremony, September 24, features the evening ritual of Shichiza, seven dances to purify the new rush mats. The attendants carry the mats up the steep steps of the three main halls, after which the head priest enters, closes the doors, and exchanges the mats while the attendants chant below. The following day's event celebrates the completion of the mat-changing ritual with an evening performance of three congratulatory dances called the Shikisanban, drawn from Noh theatre. They are followed by lively masked dances from a repertoire celebrating Shinto mythology. "Yaegaki," a notable example, enacts the myth of the god Susanoo no Mikoto slaying the eight-headed serpent Yamata no Orochi. These popular dances feature colorful costumes, strikingly dramatic masks, dynamic movement involving swordplay, and battles between good and evil.

A Living Tradition of Dance

The introduction of Sada Shin Noh in the seventeenth century had a significant impact on local shrine dances, spreading throughout the region and is still performed today.

Nevertheless, the aging of Japanese society has made it difficult to ensure a new generation of performers will continue the tradition. A preservation society first inaugurated in 1919 helped this local Noh theater tradition to become designated an Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property by the Japanese government in 1976; it was registered as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2011.