

Kaguraden (Sacred Dance Hall)

The Kaguraden is a ceremonial space that hosts large group rituals, weddings, and performances. Kagura, which means “entertainment for the gods,” is a type of Shinto ritual dance that can be traced back to the early ninth century. Despite the name, kagura performances are not held in Izumo Ōyashiro Shrine’s Kaguraden. Instead, it was originally built to conduct unique sacred rituals passed down through the shrine’s family of chief priests (*kokusō*). Today, the Kaguraden hosts weddings and prayer services for the general public.

The Kaguraden’s most prominent feature is the massive *shimenawa* rope (the “Ō-shimenawa”) that hangs above the entrance to the hall. Measuring 13.6 meters in length, 8 meters in girth, and weighing 5.2 metric tons, it is the largest in Japan. *Shimenawa* are braided straw ropes that designate Shinto sacred spaces. The *shimenawa* at Izumo Ōyashiro are twisted together beginning on the left (as one faces the hall), as evidenced by the bluntness of the rope ends on the left, compared to the narrower, tapering ends on the right. This feature is peculiar to Izumo; at most other shrines, the ropes begin on the right side. The Kaguraden’s *shimenawa* is replaced every six to eight years and is woven by a group of volunteers from Iinan in central Shimane Prefecture.

Behind the *shimenawa* hangs a large, framed piece of calligraphy proclaiming, “Filled with the light of Ōkuninushi” (*shinkō manden*). Above the doors to the hall, visitors will see a large stained-glass window decorating the gable. It depicts the shrine crest and the multi-colored clouds that symbolize Izumo. Stained glass is not typically used in shrine architecture, so this is a rare example.

The Kaguraden was first built in 1667, but was rebuilt in its current form in 1981 to commemorate the 1982 centennial of Izumo Ōyashiro-kyō, a religious organization that promotes the worship of Ōkuninushi no Kami. The organization was founded in 1882 by Senge Takatomi (1845–1918), the 80th chief priest (*kokusō*) of Izumo Ōyashiro. With its own set of teaching principles known as “Izumo Shinto,” Izumo Ōyashiro-kyō was one of the original 13 sects of Shinto recognized by the government during the Meiji era (1868–1912). While the shrine and Izumo Ōyashiro-kyō are separate entities, the two organizations work together closely.