

## O no Mai Ritual Dances

### Overview

The O no Mai (literally “King’s Dance”) is a ritual commonly performed by a single male dancer wearing a long-nosed mask and wielding a halberd. The tradition is said to have spread from the former capitals of Nara and Kyoto between the eleventh and the fourteenth centuries. Active trade between port towns along the Sea of Japan and the metropolitan areas likely spurred the cultural exchange that brought the practice to Wakasa. At present, seventeen O no Mai dances are preserved in the region and are usually performed during spring festivals. The form, length of the dance, number of participants, and costumes vary by location.

### Learn More

#### *A Tradition from a Thousand Years Ago*

The origins and purpose of O no Mai dances have been lost to time, but the tradition likely began in the eleventh century at religious sites in Nara and Kyoto. The red color of many O no Mai costumes is associated with repelling evil, and several shrine legends related to the dance tell of a hero defeating an enemy, which suggests that the rituals were possibly performed to ward off disasters and misfortune.

#### *Connection to Bugaku and Gigaku Performances*

O no Mai may have origins in bugaku, an ancient type of dance that was traditionally performed at the imperial court or for the nobility. Bugaku was brought from mainland Asia in the sixth century in the process of trade and cultural exchange and developed into a distinctive Japanese art form by approximately the eighth century. Similarities can be found between O no Mai and ancient bugaku pieces such as *Sanju* and *Kitoku*, in which the dancers are thought to represent military leaders celebrating a victory. O no Mai may also have been influenced by *gigaku*, an even older type of masked dance from mainland Asia that gradually disappeared as bugaku became more popular. Some researchers suggest that the appearance of the O no Mai dancer in a long-nosed mask originated from the procession that took place before *gigaku* performances, led by a similarly masked actor whose role was to ritually purify the path.

#### *The Role of Private Agricultural Estates*

The O no Mai tradition probably came to Wakasa via trade routes connecting the region to the old capitals. It was sustained due to the presence of *shoen*, private agricultural

estates that were maintained in distant provinces by court nobles and influential shrines and temples. Such estates were major contributors to the spread of Kyoto and Nara culture in Wakasa, and most of the surviving O no Mai dances are performed at Shinto shrines located on former *shoen* lands.

#### *Variations of O no Mai*

There is substantial variation among the seventeen O no Mai dances preserved at shrines across the Wakasa region. While some dances only last two minutes, others can go on for up to an hour. Most are performed by a single male dancer, but some involve multiple participants. In some cases, the performers are adults, while in others, they are school-age boys. Though the overarching theme of the O no Mai ritual is thought to be warding off evil, at certain shrines the dance serves as an offering to the deities when asking for specific blessings, such as a good harvest or bountiful catches of fish. The differences illustrate how O no Mai changed over time to reflect the folklore of each area, as well as the needs and lifestyle of the villagers.

#### **Exhibition Items**

The mannequins display a variety of costumes, masks, and halberds, illustrating the differences between the seventeen O no Mai dances still practiced in Wakasa. Photos of the dances in front of the mannequins present the range of costumes in more detail. Video recordings are played on the screen, showing the slow, stylized movements of the ritual performance. A red robe, an elaborate phoenix headdress made with peacock feathers, and a long-nosed mask from the Edo period (1603–1867) that are displayed in a glass case were all once used in the O no Mai at Mimi Jinja Shrine.