

Kikuchi: An Introduction

The Kikuchi region extends across vast fertile plains in northern Kumamoto Prefecture. Flowing out of the mountains northeast of the plains and through this pastoral landscape is the Kikuchi River, providing water for rice cultivation for more than two millennia. Agriculture remains at the core of local life and culture. Much of this cultural heritage can be traced back to the days of the Kikuchi clan, which controlled most of central Kyushu from the eleventh until the early sixteenth century. The Kikuchi headquarters was the castle town of Waifu, today the city of Kikuchi.

The rise of the Kikuchi clan

The Kikuchi clan is thought to have been founded by Fujiwara no Noritaka, a high-ranking court official. In 1070, Noritaka's superiors at Dazaifu, the administrative center of Kyushu near what is now the city of Fukuoka, appointed him to oversee an agricultural estate (*shoen*) owned by the court in what is now the Kikuchi district. Noritaka changed his surname to Kikuchi and built a fortified compound on the river that later took the same name, laying the foundations for the castle town of Waifu and for the rice trade that was to bring prosperity to his descendants and expand Kikuchi ascendancy far and wide.

Noritaka's successors extended their clan's influence through skillful diplomacy and success on the battlefield. They acquired great wealth by monopolizing trade on the Kikuchi River and selling crops grown on the surrounding plains, which they developed into some of the most productive farmland in the country. The Kikuchi reached the height of their prosperity in the fourteenth century, when the imperial court split into two as the result of a power struggle, and the rival Northern and Southern courts fought for control of the country. The Kikuchi were staunch supporters of the Southern Court, whose emperor sent his young son, Prince Kaneyoshi, to Kyushu to strengthen existing alliances and cultivate new ones.

A cultural legacy

On Prince Kaneyoshi's arrival in Waifu in 1348, the Kikuchi planned entertainments befitting a member of the imperial court. A celebratory New Year's performance called *matsubayashi*—modeled on performing arts enjoyed by the aristocracy, with dancing accompanied by singing, drums, and flutes—inaugurated a tradition that survives today. For more than 650 years, the entertainments witnessed by the prince have been

reenacted annually on a stage in front of a giant *muku* (*Aphananthe aspera*) tree in central Kikuchi. The tree is said to have been planted by Prince Kaneyoshi, or to have grown from a staff he stuck in the ground. During the *matsubayashi* performance, held on October 13, spectators are not allowed to enter the area between the stage and the tree so as not to obstruct the prince's view.

The Kikuchi clan's fortunes declined gradually after the Southern Court was defeated in the late fourteenth century. They then directed their efforts toward supporting local culture and providing education for samurai and townspeople. This tradition survived even after the Kikuchi were vanquished by rival warlords in the early 1500s. Statues of Kikuchi heroes dot the streets of the modern-day city of Kikuchi, and a shrine dedicated to these historic figures stands on the hilltop site of what was once the clan's castle.

Dramatic scenery

In the eighteenth century, Kikuchi became famous for the dramatic scenery of its mountainous northeast. Once an inhospitable wilderness used as a training ground by ascetics who would retreat into the mountains in pursuit of spiritual discipline, the scenic beauty of the Kikuchi Gorge in the uppermost reaches of the Kikuchi River was first described in a 1772 travelogue. Its landscape includes waterfalls and several types of native woods that nurture a great diversity of plant and animal life. Today, the gorge is a popular hiking destination with a modern visitor center providing informative exhibits on the natural environment of Kikuchi.