

Gion Kagura

Gion Kagura is an eclectic festival held annually at the Yasaka Shrine in the small village of Tauta on July 14. The celebration revolves around an hour-long parade through the village to the shrine, in which residents dress as folk-tale characters such as long-nosed *tengu* and ogre-like *oni* and dance, play the drums and flute, and chant on their way to perform a program of sacred dances for the deities. The nearly 400-year-old festival is the most important event of the year for the community and often draws hundreds of spectators.

The origins and history of Gion Kagura are uncertain, but it is thought to have been held in Tauta since 1640 and may have originated in Kyoto, the site of the original Gion (Yasaka) Shrine. Famines ravaged the Miyama area in the mid-1600s, and the festival may have started as a prayer for deliverance to the deities of Kyoto's Gion Shrine, which was founded to ward off disease.

In its present form, Gion Kagura is part prayer for a bountiful harvest, part ritual conducted to ensure the well-being of the village, and part mechanism to reinforce community ties. The music played during the festival has been passed down by example for generations, and memorizing the melodies is considered the mark of a fully-fledged Tauta resident. As most participants know the program by heart, they rehearse only during the week prior to the festival.