

Shrines and *Kagura* on Iki

Ancient sites of worship associated with the deities of the sea, navigation, and warfare can be found throughout Iki, reflecting both the importance of the ocean in the local people's livelihood and the island's historical position on the front lines of contact with foreign powers. Some two dozen of the more than 100 shrines on Iki are mentioned in the tenth-century *Engishiki*, a compilation of regulations and procedures produced by the imperial court that also listed all the significant shrines in Japan at the time. That so many religious sites on such a small island were included in this important compilation suggests that the Yamato court considered Iki a place of strategic importance.

These shrines have for centuries served as venues for *kagura*, an ancient performance combining dance and music that is generally presented around the autumn harvest to thank the gods for a bountiful crop. Different regions have their own variations of *kagura*, and the tradition on Iki is one of the most distinctive. Iki *kagura* is highly ceremonial, with few of the entertainment elements seen in some other areas. Only Shinto priests and their family members are allowed to act out the around 35 stories passed down orally through the generations at shrines on the island. In these plays, which range from solemn reenactments of scenes from the creation myths of Japan to acrobatic displays that include elements of sumo wrestling and juggling, performers are limited to a space of two tatami mats.

Kagura on Iki is performed to welcome and entertain deities, and, despite most performances being held in autumn and winter, was not traditionally associated with any specific occasion or time of the year. Two significant performances are open to the public. The three-hour Daikagura is held in August at Tsutsuki Beach, whereas the Daidaikagura, which consists of around 30 plays and goes on for up to nine hours, takes place at Sumiyoshi Shrine in December.