

Kikuchi Matsubayashi

Kikuchi Matsubayashi is a performing art tradition that dates back more than six centuries, to a pivotal event in the Kikuchi warrior clan's history. It is considered a precursor of Noh theater, modeled on the performing arts enjoyed by the medieval aristocracy: dancing accompanied by singing and drums.

Matsubayashi was first presented as a celebratory New Year's performance at the Kikuchi clan's castle in 1349. The guest of honor on this occasion was the recently arrived imperial prince Kanenaga (also known as Kaneyoshi; 1329–1383), who had been sent to Kyushu to raise an army.

During this period, the imperial court split into two as the result of a power struggle, and the rival Northern and Southern courts vied for control of the country. Kanenaga, the son of the Southern Court's Emperor Godaigo (1288–1339), allied with the Kikuchi clan. In the following decade their forces brought all of Kyushu under Southern Court control, ushering in a golden age for the Kikuchi.

The Kikuchi clan's ascendancy proved short-lived, but Matsubayashi has endured largely unchanged to this day. The entertainments witnessed by Prince Kanenaga are reenacted by a local heritage association on a traditional stage in central Kikuchi every October 13 as part of the Kikuchi Shrine's autumn festival.

Kikuchi Matsubayashi has been designated an Intangible Folk Cultural Property, in part because it exemplifies elements of Noh that predate the tradition's classical form, which was established by the playwrights Kan'ami and Zeami between the late 1300s and mid-1400s.