

***Tengu* and Kashozan Mirokuji Temple**

Tengu are a central and conspicuous part of worship at Kashozan Mirokuji and are the guardian deities at this temple. A pair of fierce-looking *tengu* statues stand guard in Chuhodo Hall. Hand-painted papier-mâché masks depicting these legendary long-nosed creatures can be borrowed from the temple. It is customary for people to borrow a mask on their first visit to the temple and place it on the Shinto or Buddhist altar in their home for protection from evil. The borrowed mask is to be returned the following year, along with a new mask purchased from one of the shops at the foot of the mountain.

Belief in *tengu* as guardians has been an integral part of local religious practice for centuries. In what is now Gunma Prefecture, *tengu* were strongly associated with silk farming, a major industry in the area from the mid-nineteenth century into the early twentieth century. *Tengu* were believed to protect silkworms from disease and the elements, and farmers

would hang a *tengu* mask on the wall of the room used for silk farming to watch over the larvae.

The tradition at Kashozan Mirokuji of borrowing and returning *tengu* masks is also thought to date to the late nineteenth century and may have begun in part as a means of supporting local farmers, many of whom crafted masks during the winter to supplement their income. The temple's association with these auspicious objects eventually led temple visitors to dedicate ever larger and more elaborate specimens, culminating in the 1939 donation of what remains one of the largest *tengu* masks in Japan.

The giant mask measures 6.5 meters across and has a 2.8-meter-long nose. It was dedicated by members of the local chamber of commerce who prayed for the safety of those sent to fight in World War II. Its back side is covered with paper slips bearing the prayers and wishes of approximately 50,000

devotees who contributed to the donation. The massive mask is displayed in Chuhodo Hall next to a slightly smaller one from 1971, donated as a

token of prayers for traffic safety. Annual traffic fatalities in Japan peaked at 16,765 in 1970, leading to intensive efforts by the government and civil society to improve road safety.