

KAGURA

神楽

Dancing with the Gods

Kagura Performance in Central Europe
Traditional Folk Theater from Tohoku region





上町法印神楽

黒森神楽

2019 marks the 150 years of diplomatic relations between Japan and Hungary, and the 100 years of international relations between Japan and Poland. To celebrate and commemorate this juncture, the Japan Foundation is honored to have presented “Dancing with the Gods -Japanese Kagura Performance- Traditional folk theater from Tohoku region” to introduce the tradition of “*kagura*,” an art form that has never been formally presented in Hungary nor in Poland before.

Considered one of the origins of *noh* and *kabuki*, *kagura* is a traditional folk art form that has been passed down across generations. Rooted in local communities, the ritual performances are held dear and passed down from generation to generation by the people living in those regions as a vital part of their lives. *Kagura* forms exist all over Japan, but this presentation focuses on the *kagura* from the Tohoku region of Japan where the performance holds a particularly close relationship to the local community and businesses.

After the great earthquake in eastern Japan in 2011, *kagura* has received renewed attention for its value and role in society as something that supports people, maintains ties to local communities, and a vitalizing force in the recovery of the region. The nations of the world, including Hungary and Poland, responded to the natural disaster with warm support. We are pleased to have this opportunity to celebrate the 150th and the 100th anniversary of diplomatic relations by presenting to Hungarian and Polish audiences the continued recovery efforts in the Tohoku region, and *kagura*, which has provided encouragement and comfort to those who are rebuilding.

In this brochure, we will introduce in greater detail the art form of *kagura*, the Tohoku region of Japan, the local activities, and some vivid shots of the *kagura* company that we have presented on this tour.

JAPAN

Geography (Tohoku Region)

上町法印神楽
Kanmachi Hoin KAGURA

黒森神楽
Kuromori KAGURA

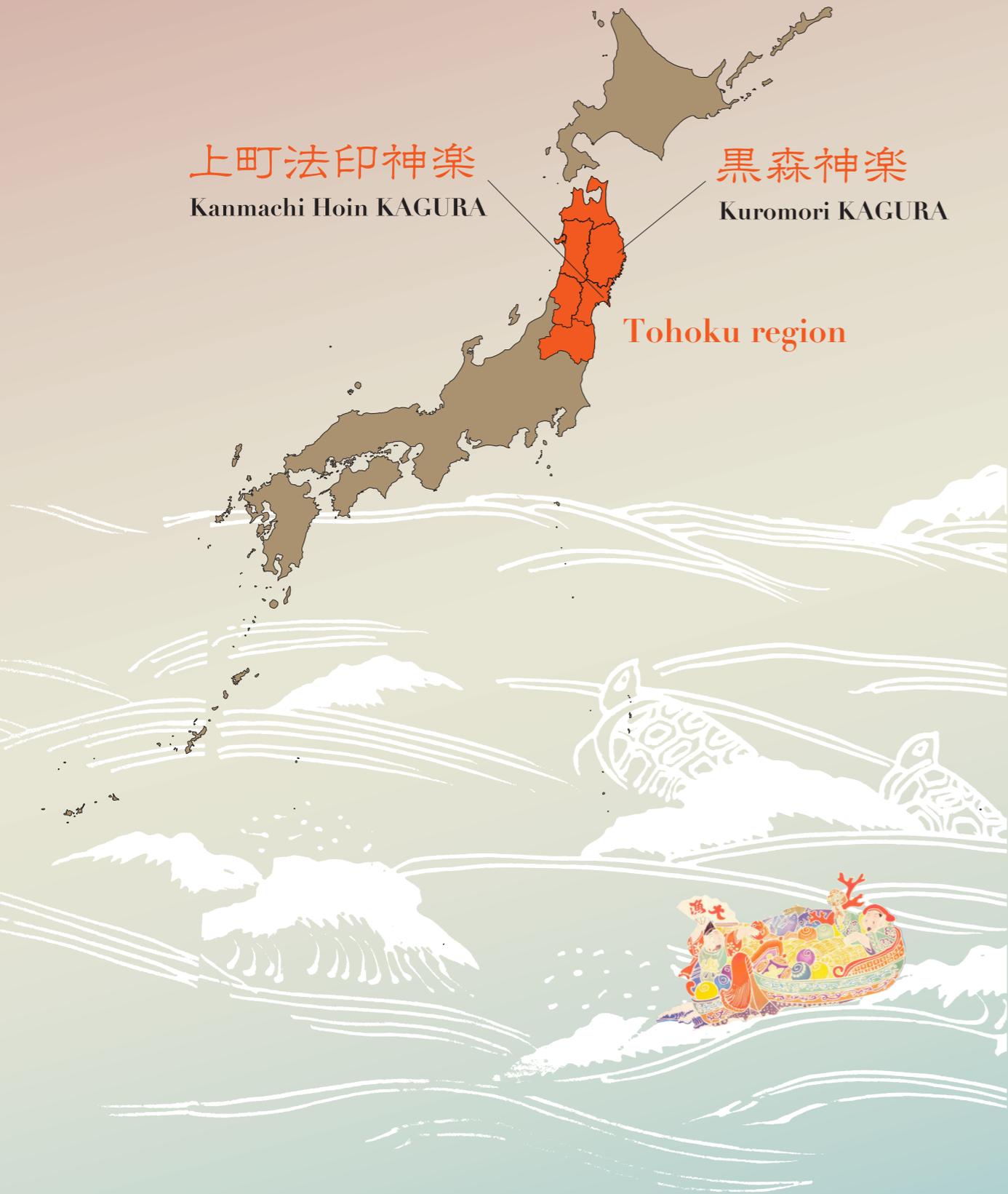
Tohoku region

The two forms of *kagura* we will introduce are Kanmachi Hoin Kagura and Kuromori Kagura, both deeply rooted in the Tohoku region of Japan. The Tohoku is the northeastern region of Japan with a population of approximately 8.8 million people and area of 67,000 square kilometers. Within the region are six prefectures; Kanmachi Hoin Kagura hails from Tome city of Miyagi prefecture and Kuromori Kagura from Miyako city in Iwate prefecture.

The shinkansen high-speed bullet train is one of the most popular modes of transportation to reach the Tohoku. From Tokyo, one can reach the Tohoku in one to four hours by shinkansen. The Tohoku is flanked by the Pacific Ocean and the Japan Sea, and enjoys rich harvests of seafood. Agriculture and rice-farming are also prominent in the region, making the Tohoku notable as a center of food production within Japan. With characteristically snowy winters, winter sports and hot springs are enjoyed here. Life in Tohoku demands a lifestyle of harmony with winter and snow.

On March 11, 2011, an earthquake with an epicenter in the Miyagi prefecture bay and a magnitude of 9.0 shook the Tohoku, with particularly destructive effects on Iwate, Miyagi and Fukushima prefectures on the Pacific Ocean side of the region. The resulting tsunami that wreaked havoc on numerous towns along the Pacific and the accident at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant made the headlines worldwide. However, the people of the Tohoku were already embarking on their road to recovery. With tremendous effort, service on the Tohoku Shinkansen lines were operating in only one month after the earthquake, and there were several other examples of positive indications of recovery.

Kagura is an art form of prayer that is rooted in the daily lives of people. During the time of heightening self-restraint after the disaster, the residents of Tohoku longed for *kagura*, and *kagura* became a great source of comfort and support for them. This was proof that *kagura* and all the traditions of local folk art and rituals are not fixed legacies that remain unchanged over time, but a cultural asset that hold great significance to people who are living today.



What is kagura?

There are six components to *kagura* that are: [ceremonial] [performing art] [to greet], [entertain] and [send home] [god]. Since ancient times, [god] has been an important “existence” in the daily lives of the Japanese that protects people from natural disasters, sickness, and food shortages while bringing good matches, fertility and healthy childbirth, familial prosperity and other fortune. [God], for many Japanese is a generic term for “an existence that transcends human intellect,” and something they consider a necessity in their daily lives. In Japan there is the saying “*yaoyorozu*” which means “innumerable number of gods.” The Japanese believe that their daily lives are supported by many gods. Generally, gods live in a different world from the human world, and humans are not able to see gods with their eyes. However, many Japanese believe that by meeting gods and receiving their blessings, their lives would be improved. In order to do so, they must [greet] the gods. Then, they must engage in several activities to [entertain] them, such as presenting a dance to the gods, or dancing with the gods and offering them food and *sake*. The Japanese enjoy this festive time in this fashion, by building communication with the gods. In return for this entertainment, the gods promise to answer the humans’ wishes for, for example, plentiful harvest, health and longevity, prosperity in their region, etc. Finally, with deep gratitude, the humans [send the gods home] to where they came from. This flow of this entire process is the [ceremony] called *kagura*. *Kagura* is both a ceremonial ritual as well as a [performing art]. *Kagura* is something that people look forward to as part of their lives, and is on one level, a recreational activity. Though *kagura* is carried out as a holy ritual, at the same it has the ability to lift the human spirit, in the same way

entertainment does. The idea of enjoying this ritual “together with the gods” is characteristic of *kagura* and other Japanese folk performing art forms.

The great earthquake of March 11, 2011 with the epicenter in Miyagi prefecture bay cause tremendous destruction in the lives of the residents of the Tohoku region, as well as a huge influence on the traditions of *kagura* rooted in that region. Kuromori Kagura makes its home in an area that was directly affected by the earthquake; however, miraculously all the members of the *kagura* company and its props and instruments were unscathed, and the company restarted its activities right away after the quake. Kanmachi Hoin Kagura is located further inland from the worst areas struck by the earthquake and managed to escape the destruction caused by the tsunami. The company quickly moved in to support other Hoin Kagura companies that were active in the towns along the coastline, which was hit worst. *Kagura* contributed in a critical way to the recovery of the Tohoku by holding memorials for the victims of the disaster as well as continuing to provide encouragement and support for the survivors who are still working to recover their lives. The activities of *kagura* continues today, deepening its roots in the lives of Tohoku communities, bringing people together, and proving itself to be an art form that strengthens and supports humanity. This is because *kagura* has the quality of “holding ritual and art together” as well as an inextricable bond to the Tohoku region. *Kagura* has developed and been passed down over generations, taking on the particular qualities unique to each local area. In the effort to learn about and understand the lives and culture of a specific community, *kagura* can be seen as a kind of “living textbook.”



Kanmachi Hoin Kagura An Overview

The Inari Jinja shrine in Kanmachi in Toyosato ward, Tome city in Miyagi prefecture is home to the Kanmachi Hoin Kagura. [*Hoin*] refers to the mountain ascetic. Mountain ascetics are monks who practice religious austerities in the mountains where it is said special powers reside. In other words, Hoin Kagura is the form of *kagura* that has been handed down from these mountain ascetics. [*Jinja*] is a shrine where, to explain simply, “gods reside.” [*Inari*] points to the god of harvest, symbolized by the rice plant. So, Inari Jinja is “the place where one can meet the god of harvest.” As a side note, for the Japanese, Inari Jinja brings to mind the fox, because it is thought that the god of harvest takes the form of the fox. For Kanmachi Hoin Kagura a wooden stage is set up within the precinct of Inari Jinja and there the invitation to god is performed. Residents nearby gather at Inari Jinja and greet, entertain, and send the god home. Kanmachi Hoin Kagura has a history of about 170 years since its origin and has been designated an Intangible Folk Cultural Asset of Miyagi prefecture. Today, with the support of the preservation society, *kagura* continues to be passed down and widely spread.

Miyagi prefecture suffered terribly from the aftermath of the great earthquake of March 11, 2011. Luckily, Kanmachi Hoin Kagura managed to escape damages from the tsunami. The company supported other Hoin Kagura troupe in neighboring towns by loaning out their stage props, gathered information, and put their efforts into the recovery of local arts. Among the several *kagura* troupe in the Tohoku region, this company has garnered love from audiences old and young due to their activities that feature both younger performers and seasoned veterans. They continue to support the revitalization of their community.



Kanmachi Hoin Kagura the kagura stage and fly scenery

Here are some useful keywords to deepen your understanding of Kanmachi Hoin Kagura: [*kagura stage*] [*daijo kazari*] [*yutate shinji*] [*shuin*] and [*benbai*].

Kanmachi Hoin Kagura performances take place on the wooden stage that is set up within the ground of Inari Jinja. The *kagura stage* consists of two stages: the main stage and a smaller stage. The perimeter of the stage is surrounded on four sides by a rope called “*shimenawa*” and this demarcates the area where the god descends. Far upstage of the main stage, a flat scenery made of Japanese paper called [*daijo kazari*] is hung, one of characteristics unique to Kanmachi Hoin Kagura. When enjoying the performance, make sure to pay attention not only to the performers but the entire stage set and the scenery as well. The vast and grand *daijo kazari* gives off an air of magnificence. This stage convention could only be developed for *kagura* in Miyagi prefecture, where there is a long-standing custom of using Japanese washi paper to create ornaments for sacred household Shinto shrines.

[*Yutate shinji*] refers to the ritual of purification that is performed before evening *kagura* performances. Water is boiled in a large vat and a branch of bamboo grass is dipped into the boiling water. Then the hot water on the bamboo is sprinkled through the stage and surrounding area. It is believed that hot water has the power to cleanse evil spirits. When performing *yutate shinji*, all of the props, including masks, costumes, swords and so on, are placed on the stage, and the entire *kagura* troupe also sits on stage formally to prepare for greeting the god.

Another unique characteristic, this one within the dance, are [*shuin*] which are special hand gestures and [*benbai*] or stomping movements, both of which signify prayers of thanks to the harvest and to the land. *Henbai*, especially, is considered one of the foundational movements in Japanese traditional performing arts since ancient times, and the practice of *benbai* as passed down in Kanmachi Hoin Kagura has been hailed as culturally valuable.

Kanmachi Hoin Kagura holds significance as a prayer to bring good and ward off misfortune, but also has another meaning, and that is to enjoy oneself while offering prayers and thanks to god. In other words, it is a form of entertainment. There are numerous heroic moments in the performance when the performers climb up and hang off the beams of the stage for dazzling action scenes. And the motion of swinging the sword around signifies a beheading of evil spirits and chasing them away. Thus, *kagura* performances serve the dual purpose of both prayer and entertainment, serving god and finally sending god home. There are also interactive elements to both the Kanmachi Hoin Kagura and Kuromori Kagura that is geared not only for the god but also drawn in the audiences. If you fully enjoy the performance, no doubt the gods will bring blessings upon you.



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Program

Kanmachi Hoin Kagura

Douso

This piece is based on a god named Sarutahiko who appears in Japanese mythology. It is a solo piece in which the performer wears as mask called the *douso-men* and essentially the same costume used for the dance “*Sboya*” which is considered one of the foundational dances in the Kanmachi Hoin Kagura repertory. *Henbai* stomping is abundant in the piece, and the performer also scatters rice and chants lyrics to an archetypal Japanese melody. In the second half of the piece, there is a section where the performer walks forward on his knees while swinging his sword down to the left and right. This represents a man standing before undeveloped land, cutting down the vegetation to forge a new pathway for humankind. “*Douso*” is said to be a dance that is a shows people how to live and has gained praise and popularity as such a dance. It is frequently performed in celebration of a newly built house.

Yamato Takerunomikoto

This piece is based on the legendary hero in ancient Japanese texts, Yamato Takerunomikoto. An evil ogress who holds a grudge against Yamato Takerunomikoto disguises herself as a beautiful princess and plots her revenge. She steals a jeweled sword called Amanomura Kumonotsurugi, a critically important sword in Japanese mythology. Enraged at the disappearance of the sword, Yamato Takerunomikoto manages to slay the ogress after a violent fight. The jeweled sword is returned and enshrined. One of the highlights of the performance comes during the scene in which the ogress is stealing the sword. Although she is disguised as a beautiful princess, a holy mirror shows the ogress’ figure for who she is as she fearfully steals the sword. Famous for its swift-moving and violent dance, this piece offers a variety of exciting visuals and is one of the crowd favorites.



Kuromori Kagura An Overview

The home of Kuromori Kagura is Kuromori Jinja, located on Kuromoriyama mountain with an altitude of about 330m, in the Yamaguchi ward of Miyako city, Iwate Prefecture. Miyako city is located at the center of Iwate's coastline and is blessed with abundant nature from both forest and the sea. Kuromori Jinja is a shrine for whom fisherman are the center of its devotees. At the beginning of the year, the Kuromori Kagura troupe visits the villages along the coast and perform *kagura* rites to bless all the residents of the area. Here is a distinct difference between Kuromori Kagura and Kanmachi Hoin Kagura. In contrast to Kanmachi Hoin Kagura, for which people gather to one place to enjoy performances, troupe members of Kuromori Kagura actually travel themselves to many different villages to offer their performances. It is the difference between "going to see" the gods and "inviting and greeting" the gods. This is a wonderful opportunity to witness the difference in Japanese *kagura* styles. Even among the traveling-style *kagura*, Kuromori Kagura covers a comparatively large geographic area – in fact the same area that the troupe has served for over 340 years. The art form has been distinguished and named an Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property in 2006.

When the earthquake hit on March 11, 2011, five members of the Kuromori Kagura troupe were affected by the tsunami. However, in just three months, Kuromori Kagura was back on its feet, engaging in the vital work of offering memorials for victims, visiting people who lost their homes to the tsunami in their temporary housing, giving performances in honor of the recovery effort and so on. The troupe was also invited to many other parts of Japan and the world to participate in charity events for earthquake relief. The company was able to tell the rest of the world of the state of the affected areas as well as express thanks for the recovery support. As a company deeply tied to the everyday lives of the people through prayers and requiems, Kuromori Kagura gained attention as a representative local art form of the earthquake-stricken region and became widely recognized.

Kuromori Kagura

Jungyo, Gongensama, Kaguramaku and more

Here are a few keywords we'd like to introduce to further your understanding of Kuromori Kagura: [*Gongensama*], [*jungyo*], [*kaguramaku*] and [*yokagura*]. There is a god residing in Kuromori Jinja. In order to bring the blessings of this god to the villagers who live far from the shrine, the god must take a journey. In this case, the container that holds the god is called [*gongensama*]. From appearances, *gongensama* looks like the head of a lion. When the god takes residence within the *gongensama*, it becomes one with the god and must be handled with extreme care. At the shrine, a strict ritual must be performed to place the god into the *gongensama*. With the *gongensama* hosting the god, the *kagura* troupe can then travel on foot to visit the many villages along the coast of Iwate prefecture. This journey is called [*jungyo*]. There are two routes, the northward "*kitamawari*" which heads north from Yamaguchi ward in Miyako city, and the "*minamimawari*" which heads south, and each route is traveled once a year. Once the ritual before entering a village is performed, the troupe performs a dance called *gongenmai* in the yards of individual homes. *Gongenmai* is performed to ward off evil, pray for protection against fire, the safety of the home, to ward off sickness, for abundant harvest and catches at sea, healthy childbirth and many other blessings. Each household has its own specific troubles, so the troupe prepares a variety of different rites to answer different needs. Furthermore, it is said that having the *gongensama* bite the shoulder or head of an individual will ward off evil and ensure that person's safety for one year. This is one of the ways the *gongensama* can provide all-around support for the daily lives of people. All of the rites described up to now are performed in broad daylight. Once night comes, Kuromori Kagura shows a

different side. Here is where we find the [*kaguramaku*]. When the *kagura* troupe visits a village, the inn where they are housed is called the *kagurayado* and serves a critical purpose. The *kaguramaku*, or *kagura* curtain, is hung in the drawing room of the *kagurayado* as a stage set, and this room becomes the stage for the [*yokagura*] or night *kagura*. Since Kuromori Kagura covers a great distance on foot, they are unable to carry large cumbersome stage devices with them. Their performances are designed to be performed with compact stage props including the *kaguramaku*, costumes, *taiko* drum, flute, and other transportable items. The *kaguramaku* is dyed by the same methods used for "*tairyoubata*" or the large banners displayed on fishing boats as a symbol of bountiful harvest, and there are several designs based on prayers for plentiful catch and mythology. *Yokagura* begins with *uchinarashi*, a ritual marking the beginning of the performance. The next performance is of a piece that contains a strong prayer message or one about Amaterasu, the greatest goddess of all Japanese mythology. Other pieces in the program might include comic pieces, those reflecting the local area industries, and stories to entertain the audience. The intent of *yokagura* dances are also prayers for rich harvest on land and at sea, and for the village to live in safety and peace. The performances both ease the viewers' hearts as well as entertain them. The driving forces of Kuromori Kagura are the troupe members who have inherited and continue to practice the precious art form as well as all the members of the communities who welcome the troupe into their villages and host the troupe in the designated *kagurayado*. All of their spirits are deeply tied to this cultural expression that has been passed down in the coastal area and makes tonight's performance possible here.





Program

Kuromori Kagura

Uchinarashi

When performing in the *yokagura* or night *kagura* at the *kagurayado*, this is always the opening ritual performance. The *kagura* troupe sits in a circle on the stage before the hung backdrop, and invokes the god. To the accompaniment of *taiko* drum, fute flute and *tehiragane* (a percussive instrument that is played by rubbing both hands together), the *Uchinarashi* song is sung. As a “*kamioroshi* song” (a song to bring the god down), it is an invitation to the god and the lyrics describe the origin of the song and honor to the deity.



Sakakiba

New members of the troupe always learn this dance first. This is a solo dance that is considered one of the foundational pieces in Kuromori Kagura. It is performed not with a mask but with a bird helmet on the head, a woman's undergarment robe with the sleeves tucked up with a *tasuki* cord. In the right hand the performer holds a white fan and a *shakujo* (a cane used by Buddhist monks with several rings on the head of the cane), and a *sakakimitegura* (a tool offered to the god consisting of two ritual Japanese paper objects tied to a tree branch) in the left. This dance is a prayer, and serves to purify, cleanse and bless the house and the land. As with the fierce jumps and turns characteristic of Kuromori Kagura, this dance features the repetition of a spell-like footfalls called *sanzoku*. As he finale of the dance, the *sakakimitegura* is placed standing on the *taiko* drum, rice is scattered towards the *gongensama*, and *sake* is offered in worship.



Matsumukae

Wearing the bird hat and the mask of *aum* (the sound of a Buddhist chant that brings two faces together, one with the mouth open and the other with the mouth closed), this is the dance of two brothers called *Sensbu* (thousand autumns) and *Banzei* (ten thousand years). The two set up a *kadomatsu* (a New Year's decoration made of pine and bamboo, placed at the entry to a home) to celebrate the New Year. After chanting the words of blessing for the whole world entrusted to a pine branch, the two remove their masks and dance with fans. The tempo picks up speed in second half, and this piece is considered one of the most flamboyant even among the many in the Kuromori Kagura repertory. Watching the two performers moving in synchronicity and witnessed the grace and beauty of the dance makes this a dazzling piece.

*Performed only in Budapest



Yama no Kamimai (Dance of the Mountain God)

This piece holds many meanings and traditions as a dance in which the god of the mountain, closely linked with the daily lives of the local communities, appears. The god of the mountain is the only character in the piece and he wears a red mask. The performer tells the origin story of the mountain god, bestows the blessings of the mountain and then promises fertility and prosperity. In the second half of the dance, the performer removes his mask and finishes with particularly ferocious jumps and turns. This god is one who protects those who work on the mountains and their harvest, but also is held deeply in the hearts of the fishermen, and many women also pray to him as a god of safe and healthy childbirth. In order to perform this dance, the performer must undergo severe training. It is one of the most important dances in the Kuromori Kagura repertory and is always performed.



Ebisumai

Also called the “Dance of Fishing Sea Bream,” this piece is also performed by one performer who dons the mask of the god Ebisu, the ancient god of fishermen and industry, and carries a fishing pole. Several skillful performance techniques and gestures are used to show Ebisu attaching a fishing hook to the pole, casting the line, catching a sea bream and capturing the fish. It is an audience favorite for its intricate performance, especially among those in the fishing industry. The climax of the piece is the fishing battle between Ebisu and the fish. When performed locally, often community members offer dried salmon that may be used as a real prop on stage. Overall, the movements in this piece are relaxed. As a piece that offers prayers for plentiful catches and safety at sea, it is performed faithfully in coastal areas.



Gongenmai

This is the ritual performed when the *gongsama* departs the *kagurayado*. *Gongsama* clicks its teeth and disperses any evil spirits or misfortune. Also, being bitten by *gongsama* is believed to have the effect of sending prayers of safety and prosperity in daily life. *Gongsama* might bite the kitchen or bite down on kitchen appliances and utensils including the hearth and stove and other heating appliances to pray for safety and fire prevention. *Gongsama* continues to click its teeth before the good-luck alcove or before the household shrine to ward off evil. Then in the “*migatame*” ritual, the *gongsama* bites down on all the observers of the ritual so far, including the family of the inn and any others present, praying for their health and safety. Once these prayers are complete, *gongsama* performs a dance and exits the home backwards. For this performance tonight, we offer thanks to our audience for joining us, and play for the deepening friendship between Japan and Poland and Hungary. We conclude with *gongsama*’s dance and the *migatame* on a representative of the audience before lowering the curtain.



Archives:
Performances and Exchanges
in Central Europe









Date of Performances and Exchanges in Central Europe

Exchange Session

February 19, 2019

University of Theatre and Film Arts (Budapest/Hungary)

February 22, 2019

The Song and Dance Ensemble of the Warsaw University of Technology (Warsaw/Poland)

Performance

February 20, 2019

József Attila Színház (Budapest/Hungary)

February 23, 2019

Teatr Polski (Warsaw/Poland)

February 26, 2019

Teatr Szekspirowski (Gdansk/Poland)

Special Screening of Kuromori-Kagura Documentary "Mawari Kagura"

February 7, 2019

Elektronik Cinema (Warsaw/Poland)

February 15, 2019

Zamek Culture Center (Poznan/Poland)



Kanmachi Hoin Kagura

Keiichi Takahashi, Masataka Sakai, Senju Takahashi, Ikuo Sasaki,
Shinichiro Konno, Hidemi Sato, Shin Oikawa, Hiromu Sato, Ryu Oikawa

Lecturer at exchange session: Hiroyuki Chiba

Kuromori Kagura

Fumio Matsumoto, Ryoshin Uesaka, Toshiyoshi Hatakeyama, Hiroki Tanaka,
Kenta Shinobu, Tomo Hirano, Taisei Ishizaki, Naoki Tagawa

Lecturer at exchange session: Yuichiro Kariya

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Co-organized by Embassy of Japan in Poland

In cooperation with Embassy of Japan in Hungary, József Attila Színház, and Visual Folklore Inc.

As a commemorative project for the 100 year anniversary of international relations
between Japan and Poland and the 150 years of diplomatic relations between Japan and Hungary

