

Report: Watching Kagura in historical town ~Ashikaga Raiden shrine Kagura



Date: 4th Sunday, April (Spring festival) & 4th Sunday, October (Autumn festival)

Location: Honjo 1-1562, Ashikaga city, Tochigi prefecture

Access: From Tokyo, take the JR Ueno-Tokyo Line to Ueno. From there, change to the Joban Line and go to Kuki. From there, take the Tobu Railway to Ashikaga-shi Station. It is about 4 km from there. About two hours from Tokyo.

*This article is based on my visit in April, 2016.

introduction

This time, we had the same guides as before. If you want to know who they are, please read this article.

Long time no see. I hope you are well

Really. I was looking forward to seeing the Kagura with you again for the first time in a while.

Today, I heard that we are going to visit the Raiden Shrine in Ashikaga City, aren't we?

That's right.

By the way, do you know that Ashikaga City is a very historic city?

Yes, I did.

Then do you know why it is so?

No, not that much...

Ashikaga city's history

I thought it would be something like that. I'm going to give you a brief explanation, so you'd better listen up.

In the beginning, this country was ruled by the emperor, and the nobles held the actual power of politics. But then the

samurai came to power. Originally, the samurai were only a kind of bodyguard to protect the aristocrats' territories. However, as they gradually gained actual power in the countryside, battles between samurai began to occur. Their power was not to be underestimated, and the struggles between the nobles needed their help. Eventually, powerful leaders emerge to unite them. The two major groups were the Heike (平家) and the Genji (源氏). The two sides faced off and Yoritomo, the leader of the victorious Minamoto clan (Genji), created the first ever samurai government.



nobles



battle



battle



Minamoto no Yoritomo (first shogun of Kamakura shogunate)

From then on, the power of the samurai prevailed over that of the nobles. This was called the Kamakura (鎌倉) Shogunate, around the 12th century. However, around the 14th century, the forces that held the power of the shogunate became increasingly despotic rulers, and a rebellion finally broke out. They overthrew Kamakura shogunate and established a new

government in Kyoto. This was called the Muromachi (室町) Shogunate, and the Ashikaga (足利) clan was the one who created it. The Ashikaga clan's original hometown is here in Ashikaga.



Ashikaga shogun (the first)



Kinkakuji-temple (Kyoto)

The Kinkakuji-Temple, one of the most famous tourist attractions in Kyoto, was built by the Ashikaga Shogun.

Come to think, I just talked to an old man who was looking into the shrine and he said he was a descendant of the Ashikaga clan. It's a town with a long history.

By the way, will you be able to make it to Kagura?

It starts around 11:00, so you'll have plenty of time to get there.

*Actually, it turned out to be a terrible mistake. This is the author's actual experience.

But it's far, isn't it? I can fly there.

There are bicycles for rent at Ashikagashi Station, so I'll take this.

Again?!

Well, let's go!

Let's go to shrine



Ashikaga city



The photo is an image.







There are so many steps...

We humans have to go up here to meet deities.

That sounds good. You should feel the greatness of our deities.



Ashikaga Raiden shrine

Whew. We're finally here.

We're right in the middle of a ritual. Hasn't the kagura started yet?

It's past eleven now, so it should start in a little while.

But wait. The sign says that the next one starts from the 8th program. I thought it's already started.

Oh, my God! I think I misunderstood that the Shinto ritual started at 11:00 and the Kagura started at 11:00.

*The actual start was at 9:00.

It's no use crying over spiled milk. Let's get ourselves together.

8th program "Kanayamahiko"





Look! your colleagues are coming out here. They are always noisy, aren't they.

This is what we do, you know. It's what we're so called "mode makers". But, everyone misses us when we're not here.



It's a perfect day for forging sword. Now, let's get started.

We'll do our best to help you, sir.

*The following dialogues of the characters are only imaginary. The actual Kagura is performed entirely in pantomime.

But the principal character of the show is this one. It's **Kanayamahiko**. He's the deity of the blacksmith's ancestors.

He seems so strait-laced.

In the old days, the ability to work metals, whether copper or iron, was the cutting edge of technology.





It looks like it went pretty well, don't you think?

We agree with you completely, sir. It looks great.

Kanayamahiko is looking at the finished sword, and Hyottoko are saying things like, "It's pretty good," but do they really know what makes a sword good or bad?

No, I doubt they don't understand at all. It's all okay. That's our role. We are here just to make it lively.



No, not quite enough.

Yes, it is. (Good grief. Isn't that enough?)



Yeah, it turned out pretty well.



As we expected of you, Sir. Kanayamahiko. You always do such a great job. It was worth our while to help you.

While this was going on, Kanayamahiko left the stage, as if he finally had a sword that he was satisfied with.

9th program “Ebisu”



Well, they abruptly started fishing, what a surprise without

interruption?

So, it's that deity again,





I've been waiting for you! The crowd is already in an uproar. Most of the bait are practical things like cup noodles.

The adults were more fascinated than the kids. Is that okay?

*Here's a little additional explanation. **Ebisu** is the deity of fishing and also the god of prosperity. He is known for always carrying his fishing gear and a sea bream.







Here's an amazing tactic coming up.

I mean, he's not just a mood maker. He is truly an entertainer.



With rice cakes and cup noodles, they can fish for gift money

all they want. This is the true *Ebisu face!.

*Ebisu face means smiling face. It is often used to describe the smiling faces that people make when something good happens, especially in business.





Oh, it's rare to see a Hyottoko fishing for sea bream instead of Ebisu, isn't it?

Intermission



It's your favorite time of the day.

This is the best part of kagura. In addition, yakisoba noodles are 300 yen, and a plastic bottle of tea is 50 yen. I bought one for you.

Is it really that cheap? It's already past midday.

10th program “Daikoku”





When Ebisu comes out, Daikoku is supposed to be next. It says in the brochure that he carries a hammer and a fan and sprinkles gold and silver around the country.

Where'd you get a brochure like that?

A person concerned gave it to me because he said I was eager to see even though I wasn't a local. He said "I hope you will spread the word about this kagura".

*This is a fact. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all those involved.

Oh, I'm so glad that the next generation is interested in it and passing it on.

“Inari and White foxes”







This is another standard of kagura. This program is the deity "**Inari**" who cultivates rice with his servants, the foxes.



Speaking of foxes, they jump. But it's hard to play the fox.

Even the role of Inari, which looks so easy, is not easy because you have to show your dignity and integrity.

“Hachiman”







The brochure says that this “Hachiman” is a dance to exterminate evil spirits with a bow.

The Hachiman is the deity of war, and warlords have worshipped since ancient times. In Kamakura city, which was the center of the Kamakura Shogunate, Hachiman Shrine, which enshrines the Hachiman deity, is still an object of worship for the people.

Ending “Sanjin”





The fact that “Sanjin” is out there means it’s over. Oh, I

didn't expect the rice cake throwing.



Finally, the Kagura people greeted us. By the way, where'd that guy go?

Hehehe, I've gotten a lot of them.

You, when did you...?

The number of audience has decreased after the intermission, so the competition had gone down a lot. After all, there's good fortune in leftovers. Good things come to those who wait. Everybody has to see the kagura until the end.

What a guy.

I'll give you a piece of candy. The time is 2:30. Isn't it just the right time for a snack? Now, let's go home. I'm looking forward to the next kagura. I look forward to seeing you again.

Mmmmm.....

After this, I heard they went for a walk around Ashikaga City.

refer→[Ashikaga City Tourist Association site](#)

Report: The Lion dance (Shishimai) in Sawai, urban Tokyo

□It is impossible to talk about folk performing arts in Japan without discussing "Shishimai". Although Shishi means lion, this is not a real lion. The original source is said to have come from India, so it is said that a real lion had been an object of worship there. However, as it spread throughout the

West, China, Korea and Nepal, it became an imaginary spiritual animal. Some say that Chinese emperors had lions, so it's possible that they knew about the real lion up to that point.



Kara jishi (Chinese imaginary lion)

獅子舞の歴史 - 獅子 (kunaicho.go.jp)

Date: Sunday closest to July 25 (Most often the fourth Sunday of the month)

Place: Yagumo shrine, 2-902 Sawai, Okutama town, Tokyo

Access: A few minutes walk from Sawai Station on the JR Oume Line. It takes about one and a half hours to get to Sawai from either Tokyo or Shinjuku.

Shishimai (lion dance)'s history

It is said to have been introduced to Japan around the 6th century, at the same time as Buddhism. In 752, when the Great Buddha was built at Todaiji (東大寺) Temple as a national project, the lion dance was performed. It is said that half of the population of the time was involved in the construction of the Great Buddha, and about 10,000 people gathered for the unveiling of the statue. It is said that this is how the lion dance spread across the country.

□However, there are various routes as to how it had been introduced to Japan, and thus a variety of lion dances have been born. It is said that there are now about 8,000 of them active.

Shishimai can be divided into two main groups: Ise-Daikagura (伊勢大祭) style and Fuyu (ふゆ) style. The Ise-style dance is performed by two people, while the Fuyu-style dance is performed by one person holding a small drum called Kakko. However, it is so diverse that there is naturally a mix of these as well. The Ise-Daikagura-style is distributed in western Japan, while the Fuyu-style is mostly distributed in eastern Japan.

Introduction of the Lion dance of Sawai

□This time, this site is going to introduce Shishimai in Tokyo. The main style in Kanto region (including Tokyo) is three units of “one-man shishi dancers” comprising one group.

□Nevertheless, there is a variety of lion dances in Kanto, and even in Tokyo there is diversity. This time, I would like to take a look at one from the Okutama area first. The Okutama area may be the closest vacation spot for those living in Tokyo. It has ravines, waterfalls, mountains, and scenic beauty. It can be reached from the center of Tokyo in about an hour by train. An area that many people visit in summer to cool off. There are groups that practice canoeing on the river, and many groups enjoy hiking and camping. It is precisely because of such an area that the cohesion of the community is rather strong and there are many performing arts that have been passed down.



□As we pass Ome (〇〇), we start to see mountains around us, and the atmosphere starts to change. As most of the passengers are backpackers, the Okutama (〇〇〇) area is just around the corner. There are reasonable hiking trails, mountain climbing trails, and ravines around the area, and the passengers get off at their desired destinations. When you get off the train, you find yourself in a quiet village surrounded by summer mountains, where the bustle of the city has disappeared. In the middle of the village, there is a small shrine. It looks just like an ordinary house. You would feel as if you are visiting a neighbor's farmhouse. It's Sawai Yagumo (〇〇〇〇) Shrine. This is the stage for today's lion dance. As you walk up the stairs, you find a sandy stage about 10 meters square, surrounded by the shrine in front and audience seats on either side. The lion dance starts at 8:30 in the morning. But in the morning, the main activity is walking around the village. They

walk around street by street performing their dance. This is not just to present themselves in public, but to celebrate the prosperity of the village and drive away the evil spirits.



□After lunch, they return to the shrine around 1:30 to perform a variety of acts. There are three lions. Two males and one female. The male lions are the elder and the younger. And four Hanagasa join them. This is the basic style. There are many theories as to why this style was adopted, but here in Sawai, it is said to represent the sun, moon, and stars. In Sawai, it is said to represent the sun, moon, and stars, and the four flower hats represent the four heavenly kings who protect the Buddha in Buddhism. The three lions are called "Oh (elder)" lion, "Waka" (young) lion, and "Me (female)" lion.



the elder lion



the young lion



the female lioness

□Hira-gurui □□□

□The first performance is called “Hira-gurui”. In lion dance, a violent dance is often called “Kurui (mad dance)”. As the name suggests, this is also an intense dance. The age range of performers is wide, and this basic dance is usually performed by junior high to high school students. However, the ground below is soft sand. It’s like dancing on the beach, and we can imagine how exhausting it is.

□It’s the height of summer. It’s hot. There is an electric fan running in front of the building, but it doesn’t help much for cooling. So, if there’s a pause in the middle or at the end of the dance, there are people who fan the dancers.

□Kurenai-gakari □□□□



□The next step is “Kurenai (deep red) gakari”. The lion dance often has a performance with this name. The word “kakari” seems to be used in the sense of relating to or showing interest in the subject. As the name implies, three rogues with deep red cloths come out and play with the lion. The lion’s interest in the red reminded me of a Spanish bullfight.

□During the breaks, the famous local sake “Sawanoi” is served, and pickles are passed around. It was all very thoughtful. It doesn’t matter if you take it or not. In the plaza below the shrine, simple meals and beer are sold at a reasonable price, but if you want to eat well, it is best to bring your own food. There are no big stores or convenience stores nearby.

□Tachi-gurui □□□□





□As the name suggests, a lion is entangled with a sword (Tachi means sword). Most of the swords are imitation, here they use imitation swords too. However, it was just barely enough to shave off 20%. They are almost serious about it. That's why there is a sense of urgency in the air, as if a slight mistake could be made. It looks as if a lion and a man are engaged in a tense battle. As in any other performance, this one requires special training. The power of the lion dance can be seen in such a way.





□Sao-gakari □□□□





Let's go !



I'm still afraid.





There's no wall that we can't cross.





□The lion dance sometimes has a representation of life. The same is true of this program. A pole (sao) is passed in the center. The lions are interested in the pole. But they are too scared to go over it. They try again and again, but each time they run back. They return with their hands behind their backs, as if they are expressing their fear with their whole body. And it is the female lion who is the first to cross the pole. The performance varies from each group of lion dance , but it is usually the female lion who is the first to cross the pole. And the elder lion is the one who hesitates until the end. It's as if women are quicker to make decisions in life, and men who have too much stuff they don't need are slower to adapt to change.

Mejishi-gura



There is a performance in which a female lioness is hiding in every lion dance. I'm even wondering if that's the reason why there are three lions two male lions and a female lioness. Simply put, it is a love triangle.



It starts out with the setting where the lions are on a journey. Eventually, the fog gets thicker and only the lionesses disappear. The two males panic and look around for her. They decide to split up and search for her. So far, there are no problems. After this, the young lion finds the female lioness first, but does not tell the elder lion. The elder lion is desperately searching for her. Eventually, he finds the two lions.

He says, "Oh, I didn't know they were here..."

Naturally, he was very angry. The young lion doesn't even apologize, and a fierce battle ensues. This fight is one of the highlights of the story.

□





While they were fighting, the fog thickened again and the lioness disappeared. This is no time to fight. Once again, the two animals split up to look for her.

This time, the elder lion finds the lioness first. If you get hit, hit back. The same thing happens again.

□









□This fog thickening of fog is expressed by the densely packed Hanagasa hats on all sides. And finally the hanagasa return to their original positions, and the lions dance together as if nothing had happened.

I always wonder. Why did the old people create this kind of performance? Is it a warning or an irony? In any case, the person who created the original must have been quite a connoisseur.

Gokito □□□





□The final performance is called “purification. At the end of the day, evil spirits are driven away, the place is cleansed, and the dance is concluded.

□



It ends at five in the evening. The Okutama area is a little cooler than the city center. The lion dance depicted on the back of stuff is dancing proudly. And so, one by one, summer comes to an end. You may look back at the road your came from, feeling as if the sound of lion dance drums and flutes are still echoing, but all you see is a quiet village that has regained its daily life. The fog in the mountains seemed to have lifted. The day is long. Let's go home slowly.