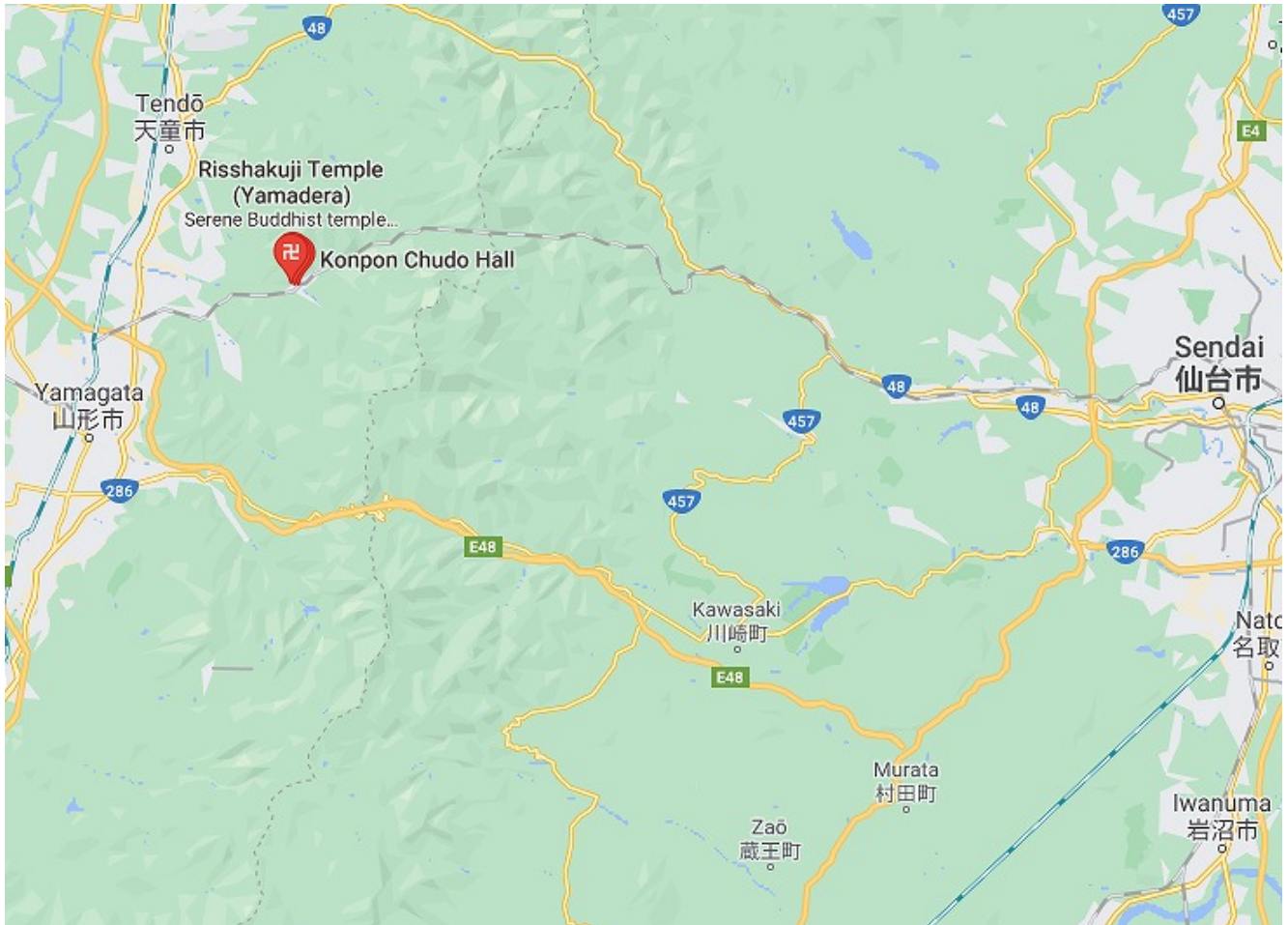


# Report: Yamadera-temple, haiku, and shishi dance ~or a feast of Yokai





**Date:** Sunday around August 8th

**Location:** Yamadera, Yamagata city, Yamagata prefecture, in front of the “Konpon chudo”

**Access:** It takes about one hour from Sendai by JR. About 20 minutes from Yamagata. About an hour from Tokyo to Sendai by Shinkansen, and 1.5 hours to Sendai

**Haiku master ~Matsuo Basho**

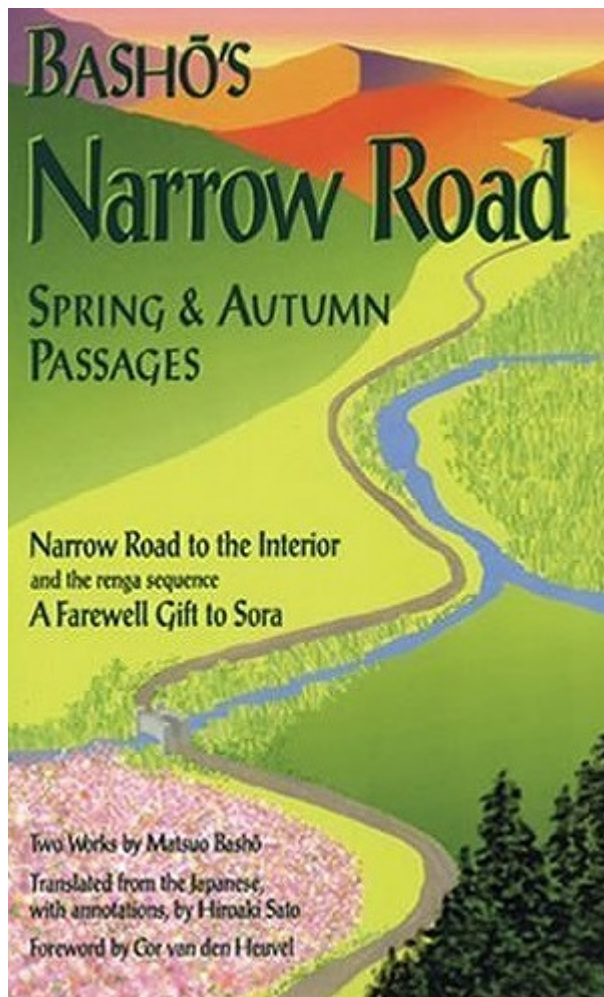


**Basho and Sora (disciple)**  
**source: *painting by Morikawa Kyoriku***

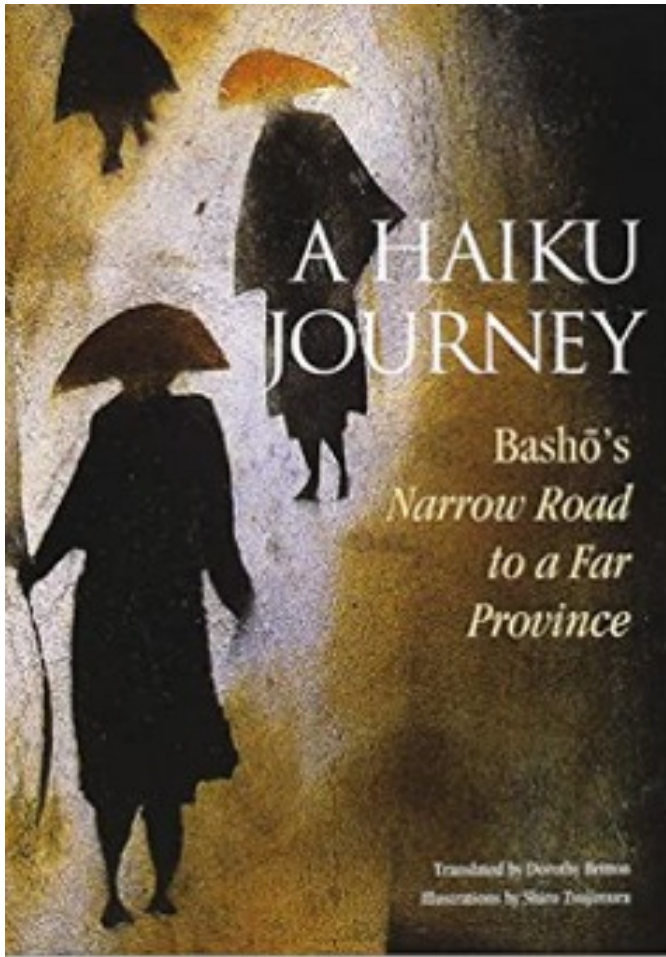
The literary form of haiku is now very popular outside of Japan. It is said that there are people who enjoy haiku in their own languages.

Speaking of haiku, there is Matsuo Basho. Matsuo Basho (1644~1694) was the great poet in history who established this form as a literary art form that is still popular today and has become internationally accepted. Until then, haiku was a literary art form that emphasized fun and was more like a banquet game. It was Basho who transformed it into what we recognize today, and his achievement is quite remarkable.

**Okuno hosomichi~Haiku journey**



published by Shiksha



**published by Kodansha**

Many of Basho's famous haiku are contained in his travelogue, "Oku no Hosomichi". Basho recorded his long journey, which took about five months, in this book. At his old age, it was almost a life and death kind of trip. There are many various theories why he decided to make such a trip. There is an interesting theory that Basho was from Iga, which is famous for its ninjas, and that he may have been gathering information for the Shogunate, but this is not the subject of this article.

Among the many famous phrases, one of the most famous haiku is "Shizukasaya 静かなる  
Iwanishimiiru 岩にしみいる  
Seminokoe". 雨の音

It translates into English like this.

How still it is here

Stinging into the stones,

The locusts' trill." (translated by Donald Keene)

## Voice or buzz of locusts (cicadas)?

Speaking of cicadas, it's summer. Japanese people know that summer has arrived when the cicadas begin to buzz, and think that autumn has arrived when they can no longer hear them. However, I dare to say that the word "buzz" is used, but Japanese people hear it as a voice. In various English translations, various expressions such as voice, echo, cry, etc. are used, but no one uses buzz. Why? There is a study by a Japanese scholar (Prof. Tsunoda of Tokyo Medical and Dental University) that tries to explain this, but it is not well received overseas, so I will not go into it here. I would like to add, however, that quite a few people are keen on various autumn insects just to listen to their sounds. The original direct translation of this haiku is also the "voice" of the cicadas.

## Yamadera-temple

This poem was composed at Risshakuji Temple 臨済寺, also known as Yamadera, in Yamagata Prefecture.

In the first place, Basho had not originally planned to stop here. When he tried to pass by without knowing it, he was asked by a local if he had been to the temple. When Basho replied that he had not, the local people said, "That's a waste of time." He was told that he should visit the temple if he came this far.

So he hurried back 4 kilometers to visit the temple. So what kind of temple is Yamadera (officially called "Risshakuji Temple")? The temple was opened in 860. It was opened by a man named Ennin, the foremost disciple of Saicho, the greatest monk of the time. Ennin went through many hardships to study in Tang Dynasty (present-day China), and after returning to Japan, he opened more than 500 temples. About 900 years later,

Basho visited the temple. The literal translation of the word “Yamadera” is “mountain temple”. As the name implies, it is a temple built in the middle of a steep mountain, and is one of the representative temples of this region.

## **Shishi odor**

This area was once ruled by a hunter named Banzaburo Banji. Then, Ennin proposed to turn this land into a place of Buddhism. Banji accepted the proposal and stopped killing animals in this land. As a result, animals were said to have danced with joy. In commemoration of this, the Banji Festival has been held and the Shishi Dance has been dedicated.

## **Painting of Basho Nirvana and animals**



Nara National Museum

<https://www.narahaku.go.jp/collection/756-0.html>

There is a painting called “Nirvana” which is a picture of Buddha’s death. Most of them depict the Buddha lying in the center of the painting, with people grieving around him. There are many sculptures and other three-dimensional statues, and even outside of Japan, you can see a large statue of Buddha

lying down. The subject of this painting is so famous that it was imitated in the painting of Nirvana.



**"Vegetable Nirvana" by Ito Jakuchu 飯田 耕雲**



**Basho Nirvana by Ueda koucho** 〇〇〇〇

Monkeys, horses, deer and crows gather for a trip to the Yamadera temple. Today is the day when those who have had their haiku composed by Basho go on a trip to the mountain temples. Sora is the guide.

Come on, everybody. Are you together?

We haven't seen any snails yet. Oh, he's here. It looks like the members are all here.

So, let's get going.

Wait, wait, wait, wait. Didn't you forget someone?

Oh, it's Mr. Frog

All right. I'll tell you something. My haiku is the most famous of them all\*. It's one of Basho's best. What's the matter with you leaving me here? Besides, I've been loved in Japan since the days of the "Choju-Giga (Birds and Beasts Caricatures)".

\*Furukeya 古井 川 蛙 跳 込 水 音 聞 け (Japanese)  
The ancient pond- A frog leaps in- The sound of the water  
(translated by Donald Keene)

But I'm not in Ueda Koucho's Nirvana...

He's pretentious. Otherwise, he's got amnesia. Besides, he's not the only one who has painted the "Basho Nirvana".

Let's go with the frog. It's almost time for us to go.

## Banji-sai 山寺



Yamadera station



## The Main Hall

As you go up the stairs, you will soon see the Hie Shrine. Next to it is the main hall of the temple. It is characteristic of Japanese religion where both God and Buddha are worshipped together.

Let me explain the “Pan priest”. A long time ago, a monk named Ennin 延暦 came to Japan for missionary work, and he thought this would be a good place. However, at that time, this was the territory of the Banji 伴氏 clan. So, Ennin asked the head of the family, Saburo Banji, to let him use the land for the sake of Buddhism. The Banji clan accepted and set the land free. At the same time, he also stopped hunting in the mountains. The “Banji Festival” is held in honor of this achievement.

That’s why we can come to the mountain temple with a peace of mind.



## Nembutsu procession

The first thing that appears today is “the Nembutsu

procession". The first event of the day is the Nembutsu, an event to welcome the morning by chanting the Nembutsu at various places to make offerings to the dead. The fact that this is the first event of the day gives us an idea of the overall character of this festival.

## Nagatoro deer dance □□□□□

The content can also be enjoyed on  
video→<https://youtu.be/kjsezHGDJ0U>





First up is the Nagatoro Shishi Odori in Higashine City. People also remember Nagatoro as the place where Ennin opened the land. Originally, there were eleven shishis in all, but recently there have been fewer due to a lack of manpower. There are also “sasara” and “gong striking. And flutes and drums. In total, there are 12 performances.

Wow, a yokai. It's a monster.



**Sasara**



**gong striking**

He has a small drum in his stomach. It's similar to the Kanto lion dance.

It's a yokai. I'd be scared if I met one of these in the middle of the night.



They have 12 performances in total. but today, they're over, because they are limited in time.

Absolutely scary.

## **Tsuchihashi deer dance** □□□□□□

The content can also be enjoyed on  
video→[https://youtu.be/2PNzMdXs2\\_Y](https://youtu.be/2PNzMdXs2_Y)



We have another awesome one coming up.

It's a shishi dance from Nakayama Town. There are seven deer

in all. They have a total of 19 programs. The names of the programs are interesting: “Hiya, hiya-ro, hiya-ro,” “degadan,” “dengarakatta,” and so on.

That’s a very intuitive way to name something.

I can’ t recognize the language of monsters.







The leader wears “the Gohei (A Shinto ritual object in which a deity dwells)” on his head, and the sub-leaders wear the sun and moon on each of their heads.





I guess it's hard for a leader to move around all over the place.

**Sawatari Shishimai** 囃子舞





The content can also be enjoyed on video→<https://youtu.be/XTSpuswiQMo>

The Tengu are bringing in a bunch of weirdos.

This is the Sawatari Shishimai from Higashine City. This is not a Tengu, but Sarutahiko, the god of guidance. It uses the character for “lion,” but it’s actually a deer or wild boar dance. It is said that people learned it from Yamadera in the past. However, the Sawatari area was the entrance to a nearby mountain for ascetic practices, so there is a high possibility that it was learned or created from there.



I think he would have said something like, "We're from another planet."

I feel that frogs have no respect for traditional arts. It's a joke.

Everyone has their own view.



There is a lot of crouching, so it's harder than it looks!

Wow, a party of monsters.

After listening to the frog saying that for a long time, I felt like it was right.

## Takadama-Shoryo-Bodai Shishi-odori 田楽獅子舞





The content can also be enjoyed on video→<https://youtu.be/iRQimsBP3HM>

This is a shishi odori dance from the Takanashi district, south of Tendo city. It consists of a deer in the center, and two males, two females, and two children, for a total of seven deer. The word “Shoryo” means “soul” and “Bodai” means “pray for a departed soul”. As with other shishi dances, the original purpose of this dance is to go around to the houses in the district to make offerings at the district festival to hold a memorial soul.

I see that they have the words “Namu Amida Buddha 南無阿彌陀佛” at the top.



The most important performance is “Kakasu”. This is an accent of scarecrow. Its purpose is to exorcise demons.



Finally, they defeat this straw doll named Scarecrow. The person in the center of the stage is supposed to knock it down, but the performer decides when to do it. However, it is always a multiple of three, and often the ninth time. There must be a meaning to it, but they don't know what it is

anymore.

That's funny that the monster can defeat the demon.

I mean, there are good monsters and bad monsters.

Hey, before you know it, we'll be recognizing the arts as monsters.

## Karaogi-Asahi Shishi-odori □□□□





This is a shishi dance from Yamagata City. The composition and facial features are similar to the previous one. The performance is also similar.



They jump and bounce around so much that quite a bit of their feathers fall off.

Like other groups, they get their feathers from the hunters.  
If they run out of feathers, they ask the hunters in advance.



This is the end of all groups for today.

It's already 12:00 noon. I'm starving.

Don't forget to visit the Basho Memorial Museum, everyone!

Oh, Basho-sensei, when did you get here?

Let's have lunch and then go sightseeing in Yamadera.

This time of year (first week of August) is "Hanagasa Odori" in Yamagata. Sendai's Tanabata Festival, Aomori's Nebuta Festival, Akita's Kanto Festival, and many other festivals. It's not a bad idea to visit all of them.

cf: <https://yamagatakanko.com/en/yamadera>  
about

Yamadera→<https://discoverdeeperjapan.com/destination/hokkaido-and-tohoku-region/old-town-sightseeing/yamadera-risshakuji-temple/>