

The king descends : No Hakusan Shrine's Unique festival

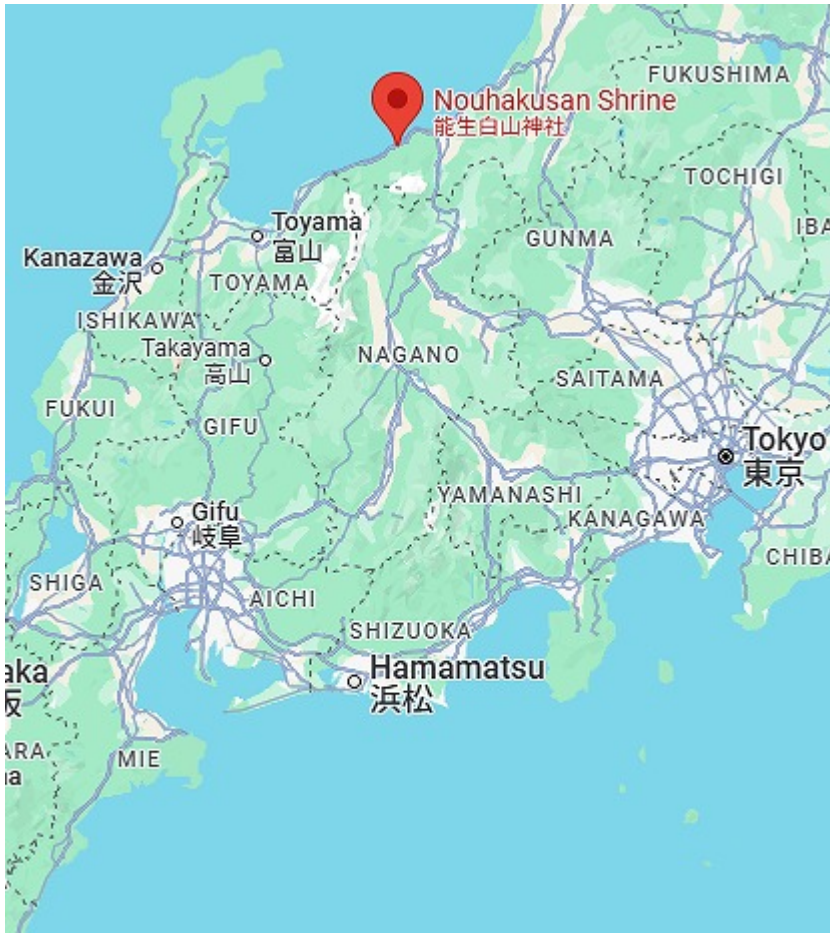
Date□24 April every year.

Location□7238 Oaza No, Itoigawa-city, Niigata prefecture

Access□ Shinkansen from Tokyo. If Hakutaka, change at Itoigawa and take the Hisui Line to Nou. About 2.5 hours. If you take Toki, change at Echigo-Yuzawa and take the Hokuoku Line to Naoetsu, then the Hisui Line to Nou □□. From there it is a 20-minute walk.

Spring in the snow country

The setting for this story, No Hakusan Shrine, is on the sea coast of Niigata Prefecture on the Sea of Japan side of the country. The Sea of Japan side has a lot of snow due to low pressure from the continent. The area north of Niigata is a particularly heavy snowfall area. A festival that they can't wait for. This is the annual spring festival of No Hakusan Shrine. Hakusan Shrine is an old shrine with important cultural assets. Its construction dates back to the 3rd century. An annual spring festival is held at such a shrine. And who is the king?



Bugaku 舞楽

The main part of the festival is the dedication of a dance and music performance, which takes place in the afternoon. This is Bugaku. What is Bugaku? It is the music and dance that were introduced from the continent at least around the eighth generation. Official Bugaku still exists today, and the Imperial Family has its own band. Also, many of them spread to various places, and Shitenno-ji Temple in Osaka and Itsukushima-jinja Shrine in Hiroshima Prefecture are famous. There were also changes when it spread to the countryside. Here at Nou Hakusan Shrine, they also made a distinctive one. The most important features are the composition and costumes. The costumes in particular are unique to this place. It consists of two parts: a juvenile dance(called chigomai) and masked dance.



at Ruriji-temple in Nagano prefecture

Chigomai 千歳舞

There is an old saying in Japan that children are within God's domain until they are seven years old. Perhaps because of this, many Shinto rituals emphasize the presence of children. Chigomai and Masked dance appear alternately at this shrine. Dressed-up, godly-looking young children. The solemn dance goes on with a graceful tune that has been performed since ancient times.

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performed since ancient times.
Each performance lasts approximately 2-30 minutes.





Masked dance

Dorari 口口口

After performing some chigo mai for about an hour, the first mask appears. The program titled “Dorari” does not exist in the central bugaku.

In fact, this is also performed by a child, so it may be a type of child dance, but here it is a masked dance.

The biggest feature is that they leave the stage with “sticking out his tongue” at the end. It is of course a uniqueness that you cannot see anywhere else, not even in central Gagaku.





Nobatou 能楽

The central legitimate bugaku also has a performance called 'batou'. However, the dance style is quite different and the masks are similar but slightly different.



nasori 龍

It was originally a dance showing two dragons playing together.

The dance is much faster than the original, and there are many jumping movements. We can see that the dance is more appealing to the audience.

And the costumes, too, are not extravagant but brilliantly designed. The red and black of the 'nobatou' and the red and pale green stripes on the white base of the 'nasori' are undeniably eye-catching.





The king finally descends□□

As the day is about to begin to set in, it finally begins. As a herald, the oldest of the chigo goes on stage. People are starting to feel something different. An expectant but very quiet time.



After the children's dance, it is time for the final star of the show, the Ryo King. So, yes, this is the most famous of all bugaku dances, the "Lanryou ou(king) 蘭王" dance. The dance has the following anecdotes. Once upon a time, there was a brave warlord in a country called Northern Qi in China. But people rumored that he was too well-formed and feminine. Thinking this would not improve the morale of the army, he put on a frightening mask and fought and won a great victory. This legendary figure was a real person in the mid-6th century.



As the legend goes, the mask is menacing images of people with dragon on their head and wide-open eyes. When Ryoo appears, he slowly crosses the bridge, following the music of gagaku. About 10 minutes or more.



It was a solemn dance, but the enthusiasm of the audience grew as never before, and the occasional unbecoming shout goes up. The music is monotonous and sometimes sleepy. However, when it is repeated over and over again, it induces a kind of hallucinatory state in people.

Even after entering the stage, his movements were slow. Especially in the first half, they hardly move. Originally, this program has movement. Moreover, it is performed as a fast-moving piece. But here it is. The slower the movement, the better.



Soon, the king stood up and made an inviting motion with both hands. This is commonly known as the “sun beckoning dance”. The sun is setting around the very same time. The time when the surroundings gradually darken and the king’s figure begins to blend into the darkness. At this time, the king is bathed in the setting sun and his golden face shines. Unfortunately, it was cloudy when the author saw it, so it was not that bright, but the majesty of the scene was awe-inspiring.





By this time, the audience are all on their feet, gathered around the stage and watching attentively. The cheers become even louder. It's not the kind of performance that makes a lot of noise. The most common cry is to "be patient". Yes, the point is to make it last as long as possible. But, the performer has already been moving slowly for an hour. He has already exhausted. Still, he uses his last strength to slowly walk back up the bridge again. Night is already falling around. In the end, they leave the stage being held by the helpers.

It is said that everyone who grew up in the area and saw the festival desire to play this role at least once.

It was already past 7:00 at night. As soon as the king leaves, the bridge is removed and several mikoshi (portable shrines) run through at once. Then the festival ends abruptly. Leaving the audience excited. The stage is then demolished and returns to its normal tatters.



Let's go to Nou

On taking the Shinkansen from Tokyo, the Toki and Hakutakas were continuous. Toki is a little cheaper. But that was a mistake. The transfer was not smooth and I ended up waiting for an hour in Naoetsu 駅. Lesson 1. If you go to an unfamiliar place, you should have as much time as possible. And choose the route with fewer transfers.

The temperature in Niigata Prefecture on that day was 15 degrees. Even though it is over 20 degrees in all areas west of Tokyo, it is still cold. So, on the way, I could see the cherry blossoms in full bloom behind the snowy landscape from the train window.



Also, this route has a lot of tunnels. Stations are located between tunnels, some of them in tunnels.



It was early afternoon when I finally arrived at Nou Station. Leaving the very small station behind, a 20 minute walk

through the quiet seaside town brings us to Hakusan Shrine,
the setting of the day.

Nou hakusan shrine





People are gathered around the stage in the center. The right side of the entrance is stepped. In the front row, a couple dressed up in kimono. The shrine is said to have been built in the 3rd century; the main building, which was rebuilt in the early 16th century, is an important national cultural asset. Why are these people sitting in the front row in formal dress? I found that out at the end of the festival. They were the parents of the children of "Chigomai". They were probably proud and anxious at the same time to see their own children on the big day. After all the children's dances were over, I could see them weeping involuntarily. It was a moment when I could once again realized that this is what the festival is all about.