



Field Note

The Deity and the Mountain

Ritual Practice and Environment in Japan's Hayachine Take *Kagura*

Take *kagura* 岳神楽 is a Japanese religious dance that has been performed in Iwate prefecture for centuries. It is primarily used as a purification ritual, although it is also a form of popular entertainment. The most significant deity for local inhabitants is Hayachine *dai gongen* 早池峰大権現, which they believe is the incarnation of Mt. Hayachine. The deity appears in a specific dance, the *gongen mai* 権現舞, and together with the *dai gongen* forms a core of practices and beliefs surrounding Take *kagura* for performers and their audiences. The images and associations of the deity in the mountain that these people hold are expressed through concepts such as terror, beauty, purity, and gratitude.

KEYWORDS: Take *kagura*—Hayachine—*gongen*—*kaji kitō*—*shishi*

TAKE KAGURA is a Japanese religious dance performance specific to Ōhasama, a district situated deep within the mountains of Iwate prefecture, in north-eastern Honshu, Japan's largest island. The formal origins of Take *kagura* have been traced to the Muromachi period (1392–1573) (HONDA 1942; SUGAWARA 1969). Some scholars associate Take *kagura* purely with Shugendō 修験道¹ (see, for example, HONDA 1942; MORIGUCHI 1971; AVERBUCH 1995), while others believe it has been associated since 1729 with Yoshida Shintō 吉田神道, which is largely influenced by *mikkyō*, or Esoteric Buddhism (OGATA 1993; YOSHIDA 2002). Although Take *kagura*'s main characteristics can be described as a combination of abstract choreography, gracefulness, and humor, it is also a representation of cosmology and myth (NAGASAWA 2009). There are approximately forty performances within the entire *kagura* that require a group of fifteen highly-skilled performers. Take *kagura* was declared a nationally-designated “important intangible folk cultural property” (重要無形民俗文化財 *jūyō mukei minzoku bunkazai*) in 1976, and with its emphasis on the preservation of a medieval style and its extraordinary esthetic qualities, it is still considered to be an important aspect of Japanese folk tradition.

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the internal structure of Take *kagura* and explore the dynamic integration between cultural representations and natural phenomena; the focus here is on one segment of the *kagura* called *gongen mai*. I examine how the images of an imposing mountain in the region, Mt. Hayachine, that are held by local performers and the audience, are integrated into Take *kagura* during performances.

Mt. Hayachine, at 1,913 meters high, is the highest peak of the Kitakami mountain range east of the Kitakami river in Iwate prefecture. Take is a small village of only thirteen houses that is located in the middle of the mountain. It contains Hayachine Shrine, and is home to a number of Take *kagura* performers. Although Mt. Hayachine is barely visible from the town center because it is buried deep within the mountain range, it can be seen from certain areas of the town and has an imposing and commanding presence.

As the core ritual performance, *gongen mai* is the only aspect of Take *kagura* that involves the performers connecting to the ritual through *kaji kitō* 加持祈祷, a prayer that promises benefits to participants.² The principle object of worship in Take *kagura* is Hayachine *dai gongen*, roughly translated as the “great *gongen*



FIGURE 1. Mt. Hayachine (taken from the center of Ōhasama; all photos [figures and images] by author).

of Hayachine.” *Gongen* means the transient appearance, or avatar, of a Buddhist deity in the form of a Shinto *kami*. The term was used from the middle of the Heian period (794–1185) as part of the efforts to assimilate Shinto beliefs within Buddhism, a practice commonly referred to as *shinbutsu shūgo* 神仏習合 (TORAO 2000).

During my fieldwork, many of the conversations with the locals concerned their repetition of phrases relating to physical or perceived spiritual aspects of the mountain. This repetition forms what I term “image patterns,” and this refers to nonverbal internal representations of concepts like terror, beauty, purity, and gratitude. These specific, recurrent patterns that are evoked at the subconscious level are similar to those elucidated by Pierre Bourdieu’s interpretation of *habitus*, whereby thought and behavior is constructed according to the social or natural environment. These concepts are directly related to the images of Mt. Hayachine. One of the chants in *gongen mai* states, “it is said that his love that raises a child held in his hands exceeds that of the parents.” This chant illustrates that the “image patterns” of Mt. Hayachine—of raising and sustaining the people—correspond to the “image patterns” of the *gongen*.³ The *gongen* of Take *kagura* is therefore the deified manifestation of Mt. Hayachine. At the same time, the surrounding, physical, natural world revitalizes the form of the *gongen*. The performer T. O. stated,

When we perform the *gongen mai*, people from small children to old men and women watch us while sitting with their palms joined solemnly. On these occasions, I go onto the stage feeling like a deity lives in my mind.⁴

This state of mind is the feeling evoked when many recurrent physical experiences, such as conventional taboos concerning the *gongen*, the careful treatment of the *gongen*, the expression of the forms of *gongen mai*, and the interaction with the praying audience are precipitated in these experiences.

Take *kagura* has two main functions. First, as with *kagura* in many other parts of Japan, it is used in Hayachine Shrine's annual ceremony, which features flute and drum performances with occasional dancing. Second, Take *kagura* is used to offer *kaji kitō* prayers for those who are descending the mountain and traveling around the area. Although Take *kagura* performers cover a wide area, I examine their activities in the town of Ōhasama. In 2006 this town had 1,961 households with a population of 6,640.

Informants living in the town expressed the sense of awe that they feel towards the mountain's greatness and beauty, but also stated that Mt. Hayachine was also fearful. The Take river that flows from Mt. Hayachine is pure, and the locals understand it to be a source of life—it provides water for drinking and agriculture. Therefore, the locals feel gratitude toward the mountain. Nevertheless, there are signs that this sense of gratitude is also diminishing as the immediate natural environment becomes less important for the local food supply. Nowadays, the majority of food is imported from other areas, and the locals are increasingly disconnected from the notion of the mountain and the surrounding natural environment as sources of sustenance. In 1950, 77 percent of the working population of Ōhasama were farmers but their numbers have decreased drastically since the 1950s: in 2005, they numbered only 30 percent. Despite all this, the image of Mt. Hayachine as a beneficent entity still remains.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF TAKE *KAGURA*

Take *kagura* is believed to have been established around the late medieval era (around 1500–1600). During the Edo period (1603–1867), the Nanbu clan believed that Mt. Hayachine was sacred. The clan designated Myōsenji, a temple established by a Shingon priest at the base of the mountain which became the training area of a cult of mountain beliefs, to be the eastern stronghold of Nanbu castle (KIKUCHI 1977, 10–129). This temple was a site of Shinto-Buddhist syncretism and rituals were held there. From then on, a number of significant changes occurred. The first critical change was the Meiji government's attempt to completely destroy Myōsenji in accordance with the national policy of separating Shinto and Buddhism (*shinbutsu hanzenrei* 神仏判然令) and establishing Shinto as the state religion. Although this change suddenly forced the Take *kagura* performers to take up farming, they continued to practice in secret. Despite the government's policy, the relationship between Take *kagura* and the inhabitants had taken such a firm root over a long period of time that even imposed changes by external forces could not alter the people's feelings towards the mountain.

The next major impact on Take *kagura* was the development of Japanese ethnological studies in the twentieth century. With increasing academic and governmental interest in researching and preserving the folk practices of rural communities, local inhabitants began to interpret and objectify their own practices according to such perceptions,⁵ and *kagura* became a national asset, not merely a local ritual.

Broadcast and print media frequently covered Take *kagura* in the postwar period after 1945, and from around the 1960s many tourists came to the festivals. The perspective of the outsiders involved in Take *kagura* performances inevitably influenced local perceptions. Seeing themselves and the ritual through the lens of the media and the eyes of tourists, local views changed reflectively. Despite these changes, the purpose and performances of Take *kagura* still maintain many pre-modern characteristics. This is undoubtedly due to environmental conditions and the extraordinary presence of Mt. Hayachine.

GONGEN AND SHISHI IN TAKE KAGURA

Local people refer to the *gongen* as *gongen-san*. Generally *san* is an honorific title but in this case it expresses a sense of warmth and closeness. In Take *kagura* the *gongen* takes the form of the imaginary beast called *shishi*, a figure derived from the sacred lions in Indian and Chinese Buddhism. The image of *shishi* in India represented a lion envisioned as the supreme spiritual beast capable of defeating every malicious or evil spirit. This image of the lion was transmitted to Japan through China. In contrast to bears and monkeys, there are no *shishi* in Japan and so it is an unfamiliar beast. The *shishi* is both simultaneously a symbol of nature and the “mysterious” spiritual power of nature. A noted example of an early *shishi* image in Japan is found in the *Kegonkyō* 華嚴經 (*Avataṃsaka Sūtra*, the core sutra of the Kegon sect, which prospered during the Nara period [710–794]). The *shishi* in this text is pictured with Monju Bosatsu (the Bodhisattva associated with wisdom) riding on its back (NAKAMURA 2003). The manifestation of the *gongen* as *shishi* was used widely throughout Japan. For example, Kumano shugen 熊野修験, an esoteric cult of mountain worship, adopted the image of the *shishi* as the manifestation of *gongen*, and it is used in the practices of Shugendō. As a result, *shishi*-related rituals could also be seen all around the Tohoku region; Take *kagura* is just one variation of these rituals, and its aesthetic character reflects certain ritual practices within *mikkyō*.

In Take *kagura*, the *shishi* does not appear in the conventional forms of statues and images but rather as the large wooden-headed figure called *shishi gashira* 獅子頭. It is important to keep in mind that the dance and prayer of the golden-eyed *shishi gashira* is at the core of the entire practice concerned with the *gongen*; it is the ritual’s centripetal force. During the performance, it appears as the *gongen* of Mt. Hayachine in order to drive out evil spirits, ward against fire, and purify the people (AVERBUCH 1995). After the performance the members of the *kagura* troupe believe that the *gongen* is a precious object, and they believe that the *shishi gashira* has certain powers.

The *shishi gashira* is shaped specifically for the *gongen mai* ritual. It is painted black, with eyes and teeth of glittering gold, and a moving jaw that opens and closes loudly in time with the music in order to imitate the sound of biting and gnashing teeth. A cloth robe attached to the *gongen*’s head forms the body and covers the performer beneath, and a small knife (*shiko*) is attached to the tail. When

FIGURE 2. *Kado uchi* performance, Ōhasama, 2005.

the *shishi gashira* is no longer usable, it is carefully carried on the performers' backs to the top of Mt. Hayachine, where they hold a ritual called *tamashii ire* (inserting the spirit) at Hayachine Shrine. The new *shishi gashira* is normally placed in the *tokonoma*⁶ of the *kagura* leader, whereas the old one is housed in the *tokonoma* at the home of one of the *kagura* performers or a neighbor.

Given the performers' reverence for the *shishi gashira*, when it is handled and moved it is treated with great care according to ritualistic rules. For example, when they travel long distances for public performances in other cities, the *shishi gashira* is carried in their arms. When some troupe members were traveling overseas to perform, one of the performers carried the *shishi gashira* on his knees in the plane. It was not until the flight attendant admonished him over the potential safety hazard that the troupe member reluctantly placed the *shishi gashira* under his seat.

TYPES OF GONGEN MAI

Gongen mai can be divided into three types—*tainai kuguri* 胎内くぐり (passing through the womb), *mi gatame* 身固め, and *hibuse* 火伏せ (fire prevention)—and within these there are many variations. The particular variation presented on pages 112–15 contains the precise order of the ritual in this program in which pairs of *shishi* appear. In this ritual, direct bodily contact between performers and the *gongen*, and the *gongen* and the audience, is important. The performers place the *gongen* on their heads and the *gongen* open and close their jaws and bite members of the audience (*mi gatame*). Bowing their heads and closing their eyes, the audience cannot see the *gongen* but they can hear and feel the *gongen* gnashing its teeth. These unique sensory experiences arouse the “image patterns” of “puri-

fiction” through the sense of a “mysterious” power. Audience members also pass under arches formed by the bodies of the *gongen* (*tainai kuguri*).

THE GONGEN IN DAILY LIFE

The *gongen mai* is performed in daily life on several different occasions, but these performances are generally divided into two types. The first is *kado uchi* 門打ち (literally, performing at the gate), which is held in private homes at the request of the householders. The second type is performed as the last stage of the program of the entire *kagura* ritual.

Kado uchi performances comprise the *kaji kitō* prayers that are intended to purify a client’s family through *tainai kuguri*, *mi gatame*, and *hibuse*. The villages recognize this tradition as continuing on from the Edo period. During rice planting in the spring, about five members of the Take *kagura* troupe visit neighboring villages by car and give *kado uchi* performances at private homes in the village.⁷ On a field trip I conducted in 2005, a *kagura* stage was set up for the ritual and villagers of all ages had gathered. Upon their arrival at the house the performers greeted the family. They then played music, prayed to the *gongen*, and performed the *gongen mai* inside the house (FIGURE 2). Given the relatively small space, the loud drums were even more impressive than the larger performance shown in the sequence of photos within this field note. Although the atmosphere was initially relaxed, when the *gongen mai* began the mood amongst the audience turned solemn, particularly when they participated in the *tainai kuguri* and *mi gatame* rituals. During the *hibuse* ritual, the *gongen* went through parts of the house to perform the prayer, holding a dipper in its mouth. When the *gongen mai* finished and the stage was dismantled, the members of the *kagura* troupe distributed a talisman to each family in the village.

As for the second type, the *kagura* rituals are usually held on traditional occasions such as annual village festivals and that of Hayachine Shrine, which is held from 31 July to 1 August. Local people recognize the annual festival of Hayachine Shrine as very important. Yet, despite its religious importance and it being a spiritual event, it is also perceived as being a tourist attraction for those who have learnt about it in guidebooks. Generally, this annual festival of Hayachine Shrine is overrun with crowds of tourists. Although ten pieces are performed, including the *gongen mai*, with the presence of many tourists the role of the *kagura* appears to be more for entertainment rather than functioning as *kaji kitō*.

Within this performance there is a special dance of the *gongen* included in the *shingaku*, which is the ritual in the annual festival of the shrine where a portable shrine (*mikoshi* 神輿) is taken around Take village to bless it. Fourteen men wearing *shishi gashiras* line up in front of the *mikoshi* and walk around the village, stopping in front of each house to pray to expel any disaster-bearing spirits. Many children join the line of *gongen*, and dance with *gohei* 御幣 (strips of white paper used for summoning sacred spirits) and swords together with the *gongen*.



THE ORDER OF THE RITUAL

The stage is set up so that the front of the curtain on the stage faces north.

1. *Gongen* (*shishi gashiras*) are placed on the stage at the beginning of the ritual. A flute sounds, followed by drums.
2. Performers A and B appear on the stage (facing north) wearing *hachimaki* (headbands), kimono, red *tasuki* [a sash that is used for tying kimono sleeves], and a sword. They dance for about one minute (image 1, left).
3. Performers C and D appear on the stage (facing south). They bow and pray to the *gongen* placed to the left of the stage in the photo (image 2). After that, they pick up the *gongen*. A and B put away the *suzuki* (bell tree) just after the *gongen* are set in a place where the *gongen* face A and B.⁸
4. A and B sit and bow to the *gongen*. A and B (facing north) and C and D (facing south) switch locations, then sit and bow to the *gongen* again, then switch again and bow.
5. A and B then switch again, holding the swords in front of them, and bow to the *gongen*. At the same time, C and D hold the *gongen* high, facing the opposite direction (image 3). A and B then put away the swords.
6. A and B bow to the *gongen* (image 4) and then take them. C and D carry the *shiko* (small knife) which must not be held above the waist (image 5).
7. C and D turn and shake the *gongen* and make the sound of gnashing teeth (image 6).
8. The robes of the *gongen* sway quickly and spread out when A and B spin. A and B go under the robes, into the body of the *gongen* (image 7). This means that the performers have been possessed by the *gongen*.⁹ As *gongen*, they stand with their heads held high and go around the stage rhythmically while making biting sounds (image 8), demonstrating the power of the *gongen*. Here the *gongen* could be said to be “frightening” or “terrible.”
9. At this point, the drums quieten down, and performer E, who is like a priest, appears on stage (image 9). The following *kami uta* 神歌 (chant of the deity) is sung by a troupe member situated behind the curtain.

御祈祷に 千代の御神楽参らせるまいらせたりや重ね重ねに

At the New Year ceremony: Greeting the “Man of the Year” at the beginning of the year, worshipping the mountain of young pines (“Man of the Year” refers to a man born in a year with the same Chinese zodiac sign as the current year).

新玉の 年の始めの年男迎えて参る峰の若松

On occasions other than the New Year: Summon the eternal *kagura* for prayer again and again.

10. E bows to the *gongen*.
11. E takes a tray with rice from beside the stage, and bows to the *gongen* again; then, the following chant is sung:
この米をまくたびごとに神々は和合の利益いや増しにけり
Each time this rice is spread, deities increase harmonious benefits.¹⁰
12. E walks around the stage clockwise and the *gongen* follow (image 10).



13. E then stands in front of the *gongen*, takes a little rice from the tray in his hand, and spreads it before the heads of the *gongen*. After spreading the rice, E bows low to the *gongen*. Then the *gongen* chew and make the sound of gnashing teeth while shaking their heads.
14. E puts away the tray and takes a bottle of saké. He bows to the *gongen* again while carrying the bottle.
15. Step number 12 is repeated.
16. E stands in front of the *gongen* and offers the bottle to them. Then the *gongen* stretch their heads toward the bottle while gnashing their teeth loudly.
17. After E puts away the tray, the audience goes behind the curtain and enters the stage through the curtain.
18. The *gongen* make an arch with the robes of their bodies. Then the audience passes under the arch following E (image 11) before passing under again the opposite way. This is clearly the ritual of “passing through the womb,” with the aim of reincarnation. The first pass means death, and the return symbolizes reincarnation.
19. The audience forms a line, and each person is bitten by the *gongen* (image 12) before they leave the stage.
20. E takes a bucket with water and a dipper, and bows to the *gongen*, offering the dipper.
21. Steps (12) and (13) are repeated.
22. E sits at the southeast corner of the stage. As the music becomes louder, the *gongen* move back and forth across the stage while turning their heads and clacking their teeth (image 13). Then they roll the robes around their body, while making biting sounds (image 14), and continue to gnash their teeth while going around the stage clockwise (image 15). The *gongen* appear to get their spiritual power from the water offered by E.
23. The *gongen* bend their heads low and open their robes wide in the shape of an umbrella behind their heads. Then E stands up and bows to the southeast corner of the stage, and splashes water using the dipper to the southeast corner of the ceiling (image 16). E repeats this process three times, sprinkling water first to the southwest (the corner closest to the curtain, stage right), then the northwest, and finally to the northeast. During this time he is followed by the *gongen* (image 17). The music is very loud in steps 22 and 23, and the movements of the *gongen* turn almost violent. The water-splashing ritual is called *hibuse*, signifying the prevention of fire.
24. E bows low to the *gongen* (image 18).
25. E moves toward the curtain and bows again to the *gongen* before leaving the stage through the curtain.
26. A and B take off the *gongen* costume and C and D remove the *shishi gashira* (image 19, left).
27. A and B remove their headbands and bow to the *gongen*. The audience applauds the performers who bow to the audience before going behind the curtain.

INTEGRATION OF *GONGEN* WITH HAYACHINE

Take *kagura* is frequently performed at nonreligious events in performance halls upon request. The performances are generally for entertainment, but when the *gongen mai* is performed as the final piece in the program, local people solemnly receive the *kaji kitō* prayer, *tainai kuguri*, and *mi gatame*. The *shishi gashira* and its dance maintain the power to evoke “image patterns” in local people, even in events that are not traditionally formal.

The *gongen*, as the incarnation of the deity of Mt. Hayachine, performs the *kaji kitō* prayer to purify the people and their homes; the people go onto the stage to purify their own *mi*. *Mi* 身 signifies the body and spirit. The action of biting signifies the driving out of evil spirits and purification of a person’s whole existence. Local people bow and pray again to the *gongen* and go on to the stage themselves. The *gongen* is revitalized again, not just in its static form, nor merely through duty, and nor through simply automatic recurrence, but is mediated through the *mi* of the local people.

Social practices concerned with the *gongen*—from the ritual order of the dance to the ritual care and centrality of the *shishi gashira*—have changed little in form over time. It is these aspects that are embedded in the daily lives of the people and recurrently experienced by them. In this process, it is very important that the elements within daily life are experienced together with the form of the *gongen*. In this case, undoubtedly the most significant element for the people of this region is Mt. Hayachine.

NOTES

* This fieldwork is based on interviews and participant observation that commenced in 2004 as part of a doctoral thesis. All photos were taken by the author. While Averbuch refers to this form of *kagura* as “Dake *kagura*,” which is the pronunciation many Japanese scholars use, every performer associated with this study referred to it as Take *kagura*, and so this is the form I have used. “Take” should be read “Ta-ke.”

1. Shugendō is a religion in which the practitioners, who aspire to attain supranormal, magico-religious powers through carrying out ascetic training in mountains, carry out salvific activities.

2. The term *kaji kitō* clearly expresses the communicative function of prayer that binds the secular and the sacred. Although it is primarily associated with the Esoteric Buddhism of the Shingon and Tendai schools, it is found in all forms of Buddhism and indeed all forms of religion in Japan (READER and TANABE, 1998, 137).

3. Ikegami has pointed out that there is no need to assume the “idea of the other world” (*takai kan* 他界観) or the “idea of the spirit” (*reikon kan* 靈魂観) when we consider the following images “closeness/deariness” or “cursed/terrible” in relation to the dead. (IKEGAMI 2006, 314). According to Ikegami, these are more suitably described as “feelings” than thoughts or ideologies extracted as “ideas,” and therefore are mainly placed in the realm of emotion or feeling. The integrated “image patterns” with *gongen* and Mt. Hayachine could also be understood as such.

4. T. O., born in 1959, is the leading performer in the Take *kagura* troupe and is recognized as a talented performer. Interview conducted 5 March 2003.

5. Yasuji Honda, one of the leading scholars of folkloric performing arts, supposedly discovered Take *kagura* first in 1931. After this, it was initially authorized by the government first as a “precious object” and then later as an “important tangible folk-cultural property” in 1976. This term “important cultural property” (重要文化財) is widely known amongst the Japanese, and it is the main standard used for recognizing the value of cultural objects. The authorization of Take *kagura* as an important cultural property was a happy event for the local people, and this greatly influenced the status of Take *kagura* later.

6. A *tokonoma* is a recessed alcove found in many Japanese homes for the display of significant objects.

7. The visits to neighboring homes by Take *kagura* troupes are recorded in a document written in 1820 (Hayachine-san Goyōtomechō 早池峰山御用留帳; HANAMAKI-SHI KYŌIKU IINKAI 2006, 97).

8. The *suzuki* is commonly used for calling forth good spirits and incarnations. In this performance, *gongen* are incarnated in the wooden *shishi gashiras* by the shaking of the *suzuki*.

9. Averbuch rightly pointed out that this process is an expression of shamanism (AVERBUCH 1995, 238–40). However, *gongen mai* as described has a fixed choreography and does not incorporate the unique techniques of shamanism that involve psychological trance.

10. SUGAWARA reports many variations of the *kami uta* chanted in the prayer for *gongen* in his book (1969, 318–21).

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