

## Locating Transcendence in Japanese Minzoku Geinô Yamabushi and Miko Kagura

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Article abstract

Contemporary *minzoku geinô* (folk performing arts) in Japanese society is associated with the *matsuri*, or festival. Community members, such as workers and students, practise and perform various types of *minzoku geinô* in preparation for local festivals. However, a look at the history of *minzoku geinô* reveals that originally its practitioners were marginalized members of society, who used ecstatic expression to perform various rites such as healings, exorcisms, and blessings. Furthermore, the attitude toward ritual specialists was often negative; indeed, shamanistic practices were prohibited during the Meiji period (1868-1912). In response to social attitudes, ecstatic performers of Japan's premodern period negotiated their expressive powers in a variety of ways in order to survive. This article introduces the reader to the typology of *minzoku geinô* that involves ecstatic performance presented by *yamabushi*, male mountain-dwelling ascetics, and *miko*, female shamans generally associated with Shinto shrines. Moreover, the discussion in this paper illustrates how ecstatic performance changed throughout history to the extent that it is now seldom performed by marginalized ritual specialists. Performers of contemporary *minzoku geinô* are accepted members of society. Furthermore, both the performers and the audience of *minzoku geinô* are affected by the transformative nature of ecstatic expression.

# LOCATING TRANSCENDENCE IN JAPANESE MINZOKU GEINÔ: YAMABUSHI AND MIKO KAGURA<sup>1</sup>

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This paper<sup>1</sup> will introduce the reader to the type of person who mediated human and divine boundaries in Japanese *minzoku geinô* (folk performing arts). Examining scholarly attitudes toward premodern and contemporary *minzoku geinô* and its practitioners, and relying on secondary historical and ethnographic sources, as well as personal fieldwork experience, I will explore expressions of ecstatic performance (shamans) in premodern and contemporary *minzoku geinô* and illuminate how ecstatic performers negotiated their own experiences as practitioners of ritual performance. In particular, I will highlight two premodern ritual performance traditions that are considered to be examples of this typology. The performers of these traditions were the *yamabushi*, practitioners of an ascetic local religion called *shugendô*, who dwelled in mountains and provided religious services such as healings and blessings to local communities, and the *miko*, female shamans who were generally associated with Shinto shrines.

In premodern Japan, the *yamabushi* and *miko* comprised a marginalized group that existed outside the rigidly controlled rural areas and urban centres, in a space that I call “the road.”<sup>2</sup> The *yamabushi* and

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1. I would like to thank Jane Marie Law for her valuable comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this paper. Any errors are mine, and mine alone.
  2. “The road” represents a liminal geographical and social space in Japanese society. It connotes an unstructured, anti-authoritarian place where marginal members of society sought refuge and earned their livelihood. It has a literal meaning in that it also represents the Tokaidô, a major thoroughfare that was constructed at the beginning of the Medieval period, which consists of the Kamakura period (1185-1333) and the Muromachi Period (1336-1573). I have developed this idea based on Victor Turner’s concept of liminality (Turner 1967).

*miko* presented ritual performances that involved shamanic transcendence. Moreover, the dance and theatre that they developed through their ritual performances is considered to be the foundation of *minzoku geinô* and classical performing arts in Japan.

The discussion presented in this paper is necessary because the state of folk performing arts in Japan continues to develop in response to changing economic, social, and political conditions, as do academic perspectives about *minzoku geinô*.<sup>3</sup> In addition to providing the reader with an introduction to forms of ecstatic expression in Japanese *minzoku geinô*, I will show that ritual performance practice has changed to the extent that ecstatic expression is no longer limited to a select group of specialists. I believe that non-specialist practitioners as well as audience members of contemporary *minzoku geinô* can experience the transformative powers of ecstatic expression. Empirical observation and descriptions of types of *minzoku geinô* have led me to this conclusion.<sup>4</sup>

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3. Barbara Thornbury elaborates on the development of the academic discipline of *minzokugaku* [folklore studies] since its beginnings around 1927. The first generation of *minzokugakusha* [folklorists] was primarily concerned with documenting and categorizing all the types of *minzoku geinô* that were being performed in Japan. Contemporary *minzokugakusha*, however, are faced with the daunting task of evaluating all the data that their predecessors collected. Furthermore, contemporary *minzokugakusha* are currently searching to find methodologies that best enable them to analyze *minzoku geinô* (Thornbury 1997). My analysis builds primarily on the work of Honda Yasuji, as translated by Frank Hoff, who explored how shamanistic expression was transformed into performance in *yamabushi kagura* (Hoff 1974). In addition, the present paper develops out of studies of *yamabushi kagura* by Irit Averbuch (1995) and Saigô Yufuko (1995). It also builds on the scholarship of *kagura* by including an exploration of the political dimension of *shamanistic* practices (Yamaji 1987). In other words, performers of *kagura* come from a background where they were ostracized from mainstream society, representing the margins of society (Ruch 1990). This awareness forces us to view performances of contemporary *kagura* in a new light. Finally, Hashimoto Hiroyuki's work has encouraged me to maintain a critical awareness when discussing aspects of *minzoku geinô* (Hashimoto 1995).
  4. For example, Hayakawa Kôtarô describes the *Hanamatsuri*, a festival that takes place in the three provinces of Aichi, Shizuoka, and Nagano, in terms that indicate that the participants undergo a transformative state: "With the relentless beat of the rhythm, the men danced and went crazy with excitement and longing, spewing out profanities. The *Hanamatsuri* is also known as the '*Akutaimatsuri*' [Festival of Bad Language]. This is a festival that has been engraved with an unforgettable power" (Hayakawa 1995: 17). My experience at a *Hanamatsuri*

*Yamabushi* performed *kagura* [sacred dance] that consisted of theatrical elements called *shugen nô* and *chihô kyôgen*.<sup>5</sup> *Miko* performed ritualistic dances called *miko mai* or *miko kagura*. These two traditions, although quite different in performance style, share one commonality: they fall into the category of shamanistic or ecstatic expression. Traditionally, the teleological purpose of both traditions aimed for connection with the *kami* [god] and the deceased, and communication with the other world was mediated through performance. Furthermore, whereas the *yamabushi* represented masculinity, austerity, and remoteness, for they dwelled in mountains and practised austerities, the *miko* represented court culture. What is most intriguing about these types of ritual performers is how they adapted to changing times and found various means to negotiate the expression of their art throughout history. In particular, *kagura* was originally performed for the *kami*; however, an audience of humans also had to be entertained. Ritual performers modified the repertoire of *kagura* to accommodate a worldly audience and propitiate the *kami*.<sup>6</sup>

Traditionally, ecstatic performance was considered to be confined to a specific typology of performance. Furthermore, the practitioners comprised a select group of individuals. For example, Yamaji Kôzô, in an ethnographic exploration of spirit possession in the Medieval period,

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has led me to believe that the division between the performers and the audience is blurred, and that audience members are also “engraved with an unforgettable power” when the *Hanamatsuri* finishes. Another example of the transformative powers of *minzoku geinô* on its participants can be found in the *ô no mai* [dance of the king]. Hashimoto Hiroyuki considers the dance, which is performed at the festival of Miyashiro shrine in Fukui Ken, to have “the quality of a rite-of-passage for young men” (Hashimoto 1995: 148). The young men who participate in the *ô no mai* are local residents who voluntarily join an association that practices the dance for Miyashiro shrine’s local festival.

5. *Shugen nô* and *chihô kyôgen* are the regional versions of the classical performing art forms of *nô* and *kyôgen*.
6. *Kagura*’s primary purpose is to entertain the *kami*; entertainment for the worldly audience is a secondary concern. The structure of *kagura* is designed to accommodate the visitation of the *kami*. For example, Hoff points out that there are songs in the *kagura* which serve to invite the *kami* to the performance area called *kami-oroshi* (literally, bringing down the *kami*) and songs which send the *kami* back to its home called *kami-okuri* (literally, sending off the *kami*) (Hoff 1974). There is also a temporary resting place for the *kami* when it is in the presence of *kagura* performers.

outlined a set of criteria that ecstasies must meet: they were of a particular lineage, they developed a narrative form that conveyed the oracles of the *kami* and the words of the deceased, and they used a musical instrument or some other rhythmic device to create a rhythm that engaged the audience while otherworld communication is taking place (Yamaji 1987: 218-220). Incidentally, rhythmic accompaniment was an important element for including the audience in the *shamanic* communication with the otherworld. I would venture that it was through rhythm that the audience itself connected with the transformative experience that the ritual specialist created. Also, a type of body movement must be performed so that ecstasies can achieve a physiological state that opens channels of communication with the otherworld. *Minzoku geinô* use dance as the performative medium through which ecstasies achieve this other-world state of awareness. There are two types of dance patterns in *minzoku geinô* that are evident in the ritual performative practices of ecstatic expressive art: *odori* and *mai* (Yamaji 1987: 216).

Various ethnographers, theatre historians, and *minzoku geinô* researchers distinguish between the two types of dance patterns and provide their own nuanced definitions for each of the dance patterns; however, they uniformly agree that the foundation of Japanese performing arts rests on the dance patterns of *odori* and *mai*. For the purposes of this paper, I will clarify the differences between the two types using the distinction provided by Yamaji: “[*Odori*] flows from the spirit-possession trance-like repetitive movements of the *miko*, who originated this type of movement; whereas [*mai*] is a type of ritualized preparation exercise that is consciously performed. In other words, the distinction is that [*odori*] is an unconscious spirit-possession trance-like movement, and [*mai*] is a conscious, repetitive preparation exercise that has been ritualized” (Yamaji 1987: 217). These elements of ecstatic performance indicate that the spiritual performer who navigated between this world and the other did so in a theatricalized manner. Theatre was the medium through which the spiritual performer negotiated his or her mantic abilities and expressed them to an audience.

Another important qualification for ecstasies is that they are outsiders. Ritual specialists in premodern society resided on the margins of society and by virtue of their social status, had the ability to perform such sacred deeds. Victor Turner explains that “[i]n closed or structured societies, it is the marginal or ‘inferior’ person or the ‘outsider’ who

often comes to symbolize what David Hume has called ‘the sentiment for humanity’” (Turner 1969: 111). In Japanese society, ritual specialists were summoned to perform healings and exorcisms because they possessed special awareness into the inner workings of human nature. Incidentally, outsiders maintained paradoxical existences because their special insight did not give them concomitant social status and respectability. Notably, in premodern Japan, blind people tended to enter the profession of ritual specialist: their lack of sight expelled them from the world of the “normal,” thus increasing their abilities to communicate with the otherworld (Yamaji 1987: 218).

I will now introduce the social milieu in which ritual practitioners resided. Ritual specialists who offered prayers to the *kami*, healed the ill, and interpreted the will of the *kami* existed on the periphery of society, outside the sphere of capital culture and beyond the rice fields of rural society. I call this milieu of society “the wanderers” because its members led itinerant lifestyles. By focusing on the historical background in which this social milieu developed, I wish to emphasize the contrast between practitioners of ritual performance in premodern Japan and participants of *minzoku geinō* in contemporary Japan.

### The wanderers

In the Medieval period, residency determined one’s place in rural society. But those who were unable to pay exorbitant taxes, or those who sought to break away from the unreasonable demands of authority, abandoned their homes and adopted a life of vagrancy.<sup>7</sup> What type of existence did the wanderers lead? And in such a rigidly controlled island society, where did the wanderers go? They took to the road or disappeared in the mountains. The wanderers subsisted on the income

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7. Thomas Keirstead provides one explanation of the type of individuals who chose to lead itinerant lifestyles: “Just as the system divided up space into estates, it recast the peasant as *hyakushō*, or resident of those estates. Producer and payer of rents, the *hyakushō* was the fundamental identity of the system and the primary subject upon which estate proprietors grounded their rule. But it is an identity possessed of a strange duality. Within official discourse, the *hyakushō* is a figure bound to the estate, defined foremost by possession of a residence and the obligation to meet certain rents. His antithesis is the wanderer, the person without a stable residence, who acknowledges no proprietor and whose realism is not bound by the estate” (1992: 23).

earned through menial jobs, the jobs of the unclean. The theatre and the sex industry also provided a meagre existence for the wanderers. A double bill of religious ceremony and entertainment of a more non-ecclesiastical nature was often performed to spectators by the same performers.

Contrary to scholarship that bases cultural progress on the activities and achievements in the Imperial court and capital, a lively, dynamic society did indeed exist outside the capital and contributed to the formation of Japan's culture canon during Japan's premodern period. This social group, which included mendicant Buddhist priests, *yamabushi*, *miko*, and tax-evading roadside entertainers, provided spiritual succour to rural communities by travelling from town to town and participating in religious events. It also provided sensual satisfaction to road-weary travellers by putting on nightly entertainments in port towns and way stations along the Tokaidô, a highway that connected Eastern Japan to Kyoto.

In the beginning of the Kamakura period, the shôgunate, or military government, established itself in eastern Japan, in Kamakura, and as a result, social and political activity in the surrounding region increased (Toyoda 1970: 61). A main highway called the Tokaidô was built to connect Kyoto and the rapidly developing eastern region. Because it passed through a flat and temperate geographical region, it became a popular thoroughfare for travellers (Shinjô 1967: 207). Furthermore, the *bushi* [military class] made countless round trips between their power base in Kamakura and the Imperial Court in Kyoto as part of their duties. Additionally, economic activity in the east increased due to the capital being moved to Kamakura, and a new class of itinerant merchants emerged, peddling their wares along the Tokaidô. Joining the flow of commercial and political traffic were Buddhist priests who, in the tradition of their Heian period (794-1185) predecessors, practised nonattachment to worldly matters by leading lives of mendicancy. They travelled the Tokaidô to spread their teachings and to make pilgrimages to various shrines.

Notably, the social upheaval of the early Medieval period caused by the separation of the imperial court from the shôgunate uprooted individuals and forced them into itinerancy (Fukuda 1981: 2). Courtiers of the Imperial court took to the road. Former emperors vacated their Kyoto residences and moved to the provinces via the Tokaidô. Financial

difficulties plagued shrines and temples; consequently, priests, nuns, diviners, and shamans found themselves homeless and they too struggled to survive by independent means along the Tokaidō.

In response to the traffic that travelled the Tokaidō, small clusters of commercial centres began to form along the highway, and quickly grew into actual city-towns called *shuku* [way stations] (Shinjō 1967: 210). *Shuku* provided rest and entertainment for road-weary and lonesome travellers. Theatre and sex were popular bills of fare. Travellers were sympathetically referred to as suffering from an affliction called *ryoshū* [lonesomeness on a journey] that necessitated their visits to the *shuku* to indulge in the luxuries that they offered (Toyoda 1970: 63). Historians assert that prostitutes flocked to the *shuku*, often in the guise of entertainers, and swarmed around disembarking travellers aggressively hawking their wares (Amino 1996: 112). However, a balanced perspective shows that those lonesome travellers were part of the dynamic relationship of supply and demand. In addition to services of a libidinous nature, the traveller was entertained with various types of theatre.

This description of the social milieu of “the wander” connotes a sense of desperation and unsavouriness, as social outcasts eked out an existence on the periphery of society using any means at their disposal. In this unsavoury environment, however, there is also a sense of immediacy and vibrancy, out of which a rich performing arts tradition developed.

Having traced a thumbnail sketch of what life might have been like for itinerant performers, I would now like to focus on the traditions of the *miko* and *yamabushi*. My analysis focuses on the historical development of both traditions to once again contrast the difference between ritual performance practice in premodern and contemporary Japan. Additionally, through the lens of the past, I would like to show how the *miko* and *yamabushi* as ritual performance specialists expressed and negotiated their own experiences. Furthermore, by exploring the ritualistic and aesthetic aspects of both traditions temporally, I will illuminate how their ritual performances adapted to changing times, and ultimately sought to involve all members of society in the experience of ecstatic performance.



## The *miko*

The *miko* is one type of ritual specialist who resided on the fringes of society and who travelled the Tokaidô.<sup>8</sup> She was generally associated with shamanism. The most illustrious female shaman in Japan's history was Queen Pimiko who ruled the land of Wa (Japan) in the third century. *Miko* have been divided into four categories (Oka 1958: 62-63).<sup>9</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I will describe three types of *miko*. One type of *miko* was a member of a shamanic family and inherited her vocation from her aunt. She mediated between her family's tutelary deity and the members of the family. A second type of *miko* was associated with a shrine and had inherited her vocation, or she resided in a local village and was brought to her calling by the *kami*. This type of *miko* acted as a medium between the deity of the shrine and the shrine's parishioners. A third type of *miko*, called an *ichigo*, was a professional itinerant who traveled the country telling fortunes, performing acts of necromancy, and healing the ill. Additionally, a branch of *miko* existed that claimed to descend from the Goddess Uzume.<sup>10</sup> This *miko* used her body as a vessel into which deities or the deceased entered; her mouth gave voice to the utterances of the other world. She achieved this ecstatic state in which she was able to call down the deities through a series of repetitive dancelike movements, called *miko mai* or *miko kagura*, that were performed in a designated sacred space.

Before the Medieval ages, the *miko* was an important figure who was associated with the ruling class and with great shrines, such as Ise and Kumano. In addition to her ritual performances of ecstatic trance,

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8. For further information about shamanic initiation and categories of shamanism, please refer to the Mircea Eliade's classic work, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (1964). Nakamura Hajime (1964) delineates shamanism's influence on Buddhism in Japan. With regard to *miko* practices, Hori Ichirô (1968) discusses *miko* activities in folk religion. His outline of *miko* practices in Japan's Tôhoku region is of special interest. Finally, Yamakami Izumo (1981) provides a detailed account of the history of the *miko* in Japan.
  9. The fourth category of *miko*, called a *monomochi*, was a member of a family that had been possessed by an animal.
  10. The Goddess Uzume first appears in the *Kojiki* [*Record of Ancient Matters*] which is considered to be the first written record of Japan's mythological origins. It was published by royal decree in 712 C.E. In Book One, Chapter 17, Uzume performed an ecstatic dance in order to lure Ama-terasu, the goddess of sun, out of a cave to restore light to the earth (Philippi 1968: 81). Scholars view this dance to be the first example of *minzoku geinô* (Honda 1986: 5).

she performed a variety of religious and political functions.<sup>11</sup> Barbara Ruch emphasizes her importance: "... from early on, shamanism was a part of the daily life of Japanese on all levels. The statesman Fujiwara no Kaneie (929-990), for instance, would not make a move without consulting the *uchifushi no miko* [Shaman who falls into a trance] attached to the Kamo shrine in Kyoto" (Ruch 1990: 523). As such, in premodern Japan, the *miko* functioned as an institution, with rituals that became a necessary part of daily life. However, as the Medieval period progressed, the social status of the *miko* and her religious powers diminished.

During the Kamakura period, the *miko* was forced into a state of mendicancy as the shrines and temples that provided her with a livelihood fell into bankruptcy. Disassociated from a religious context, her performance moved further away from a religious milieu and more toward one of a non-ecclesiastical nature. The travelling *miko*, known as the *aruki miko*, became associated with prostitution: "[B]esides the religious world of the travelling *miko*, who announcing oracles, circuited the various regions... services of a libidinous nature were sold..." (Geinôshi 1982: 150). Once a ruler, then a consultant to the nobility, the *miko*'s stature as a woman close to the *kami* diminished as a patriarchal, militaristic society took over. Her ritualistic function as a spirit medium lost its social value and she had to find other ways to survive; hence, she became one of the performers who provided entertainment and sex to travellers who disembarked at *shuku* along the Tokaidô.

Negotiating her expressive powers proved difficult as shamanistic practices were routinely discouraged throughout Japan's history. It is interesting to explore, however, how *miko* practices were valourized in Japan's cultural canon. For example, the *miko*'s expressive powers were revitalized in the *nô* drama. *Aoi No Uye* introduced an aestheticized *miko* as she was before her craft fell prey to the trappings of commercialism. Zeami (1363?-1444), who crystallized *nô* into the form we see today, rewrote an old play that was based on *The Tale of Genji* and called it *Aoi No Uye* (Goff 1991: 125). A product of Zeami's artistic imagination, the *miko* in *Aoi No Uye* performed a stylized ritual exorcism. Here, Lady Rokujô, a spurned lover of Genji, turned into a demon

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11. The *bikuni*, or Buddhist nun, was closely related to the *miko* and performed similar duties. She "explained the universe of the Buddha," whereas, the *miko* had ecstatic powers that enabled her to communicate with the *kami* (Geinôshi 1982: 150).

because of her rage and jealousy, directed her evil at Genji's new paramour, and tormented her. In Zeami's *Aoi No Uye*, a *miko* was summoned to find the source of the dying woman's ailment:

I am an official at the court of the Shujakuin emperor. The evil spirit possessing the Minister of the Left's daughter Lady Aoi cannot be controlled, so the Minister has summoned priests of high rank and great virtue to conduct secret incantations and cures, all to no avail.

There is someone here called Teruhi the Sorceress, an adept at the catalpa bow. I shall summon her and have her divine by means of her bow whether the spirit is that of someone living or dead. Is someone there? Summon Teruhi the Sorceress (Goff 1991: 134).

We see the skills the *miko* possessed. Aided by her sacred props, in this case a catalpa bow, or in other examples, bells, or a branch from a *sakake* tree, she bridged the gap between this world and the other world. The spirit of Lady Rokujō responded to the sound of Teruhi playing her bow: "I appear here now as an angry spirit/in response to the catalpa bow" (Goff 1991: 135). Teruhi, in a vision, identified the encounter between Lady Rokujō and her successor that drove the lady into a state of uncontrollable jealousy: "How strange! Who it is I cannot tell,/ but a lady is riding in a broken carriage,/while someone, a handmaiden it seems,/ weeps profusely as she clings to the shaft of a carriage drawn by no oxen. A pitiful sight indeed./ Might this be the one?" (Goff 1991: 135). In premodern Japanese society, the cause of sickness and disease was attributed to disruptions in the spirit world, and it was a figure like the *miko* who saw beyond the physical malaise into the spirit world and found the cause of the sickness. In the sacred space that was constructed for her performance, she used her dancing, rhythmic stamping, vocalizations, and sacred props, to invite the *kami* and spirits of the deceased to enter her body, and then communicated their messages to the afflicted, as well as to an audience.

In turning to contemporary *minzoku geinō*, Honda Yasuji documents several categories of *miko kagura* that are still performed at various locations around Japan (Honda 1986). Time has detached the *kagura* from its original ritualistic purpose of conveying the oracles of the *kami*; yet the conventional forms of the dances remain. Specifically, during the Meiji period (1868-1912), authorities prohibited shamanistic practices; rural localities, however, have since restored and revised their local performative traditions (Yamaji 1987). It would be safe to say that the performers of *miko kagura* are primary, high school, or university

students or are members of *hoxonkai* [preservation societies] and community centers. Nevertheless, the *miko* has been restored back to her respectable place in society and is no longer connected with her wandering days as an *aruki miko*.

A spectacular example of her dance is performed at Kasuga Wakamiya's *On Matsuri* in Nara every year in mid-December. The *miko* has a prominent role in the rite, which is an elaborate and unrestrained request to the *kami* for a bountiful harvest, by presenting the *kagura* that welcomes the *kami* to its resting place for the duration of the event. Similar to the *nô*, her dance is a stylized form of the trance-inducing *miko kagura*. In this section of the event, two or four *miko* perform with bells. At another section of the three-day festival, a *miko* of a different lineage performs the *yudate*, a purification ritual. This type of rite involves the exact enactment of a purification ritual and emphasizes the *miko*'s spiritual abilities to perform rites of a sacred nature. According to Yamaji, this particular *yudate* is one example of revived tradition because it "... was halted after the Meiji period, but revived in Showa 60 [1985]" (1991: 163).

Furthermore, we frequently spot the *miko* at shrines dressed in red *hakama* [long, divided trousers] and selling souvenirs and *omikuji* [fortunes]. A far distant relative of her premodern shamanic sister, she is most probably a university student collecting a modest wage in this part-time position. Other types of *miko*, those who conduct exorcisms and healings, are not so easily identified, but do exist.<sup>12</sup> Despite her modern incarnation, as we have seen, her dance is the basis of folk and classical performing arts, and her contribution to their development has not been overlooked.

### **The *yamabushi***

The *yamabushi*, an ascetic sect of itinerant priests, first appeared in the Nara period (710-794). En no Ozunu, a magical healer who immigrated to Japan from Korea in the sixth or seventh century, founded the sect (Murayama 1970: 342). They travelled through mountains practising magical arts and performing austerities, and were known as mysterious, magical mountain dwellers. Combining a mix of spiritual

12. For further reading about spirit possession and *miko* in contemporary Japanese society, please refer to Blacker (1975) and Yamakami (1981). Additionally, Karen Smyers (1999) discusses the activities of *miko* who are associated with Inari worship at Fushimi Inari Shrine in Kyoto.

practices from esoteric Buddhism and Taoism, these mountain ascetics established the religion Shugendô, in the Heian period. Shugendô developed into “an eclectic religious system of mountain asceticism, primarily oriented toward ritual practice. Its proclaimed purposes [were] to achieve enlightenment in this life, to gain magical powers through ascetic practices [*shugyô*] in the mountains, and to use those powers to benefit the people” (Averbuch 1995: 17). Buddhist priests of the established Tendai and Shingon sects joined the *yamabushi* to increase their magical powers. At the request of village masters, the *yamabushi* conducted ceremonies to encourage bountiful harvests for the village. They also “administer[ed] blessings from the mountain or perform[ed] special services of healing and exorcism” for the locals in the communities they visited (Averbuch 1995: 3). Additionally, they acted as spiritual leaders and guides [*sendatsu*] for laypeople who made pilgrimages to shrines like Kumano and Ise, since they knew the mountain trails very well (Averbuch 1995: 3; Ito 1993: 286).

Performing *kagura* was one means by which they manifested their powers. Dance and the theatrical forms of *shugen nô* and *chihô kyôgen* comprised the *yamabushi kagura* repertoire. Examples of contemporary *yamabushi kagura* exist in the Tôhoku region of northern Japan. The form that is performed in Iwate Prefecture is called *yamabushi kagura*; the form that is performed in Yamagata Prefecture is called *bangaku* (Miyao 1977: 303). Honda Yasuji, in a translation provided by Frank Hoff, explains how

(t)raditionally, a *kagura* group would perform their dances and rituals as they passed from place to place during a circuit of a specific area of the countryside at the end of the year. During the day, they performed ritual events, including rites for preventing fire — a menace to the farmers in the area — and magic for driving off other evils. At night the center of interest shifted to dances (Hoff 1974: 193).

They performed other types of rituals as well. For example, Hoff describes a ritual called *gongen*:

At the end of the old and just before the new year Yamabushi priests... would carry with them from home to home a lion mask called *gongen*, the living presence of the god they worshipped. This visit of the god served to drive off evil spirits and to bring blessings at this crucial point in the year. The effect was one achieved through use of the lion mask but also through a set of dances and plays performed by the Yamabushi wherever they stayed overnight (Hoff 1963: 24).

The use of the performance space in *yamabushi kagura* illustrates how ritual performance that was dedicated to the *kami* became transformed into a popular entertainment for a worldly audience. As I have mentioned previously, *kagura* was intended for the *kami*; however, when the ritual practitioners consciously enhanced the performance quality of *yamabushi kagura*, they included the audience in the ritual experience. In traditional *yamabushi* performance, the accompanying musicians, although integral to the performance, were placed in ancillary positions: the drummer faced the curtain with his back to the audience, while the flute player and the singer performed behind the curtain. The drummer, like the dancers, had shamanic abilities and it was the percussive rhythm he established that drew the *kami* from their world down to the world of humans. His role straddled the boundary between “the watcher” and “the watched” as he sat at the foot of the stage, like a barrier between the audience and the performers. However, as the performance venues of *yamabushi kagura* changed to include non-ecclesiastical settings in which an audience of this world was entertained, the musicians were placed behind the action so as not to obstruct the audience’s view.

Entertainment increased the popularity of the *kagura* ritual and the performers “[in order] to suitably lengthen the time of the ritual, [began] the practice of performing [*chihō*] *kyōgen*... [which brought] enjoyment to the audience of the house that requested the *kagura* ritual” (Miyao 1977: 304). This is one way in which the groups ensured their survival. They added entertainment value to the ritual and increased their popularity and the payment they received. Ritual performance showed itself to be a malleable form that responded to both the needs of the audience and the performers. Furthermore, the performers not only had to justify their existence, they also had to maintain their livelihood, and one way of doing so was to keep the audience entertained. As well as improvised dialogue, “lively songs and dances were inserted into the plot at suitable times,” thus contemporizing hackneyed plot lines and infusing the ritual with entertainment (Miyao 1977: 304).

Today, the practitioners of *yamabushi kagura* are no longer mystical ascetics, but the form of the ritual has maintained a momentum through time and is still performed. According to Saigō Yufuko, who examines how contemporary Japanese learn *yamabushi kagura*: “... these days, the people who dance [*kagura*] are of course not *yamabushi*. The usual people who participate in [*kagura*] are farmers and people working for

companies” (Saigô 1995: 102). Saigô also mentions that “... in many regions, there have been attempts to teach school children their own native arts” (Saigô 1995: 129). This type of performance, once the domain of a marginalized group of wanderers, is now practised by a respectable middle class. Having traced the historical development of the practice of ritual performance, however, we can see how the exclusive practice gradually opened up to include all sectors of society through hundreds of years of social change.

Tokyo-based dancer and choreographer Sudô Takeko heads a dance group that is devoted to preserving a variety of folk dances from around the country. Her group performs *yamabushi kagura* as part of its repertoire and participates in events like the *gongen* ceremony. Although the troupe is comprised of Tokyo-based performers, they regularly travel north to the Tôhoku region to participate in local rituals with local performers. Sudô’s objective is to maintain an accurate living record of various traditional dances and she refuses to perform before a paying audience that has little knowledge about the performing art that it is viewing. Her only audience is also her most important critic: the local people who “own” *yamabushi kagura*.<sup>13</sup> Her group, which is essentially comprised of outsiders, is accepted by locals in the region of Iwate Prefecture for the accuracy and dedication with which it performs *kagura*. In fact, one American member of the troupe participates in the *gongen* ceremony, and according to Sudô, the members of the local Tôhoku community consider him to be a fine dancer.

### Locating transcendence in contemporary *minzoku geinô*

Shamanic performers in premodern times negotiated their expressive powers by adding sex and comedy to their performances. Survival necessitated these additions to their craft. The methods used by ritual specialists, past and present, reveal that techniques, especially comic devices, had a distinct social purpose; namely, these techniques breathed life into the ritual.

The question that comes to mind is where in present day Japanese society do shamans/ecstatics exist? Where can one witness shamanistic rites? For the most part, decisions are seldom made and ailments are

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13. Based on personal interviews with Sudô Takeko during March, 2001.

seldom cured by consulting oracles and communicating with the dead.<sup>14</sup> The Meiji period put a stop to the practice of spirit possession, however, “[s]weeping away that time in history, there are locations where conventions that have been preserved from long ago exist. As a matter of fact, the words of the *kami* have disappeared, and today only the outward form of the sacred rites have been transmitted” (Yamaji 1987: 215). The performative traditions of the *yamabushi* and *miko* illustrate Yamaji’s theory. Through a process of revival and transmission, the structural remains of their forms are performed today.

However, ecstatic expression is not relegated to the margins of society as it was in Japan’s premodern period. Upstanding members of society such as farmers, office workers, and students strive to learn the traditions that were once exclusive to social pariahs. In particular the *matsuri*, or festival, is a time for the community to band together and showcase the folk performing arts its members have diligently practised. Many of the folk performing arts are derivative of the ritual performance practices that specialists like the *yamabushi* and *miko* performed. The *matsuri* provides a space where today’s communities can reestablish their group identity and retain their traditions in the face of spreading cultural globalism and changing demographics. The people who are selected to participate in the *matsuri* are often high-standing members of society. Since they are performing “the structural remains” of ecstatic expression, do they achieve an ecstatic state? Can “normal” people enter into the otherworld?

In the winter of 2001, I participated in a *Hanamatsuri*, a raucous, nocturnal, winter festival that occurs in the mountainous district at the intersection of three prefectures: Nagano, Aichi, and Shizuoka. A repetitive simple rhythm pounded out on a single taiko and accompanied by one flute, a simple chant that is repeated throughout the night, and repetitive dance steps induced the performers, youth, and adults of the small village of Shimokurokawa, who would return to work and to school the following day, into an otherworld-like state. No doubt, heavy costumes and tremendous amounts of alcohol aided their journey. According to Yamaji’s theory, what I witnessed was the skeletal

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14. Traces of this remnant of the past do remain today and can be identified in the activities of millenarian religious societies such as the exorcist sect, Sūkyō Mahikari (see Davis 1980). As well, the modern sect Ōmotokyō, which claimed shamanistic roots, experienced persecution by the government, but also operates today.



remains of ecstatic performance; however, I believe the participants and the audience of the *Hanamatsuri* experienced an ecstatic state. A transformation happened as the performers danced throughout the night.

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