



Namahage Sedo Festival (in 2011)

Namahage Sedo Festival

(Shinzan Shrine: Second Friday, Saturday, and Sunday of February each year)



Oga Shinzan Folklore Museum

The New Year's Eve Namahage event is re-enacted in a typical Oga magariya (bent) house adjacent to the Namahage Museum. A learning course is available to experience the Namahage practices of the Shinzan district.



Re-enactment of the Namahage event

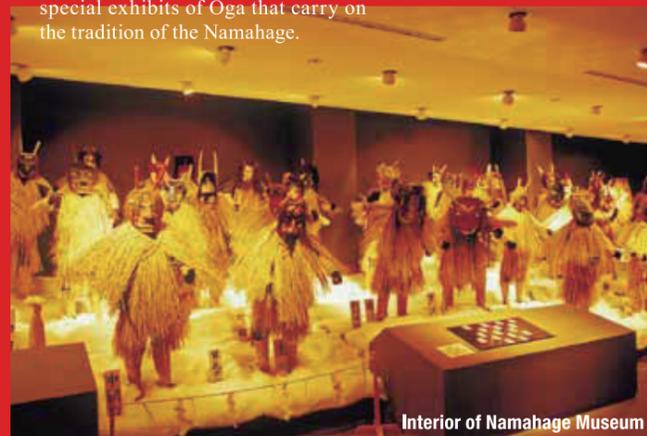
This event, which attracts many tourists, is performed at Shinzan Shrine on January 3rd, which combines the Sedo Festival, and the traditional Namahage event. Round rice cakes are baked in the sacred bonfire lit within the shrine precincts and offered to Namahage, an incarnation of the gods. The highlights are the Namahage dance and Namahage drums choreographed by a contemporary dance artist, Baku Ishii.



Namahage dance

Namahage Museum

Namahage garments and masks differ in each district where the event is performed. The Namahage Museum displays the masks and garments of approximately 60 districts, and the lineup of garments and masks is an impressive sight. There are also many special exhibits of Oga that carry on the tradition of the Namahage.



Interior of Namahage Museum

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Yunoshiri district
Toga and Kitaura



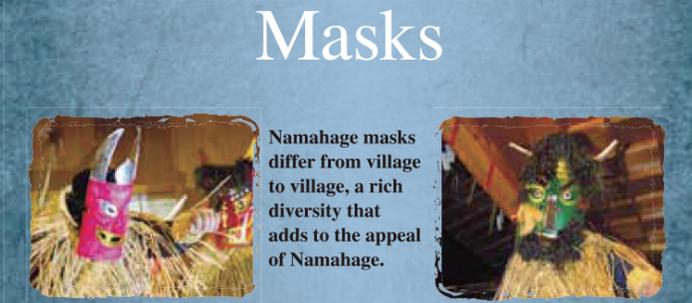
Oganaka



Funakawaminato



Namahage masks from the different districts

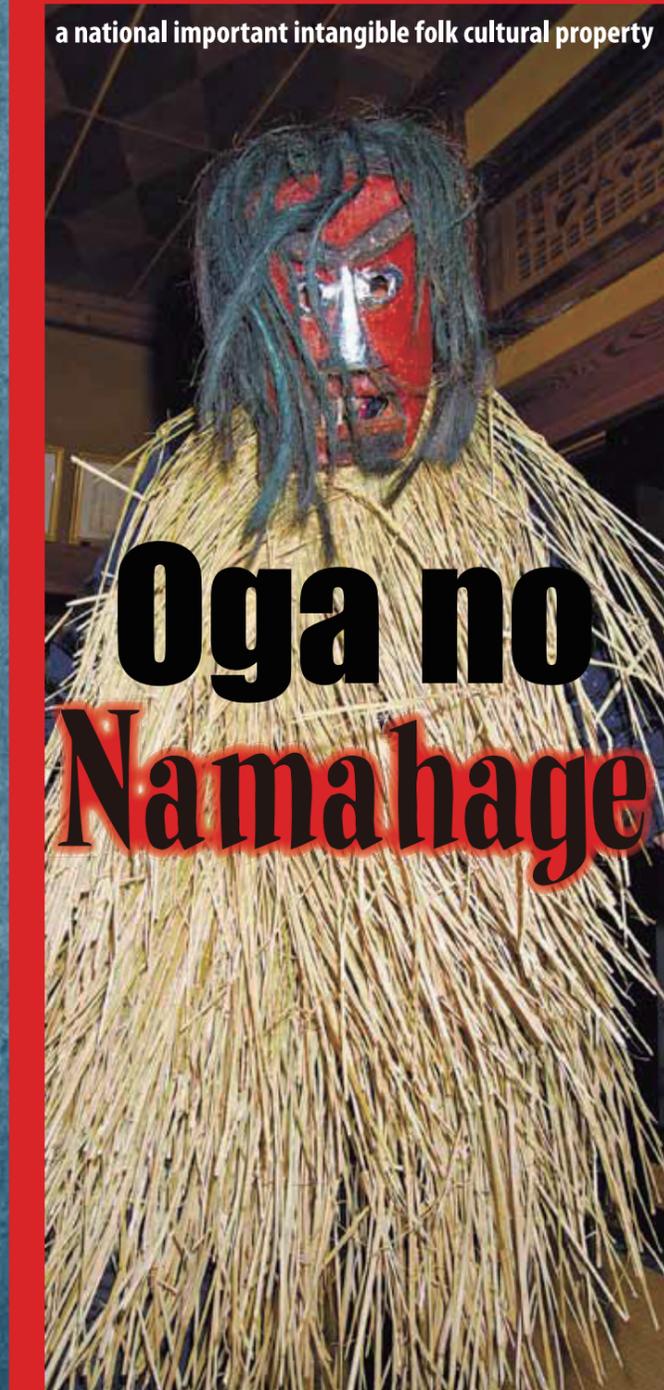


Namahage masks differ from village to village, a rich diversity that adds to the appeal of Namahage.



Namahage Sedo Festival (2011)

* Masks from approximately 60 districts are on display at the Namahage Museum.
 * Some of the masks shown here are not being used in the current events.
 * The photographs of the masks of each district are the property of Oga City, the Japan Sea Culture Research Institute, and private collections.



a national important intangible folk cultural property

Oga no Namahage

Oga no Namahage

On New Year's Eve, men from each village dressed as Namahage visit homes in the district while shouting out whether there are any crying babies or misbehaving children, or whether the young wife of the household is an early riser.

For the people of Oga, the Namahage are deities who visit at the end of the year to admonish laziness, and bear tidings of good health, good harvests, and products from the mountains and oceans. At the homes they visit, the Namahage deities are received courteously and served food and sake in accordance with traditional custom.

Historically, the Namahage event of Oga City took place during Ko-shogatsu (Little New Year, around January 15th), but is now held on New Year's Eve in some 50 villages.

In 1978, Oga no Namahage was designated as a national important intangible folk cultural property.



Shinzan district (in 2011)



Namahage consecration ritual in Shinzan district (in 2011)

Namahage Etymology

During the cold winter if one warms one's feet and hands by an open fire for too long, heat blisters will form. The dialect in this region refers to these blisters as "namomi", and it is believed that namomihagi (peelings of blisters) became Namahage.

Namomihagi also signifies blessings with which to greet the New Year, focusing on children and new family members such as new brides.



Wakimoto Okura district (1950s), Yoshio Kuranuki private collection



The garments

- 1 Cleaver and Gohei (stick with pleated paper streamers)

The Namahage make their rounds of the districts bearing cleavers to peel off the namomi, and in some districts with sticks adorned with pleated paper streamers (gohei) to symbolize gods.

- 3 Masks
The masks are made from a variety of materials such as tree bark, wood carvings, paper stuck to a woven bamboo basket, and paper clay. Recently, many masks made of plastic or carved by a local wood sculptor are also used.

- 4 Kede
Straw raincoat garments. With the mask, it is an impressive costume depicting a god. It is also called 'kedashi', 'kende', and 'keramino'.

- 5 Habaki
Shin guards woven from straw. These signify that the wearer has come from elsewhere.

- 6 Straw shoes
Shoes made of straw to enable one to travel from afar in the snow



* There are separate arrangements to present the New Year Eve's Namahage event to tourists.



Namahage of the Niiyama district (year of photograph unknown)

The Namahage legend

Legends regarding the origins of Namahage are handed down through generations as they were associated with "Emperor Wu of Han", "Shugenja (holy men)", "the mountain god" or "drifters from outside Japan".



Drawing of a peach being offered to Emperor Wu of Han, Akagami Shrine collection



Akagami Shrine Goshado (national important cultural property)

Legend of Emperor Wu of Han

Folklore of 999 stone steps

During the Han Dynasty in China, Emperor Wu, in his search for the medicinal plant of eternal youth and immortality, came to Oga accompanied by five bats. These bats transformed into ogres who worked for Emperor Wu. One day, they asked the Emperor if they could rest for just one day, and were allowed to rest on the fifteenth day of the New Year. They went into a village where they rampaged and stole crops, livestock and the young maidens of the village.

The troubled villagers pleaded with Emperor Wu, offering him a young maiden each year if he would make the ogres build a flight of one thousand stone steps from the shore up to the summit of the mountain where the Goshado was situated, in a single night before the first rooster crowed. If they failed to do this, the ogres must never descend upon the village again.

The villagers believed that it was impossible to build the steps in a single night, but the ogres worked hard to lay the stones. But then, just as an ogre laid the 999th step, the villagers made Amanojaku (a mountain specter) mimic the first crowing of a rooster.

The ogres were taken by surprise and became angry, pulling out a thousand-year old cedar tree from its roots and thrusting it upside-down into the earth again before returning up the mountain. They never descended upon the village again.

From an old tale in Oga

◆ Cases where Namahage visits are forbidden

Namahage do not enter homes where there has been either a death or a birth, nor do they enter homes with an invalid person. Instead, they stamp up and down at the entrance of such homes.

◆ Kede effect

The bits of straw that fall off from the kede when the Namahage run amok in the home must be left undisturbed until the following morning. It is believed that the straw should be wrapped around the head or affected area to pray for recovery from an illness or for good health.



Stone steps leading up to Goshado

It is said that the five ogres from the legend of Emperor Wu of Han were worshipped at the Goshado, from which the Namahage originates.

Legend of the Shugenja (holy man)

Honzan and Shinzan in Oga have long been regarded as sacred grounds for Shugendo (mountain asceticism). Occasionally, the Shugenja came to the village dressed as mountain priests to pray in the homes; it is thought that the frightening appearance of the Shugenja took on the form of Namahage.

Legend of the mountain god

Looking up at Oga from out at sea, it appears to be a mountain rising above the Sea of Japan. It became revered as the place where the mountain god who protected the villagers was enshrined, and Namahage were the incarnations of that god.

Legend of drifters coming from outside Japan

For the villagers of Oga, people who drifted onto the coast from outside Japan appeared to be ogres in their appearance and speech. One theory is that the Namahage are these foreigners who drifted ashore.



"Oga no samukaze (Cold Wind in Oga)" Akita Prefectural Museum collection

Archives

The oldest documentation regarding Namahage dates back to the Edo Period in "Oga no samukaze (Cold Wind in Oga)" by travel writer Masumi Sugae (1754–1829). It gives a picture and a detailed description of his visit to Oga on the fifteenth day of the New Year in 1881 in which the Namahage of Miyazawa are referred to as Namomihagi.

Namahage has also attracted much folklore research such as by Kunio Yanagida (1875–1962) in "The Visitors of Little New Year", Shinobu Origuchi (1887–1953) in "Marebito", and Taro Okamoto (1911–1996) in "Rediscovery of Japan – Artistic Geographic and Cultural Records".

A folklore researcher in Oga, Saburo Yoshida (1905–1979) in "Notes on farmers at the foot of Kanpuzan in Oga" published in 1935 gives a detailed description of the local Namahage in the area of Okura, Wakimoto village. Following this, he conducted a survey on Namahage in the entire district of Minami Akita. Yoshida's writings are regarded as pioneering in the field of research on Namahage.



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