

# JAPANESE EPIC PUPPET TALES AT NEW YEAR: THE FUKAZE DEKUMAWASHI AND HIGASHI FUTAKUCHI PERFORMANCE TRADITIONS

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**ABSTRACT:** In the Hakusan area of Japan's Ishikawa Prefecture, two villages, Fukaze and Higashi Futakuchi, roughly 350 years ago, developed and have continued to preserve *bun'ya ningyō*, puppetry combined with the *bun'ya* style of chanting, a precursor of *bunraku*. These traditions draw their tales from folk stories and the epic *Heike Monogatari* or *Tale of the Heike*. Although their puppets are basic in construction and use a simple form of manipulation, each of these related but distinct traditions captivates with its own unique figures, particular chanting style, and ingenious manipulation techniques. Equally worthy of attention are the roles these non-commercial traditions have played in uniting their rural communities and the deep attachment locals still have to their artform. With the erosion of rural lifestyles throughout Japan and the aging of the forms' most engaged practitioners, it is difficult to anticipate the future of these arts. Along with Hakusan City Hall, the forms' preservation associations have experimented with ways of documenting the traditions, finding new performance opportunities, and promoting their arts to a broader public.

**KEY-WORDS:** *bun'ya ningyō*, folk puppetry, *ningyō jōruri*, Japanese traditional puppetry, Hakusan, Ishikawa, Japan, Intangible Cultural Folk Properties, *The Tale of the Heike*, *Heike Monogatari*, Fukaze, Higashi Futakuchi, *dekumawashi*

**RIASSUNTO:** Circa 350 anni fa, nell'area di Hakusan e nella prefettura giapponese di Ishikawa, due villaggi, Fukaze e Higashi Futakuchi, svilupparono – e hanno continuato a preservare – il *bun'ya ningyō*, il teatro di marionette combinato con lo stile di canto *bun'ya*, precursore del *bunraku*. Queste tradizioni derivano i loro racconti da storie popolari e dall'epica *Heike Monogatari* o *Tale of the Heike*. Sebbene le loro marionette siano semplici nella costruzione e utilizzino una semplice forma di manipolazione, queste tradizioni, associate ma distinte, affasciano con le loro figure uniche, lo stile di canto, le ingegnose tecniche di manipolazione, e la profonda identificazione che il popolo

ha per le loro forme d'arte. Inoltre, i ruoli delle tradizioni non commerciali hanno contribuito a unire le loro comunità rurali. Con l'erosione degli stili di vita rurali in tutto il Giappone e l'invecchiamento dei praticanti più impegnati di queste forme, è difficile prevedere il futuro di queste arti. Insieme al municipio di Hakusan, le associazioni di conservazione delle forme hanno sperimentato modi per documentare le tradizioni, trovare nuove opportunità di esibizione, e promuovere le loro arti a un pubblico più ampio.

PAROLE CHIAVE: *bun'ya ningyō*, marionette popolari, *ningyō jōruri*, marionette tradizionali giapponesi, Hakusan, Ishikawa, Giappone, Proprietà culturali popolari immateriali, La storia dell'Heike, *Heike Monogatari*, Fukaze, Higashi Futakuchi, *dekumawashi*

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Two puppetry traditions that each flourished in remote mountain villages of Japan's Ishikawa prefecture endure today featuring stories from Japan's *Heike Monogatari* or *The Tale of the Heike*.<sup>1</sup> Japanese puppetry is world renowned for the unique *ningyō jōruri* form, more commonly referred to as *bunraku*, which developed in the Edo period (1603-1867) and continues most prominently at the National Bunraku Theatre in Osaka. But *bunraku* emerged out of previous practices that are not as well

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known. *Bun'ya ningyō*, the tradition of both Ishikawa's Fukaze Dekumawashi and Higashi Futakuchi's puppet preservation associations, is one of these earlier forms.<sup>2</sup> Once a flourishing art, *bun'ya ningyō* survives today with only a handful of troupes in four regions of Japan: on Sado Island in Niigata prefecture, in the prefectures of Miyazaki and Kagoshima, and with these two companies in Ishikawa.<sup>3</sup> The names of the two performance groups refer to their respective villages, Fukaze and Higashi Futakuchi, with the term *dekumawashi* written using the Chinese characters that mean 'wooden doll' and 'revolving', indicating puppetry performance generally. The groups received joint designation as a National Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property in 1977, under the umbrella name *Oguchi no dekumawashi*, Oguchi being the municipality that encompassed both villages before it was merged with others in 2005 into today's expanded Hakusan City. While Higashi Futakuchi members speak of their performance as *deku no mai* or puppet sliding dance, both troupes also use the word *dekumawashi* and connect it with a different aspect of their performance technique, as I will describe later. The remote locations of Ishikawa's Fukaze and Higashi Futakuchi villages, high in the Hakusan mountains, supported the continuance of *bun'ya ningyō* and its older practices. While *bunraku* may have grown into an elaborate commercial entertainment in the bustling urban areas of Osaka and Kyoto, Fukaze and Higashi Futakuchi's practices, even if simpler by comparison, captivate with their unique puppets, particular chanting styles, and ingenious manipulation techniques. Equally worthy of attention are the roles these non-commercial traditions have played in uniting their rural communities as well as the visible deep attachment locals have to their artforms.

*Bun'ya ningyō*, like *ningyō jōruri*, marries the performance of puppets with the chanting of a narrator who provides descriptions of the settings, actions, and emotions of the characters as well as dialogue. In both *ningyō jōruri* and *bun'ya ningyō*, the term *ningyō* means 'puppet' or 'doll', while *jōruri* and *bun'ya* each refer to the particular style of music and chanting of their respective traditions. Although today the term *ningyō jōru-*

<sup>2</sup> The official name of the Higashi Futakuchi preservation society is Higashi Futakuchi Bun'ya Ningyō Jōruri Hozonkai. *Ningyō jōruri* is now commonly used as an expression for traditional Japanese puppetry that involves chanting, even if the chanting style is not *jōruri* style, as I explain later in the essay.

<sup>3</sup> <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Important\\_Intangible\\_Folk\\_Cultural\\_Properties](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Important_Intangible_Folk_Cultural_Properties)>.

*ri* has come to be used generally to refer to a wide range of forms of traditional Japanese puppetry, even outside the *jōruri* chanting tradition, contrasting with *パペット* (*papetto*), which refers to more contemporary ideas of puppet performance, the original distinction is instructive. Each term also points to a general repertoire of plays, although there is overlap. The storytelling aspects of these arts trace their origins to a twelfth-century practice of ballad singing from *biwa hōshi* or ‘lute priests’, blind, itinerant performers who sang tales while accompanying themselves on a Chinese lute-like instrument known as the *pipa*. The *biwa hōshi*’s ballads portrayed the heroic and tragic events of the Genpei War (1180-1185) between the Taira or Heike clan and their rivals, the Minamoto or Genji clan. These stories were eventually gathered into the *Heike Monogatari*, an epic that provides a wealth of compelling events ripe for dramatic staging. Numerous Japanese performance traditions have brought stories derived from this epic into their repertoires, puppetry prominent among them. Drawing on the *Heike Monogatari* and other sources, traditional puppetry in Japan developed into a sophisticated art emphasizing complex characters and plots and deeply emotional situations that often capture moments of anguishing conflict between a character’s personal feelings, *ninjō*, and social duty, *giri*.

My research in Hakusan during the period of my 2021-22 Fulbright Research Fellowship in Japan focused primarily on the Fukaze *bun’ya ningyō* troupe. The Fukaze Bun’ya Traditional Puppet Theatre Preservation Association’s leaders – the chanter, Michigami Tetuo, his wife, Michigami Yurika, the company administrator, Sakai Michio, and master of Fukaze’s local weaving tradition, Katsuki Hisayo – all of whom I befriended at a performance in October 2021, were eager to inform me that their tradition had received little scholarly attention and none in English, as far as they knew.<sup>4</sup> Although my Fulbright project focused primarily on puppetry within ritual contexts, these performers encouraged me to find out more about their troupe and its history,

<sup>4</sup> The event, sponsored by Hakusan City Hall, included performances from both Fukaze and Higashi Futakuchi troupes, and a third company, Tokubei-za, a *bunraku* troupe created by James Martin Holman, a retired Professor of Japanese Studies from the University of Missouri now living in Tokushima. His troupe includes both Japanese and foreign nationals, some his former students now living in Japan. I had been invited to perform with the troupe at this event. Attending rehearsals allowed me to see the other troupes up close and make initial connections with the performers.

so I added this work to my research.<sup>5</sup> Michigami, in his seventies, although raised in Fukaze village, has only in the last few years engaged in the tradition and, along with his wife, who is not from the village, is newly invested in enhancing opportunities to present and support the form. Fukaze company members generously provided me with relevant materials and hosted me during two visits to Hakusan, in April 2022 and April 2023 [Figure 1]. Consequently, while I will discuss both forms, and Higashi Futakuchi members also generously welcomed the Fukaze performers and me in their studio during one of my visits, my view of Fukaze's puppetry is more complete. Most of my information on the companies included here derives from the time I spent with the troupe members during my visits and from Yurika's helpful email answers to my follow-up questions.



*Fig. 1.* The author and the translator with members of the Fukaze Dekumawashi Preservation Association, their puppets in the background, at their rehearsal and performance studio in Tsurugi, Hakusan. Front row from left: Katsuki Hisayo, Kitamura Yoshimi, Claudia Orenstein, Evan Rostetter, Kita Yoshitake, Minami Kenichi, and Michigami Tetsuo. Back row from left: Matsui Sadako, Matsui Kiyoshi, Yamato Masami, Sinza Hideki, Tsubota Nobuo, Uno Mitsuo, Sakai Michio, and Michigami Yurika. April 2022. Photo courtesy of Shōgo Nakano, Hokkoku Shimbun, and the Fukaze Dekumawashi Preservation Association.

<sup>5</sup> They felt their troupe had received less attention than Higashi Futakuchi. If true, this could be for any number of reasons. Perhaps because they are no longer in their original mountain setting; or their puppets are less sophisticated than Fukaze's; or the troupe, with Tetuo and Yurika Michigami involved, are now interested in bringing more public attention in their art.

## 1. THE TWO TRADITIONS

Although Fukaze's and Higashi Futakuchi's puppetry both fall within the *bun'ya ningyō* tradition, they differ from each other in numerous ways. Each tradition claims to be roughly 350 years old, but their geneses are distinct. Fukaze's origin legend attributes its beginnings to itinerant puppeteers traveling through the area who were caught in one of the heavy snowfalls for which the region is famous. Fukaze villagers took in the performers, who were unable to continue their route, and cared for them during the long winter months. This generosity was unusual in a region where people often suffered from food shortages during the winter. The puppeteers must have entertained them in return, providing engaging diversion from the cold weather and daily toils. Importantly, the legend emphasizes that the puppeteers taught the villagers their art and left them with puppets and stories so they could continue performing for themselves once the artists had gone. There are no corroborating documents for these tales – nor for a variant version that says the performers lost their puppets to villagers while gambling, a story apparently favored by local gamblers –<sup>6</sup> but Fukaze residents have long embraced and recounted the main story that highlights the openheartedness of the locals and the form's lineage from professional itinerant performers. Puppeteers traveling from the center of puppetry in Osaka as well as Kyoto, spreading their art throughout Japan, were prevalent in the Edo period. *Bun'ya* players may have increasingly left the Osaka-Kyoto area to seek out new audiences as *ningyō joruri* grew in popularity. The Hakusan mountain region's harsh winter conditions are also legendary. Locals replace the term *yuki*, meaning 'snow', with the almost-synonym *yūki*, with a longer stress and different pitch on the *u*, meaning 'courage', when joking about the hardships of the season. Regional homes have sloped roofs, like those of Swiss chalets, to prevent them from collapsing from the weight of snow, and the roofs have windows built in so that dwellers can climb out from their attics when the drifts submerge their front doors. Artifacts in the Hakusan Folk Museum attest to local ingenuity in crafting tall boots, snowshoes, and sleds from the area's natural resources.

<sup>6</sup> E-mail message from Yurika Michigami to author, July 19, 2023.

In contrast to Fukaze's story, Higashi Futakuchi's legend attributes their form's beginning to villagers who traveled outside of the region and learned the art in Kyoto and Osaka – notably in Osaka's Dotonburi district, a lively center for puppetry at the time – and brought the practice back with them. There are several different accounts about the circumstances of this excursion. According to one source, gambling was widespread in the village, and performances were brought in to draw villagers away from gaming, a strategy which was said to have been successful. Another account claims that in 1655 four students from the village trained at different places in Kyoto and Osaka while pursuing other studies there. Another tells of two men who went on a pilgrimage to the island of Kyushu to discover new foods from outside their home region and there met the famous playwright for puppetry, Chikamatsu Monzaemon. Inspired by this encounter, they went on to Kyoto and Osaka and learned to perform, subsequently returning to the village with their newly acquired skills.<sup>7</sup>

Interestingly, what allowed both villages to support puppetry originally were unique trades they engaged in that brought them wealth and some leisure time to pursue their arts. Even performing only once a year, as they both did for the lunar New Year celebration (according to the Chinese lunar calendar used in Japan until 1873), would have required time for rehearsal and funds for upkeep of puppets and other materials. Equally important was downtime for the community at large so that people could come together and enjoy what was, in the past, a three or four-day festival of puppetry entertainment. These forms' incorporation of a chanter into the art of object animation adds a further layer of complexity as it requires someone who will dedicate themselves to learning to sing through complicated literary, poetic play texts. Fukaze's tradition does not include instrumental accompaniment; the chanter recites *a cappella*. The style is repetitive and has been compared to the sound of chanting sutras. The role of the chanter in both Hakusan troupes has generally been taken by men, but the sole Fukaze chanter before Michigami joined the troupe was Matsui Sadako, the first woman to take up this demanding role.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> OGUCHISONOSCHI 1979: 714-715.

<sup>8</sup> When I visited with the Fukaze company members in April 2022, the few women there, who had lived in the village when they were younger, discussed how women had been discouraged from taking part in the performances in the past as chanters and puppeteers and how those that tried (they alluded to a woman named Aoyama in particular who has now passed away and another, Hideko), discouraged by how they were treated,



The two now take turns chanting for long programs. As with *bunraku*, Higashi Futakuchi's shows integrate playing the three-stringed *shamisen* with their puppet performance and their chanting style is more nuanced than Fukaze's. The shamisen here is more intermittent and less elaborate than in *bunraku*, and their tradition also uses flute and taiko drum in an introductory blessing dance with the character Sanbasō.<sup>9</sup> A version of Sanbasō often precedes traditional puppet performances across Japan, especially at events associated with shrines, since it is a dance which offers blessings for peace, abundance, and a successful event. The National Bunraku Theatre even begins each day of its own performances with a Sanbasō, which also allows the novice puppeteers who do it to practice foundational performance techniques. The Sanbasō character is ubiquitous in both puppet and human renditions throughout the country at New Year, and Fukaze is unusual in not beginning their programs with this dance of blessing. For villagers to bring performance of puppets and chanting together, with or without the addition of instrumental music, to prepare and then perform a three or four-day program of elaborate epic tales, could only be accomplished with serious time, effort, and dedication.

Most villages in the Hakusan mountain region supported themselves through farming, work that was time and labor intensive. Moreover, the rice that farmers grew was taxed by the Shōgun government, creating financial obligations and hardships. Fukaze, however, was set on rough land inhospitable to farming, a supposed disadvantage that ironically worked in the citizens' favor. The mountainside behind the village was rich in *hinoki*, Japanese cypress trees, and, according to local legend, it was a monk who came to the village and taught the villagers how to turn the bark of the *hinoki* into thin strips they could weave into practical goods like baskets and hats. The villagers began making these products for public sale, especially the conical hats known as *hinokigasa*, widely sought after as protection from snow, rain, and sun. During the Edo period, the small Fukaze village was one of only four places in Japan to make these popular hats sold through-

had stopped pursuing the activity. However, as with many folk arts in Japan and elsewhere, as the forms become endangered, women have found new opportunities to take part.

<sup>9</sup> Sanbasō can also be done as an independent event. The character is known for the jumps in his dance that may be interpreted as preparing the fields for planting and regeneration. The figure, whose name means 'third old man', derives originally from a very old dance of blessing of three old men later transformed into the nō play *Okina*.



out the country. Fukaze even created an intricate distribution system, leaving their products with other villages that then sent them off to further locations. A settlement that in the oldest records had only thirteen households prospered and by 1877 had sixty-nine households, most if not all involved in some way in the local weaving production.<sup>10</sup> Sadly, by the 1950s Fukaze had so devastated the area of *binoki* trees that weavers had to travel to Nara, a three-hour drive away, to get their raw materials.

Beyond wealth, the weaving industry led Fukaze to develop a relatively egalitarian economy and society. This might be understood in contrast to some other local villages, like those housing Buddhist temples, where strong hierarchical social divisions prevailed. The *binoki* weaving technique was relatively straightforward, so everyone in the village could participate in the work and the wealth it brought. Women proved uniquely adept at it and, recognized as making valuable contributions to the village economy, were encouraged to marry locally and then stay in Fukaze, rather than look elsewhere for husbands. Since weaving provided work throughout the year, Fukaze men had no need to travel from home for jobs or other sources of income during lean times or in off-seasons, as was the case in some neighboring villages. Both men and women were available to take part in supporting the puppet performances. Fukaze developed a production method that put the locals into different work units whose members labored collectively. This system and the work values and comradery it fostered carried over into the puppetry production and performance process. For example, particular units were charged with maintaining specific puppets and equipping them with new clothes, hair, or paint when necessary. Looking at the underside of a Fukaze puppet's kimono, one can see handwriting that reveals the work unit and the names of those who gave money for the garment and sewed it [Figure 2]. The village's production system, for both its commercial goods and its puppetry performances, knitted the community and its members together.

<sup>10</sup> This information comes from local records and was transmitted to me by the curator of the Hakusan Folk Museum during my visit there in April 2023.

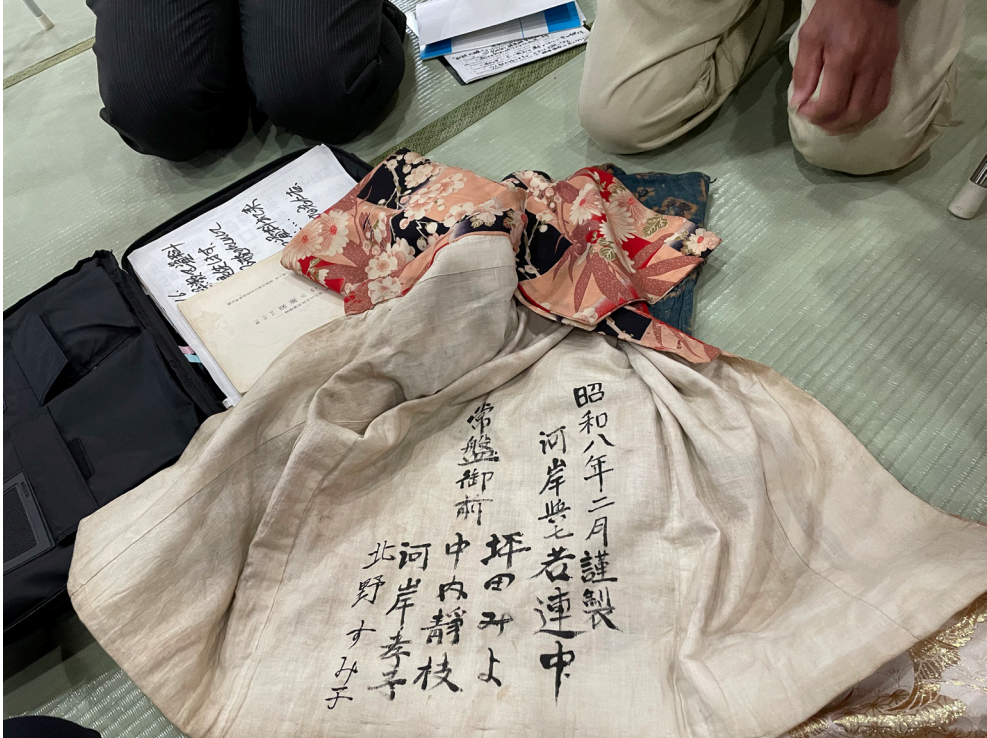


Fig. 2. The inside of the kimono of one of Fukaze's older puppets displays the names of those who funded and sewed the garment. Photo: Claudia Orenstein.

Villagers in Higashi Futakuchi primarily farmed; however, with their access to forest lands, they also developed their own lucrative industry, making charcoal, which was very much in demand. In the Muromachi period (1336-1573) Ishikawa developed a reputation as a charcoal region. Subsequently, «in the Edo period (1603-1868), policies introduced by the Kaga Clan, who ruled the area successfully, ensured that the entire charcoal demand in the castle town of Kanazawa and the rest of the domain was met through local production».<sup>11</sup> This work was labor intensive and dominated by men, with women in this village not actively participating. Although Higashi Futakuchi did not thereby develop the same collaborative production model and egalitarian social profile as Fukaze, wealth and occupational alternatives to farming likewise gave Higashi Futakuchi villagers extra financial means and time to support puppetry.

<sup>11</sup> <<https://ourworld.unu.edu/en/japans-charcoal-making-traditions-still-alive>>.

It is difficult to know if, in the early years of their development, there were cross-influences between the two traditions. Today we would consider the villages to be only a short drive apart, but before automobiles the distance would have been a long mountain hike. Given that both troupes did their performances at the same time of year, for their own New Year celebrations, it is unlikely that villagers hiked through the snow to observe their neighbors' festivities. One can't accurately test out the trek between the two villages today since in the 1970s Fukaze village was intentionally destroyed to make way for the Teodorigawa dam, a project undertaken to bring water, abundant in the mountains, to the growing nearby city of Kanazawa. Fukaze villagers, who saw their ancestral homes demolished and their lands submerged, were relocated, most to the Tsurugi area of Hakusan City, a more urban environment. The villagers attempted to keep some sense of their former community in their new home by continuing their performance tradition. Today the troupe has a well-appointed hall in Tsurugi area in Hakusan where they store performance materials and meet for rehearsals and the annual presentation. Nonetheless, torn from the small, relatively isolated community and rural lifestyle within which it flourished, Fukaze's puppetry tradition has been navigating questions about its continuance for almost half a century, even as it has managed to persist.

Although the flooding of Fukaze is a unique situation, the general precarity of traditional forms is widespread in Japan and globally. While the village of Higashi Futakuchi was spared Fukaze's watery fate, the continuation of its puppetry has also been of concern. Echoing the fortunes of many of Japan's rural areas, Higashi Futakuchi has suffered a drastic drop in population with young citizens moving to cities for jobs and the amenities of an urban lifestyle. When I visited Higashi Futakuchi in April 2022, my hosts shared that only a single village household remained with young children in it. As the population of Higashi Futakuchi continues to dwindle, and the last residents of the original Fukaze village – those in their 60s and older, still holding memories of the annual puppetry performance in its originary, now subaqueous, home – continue to age, with few new young members in sight, the complications in how not just to preserve but even how to characterize these folk arts accrue. Concerns about these home-grown forms transforming from native practices with local engagement into tourist attractions have been voiced at least since the forms received their Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property designation

in 1977, if not earlier. In Japan, local arts like these can choose to go through a process to be officially recognized first as part of Japan's local and then national heritage, and, once receiving these designations, municipal, prefectural, and national government entities can offer financial and other support. Hakusan City has been particularly energetic in promoting its many unique natural as well as cultural assets. But it remains the job of locals to continue to not only value but engage actively in their traditions for these to continue as living arts. Visiting with those who take part in these two puppet performance forms reveals their heartfelt devotion to their local traditions.

## 2. THE PUPPETS

The puppets of both these *bun'ya ningyō* troupes are much simpler than those currently used in *bunraku* but reflect objects and practices of earlier Japanese puppeteers who contributed to *bunraku*'s development. The *sannin-zukai* or three-person manipulation technique that has become emblematic of *bunraku*, in which a team of three puppeteers work in unison to manipulate large, fully articulated figures, was not created until 1734, by Yoshida Bunzaburō, and was first used for only a single puppet in the show *Ninin Yakko* ('Two Footmen').<sup>12</sup> It took time for this style of puppet to dominate the *bunraku* stage. In contrast to *bunraku*'s now dynamic figures, with their jointed arms, legs, movable heads, eyes, and eyebrows, and sometimes with faces that can fully transform, Fukaze Dekumawashi's figures are remarkably basic. Their bodies consist primarily of two interconnected crossed sticks: a vertical one, with the puppet's painted head on one end, which the single puppet manipulator grips from the other, and a horizontal stick used as the shoulders and arms of the character. These sticks are straight, with no joints, moving parts, or hands on them, and are held together by lengths of rough rope copiously wrapped around them to form the bulk that stands in for the puppet's torso under its kimono [Figure 3].

<sup>12</sup> LEITER 2006: 14.

While *bunraku* dazzles with figures that were developed to rival the performances of the *kabuki* theatre's human actors and can accomplish a wide range of intricate gestures and flamboyant actions, the charm and captivation of Fukaze's puppets are more subtle but still impressive. The puppeteers give their figures life and movement by rotating them from side to side, stomping their own feet in rhythm with the figure's motions. A puppet's swaying allows its kimono to flutter, adding further liveness to the character. Fukaze attributes the term *deku-mawashi*, ('wooden doll and revolving') in the troupe's



Fig. 3. Sakai Michio, Fukaze puppeteer and company administrator, displays an unclothed puppet to reveal the basic construction style of the troupe's figures. Photo: Claudia Orenstein.

name to this rotating motion at the heart of their technique. The puppeteer's movements and stomps viscerally connect the puppet's liveness with the actions and energy of the human performer. The stomping also echoes the importance of this action as found in other Japanese performing arts, like *nō* theatre, where it reflects a lineage or association with the actions of rice planting and related dances as well as with a mythical Shinto story, recorded in the eighth century *Kojiki* (Records of Ancient Matters), that has been interpreted as the origin of performance in Japan. In this tale, the sun goddess, Amaterasu, angry at her brother, the thunder god, locks herself in a cave, taking light and life from the earth. The other gods, seeking a way to remedy the situation, gather and watch Uzume, goddess of



the dawn, do a stomping dance on top of an overturned bucket. The performance ends with the goddess lifting her skirts to reveal her genitals. Her dance makes the other gods laugh, drawing Amaterasu out of her cave and returning light and fecundity to the land. The story underlines interconnections between ideas of performance, joyfulness, and the rejuvenation of life that remain present in many Shinto rituals and related performing arts. While Fukaze's puppetry is not specifically connected to this lineage or to Shinto rituals, the prominence of stomping may contain remnants of these associations or influences from other practices and performance forms. In any case, it offers at least one more argument for why puppet shows, even those dealing with the tragedies of war and betrayal, would be appropriate fare for a New Year celebration. Indeed, puppetry performances, especially those specifically intended to offer blessings and inspire rejuvenation, take place as part of New Year celebrations throughout Japan. While Fukaze troupe members don't see their form in any way related to offering blessings, it is certainly celebratory. Fukaze's puppets were also brought out in the past as part of wedding celebrations. Villagers would parade to the home of the newlyweds, carrying puppets while waving, close to the puppets, festively colored sticks with streamers and bells attached, making it seem as if the puppets were waving the celebratory objects. The villagers sometimes performed a short scene from one of the puppet plays outside the home, but the primary intent in bringing the puppets was to augment the festive spirit of the marriage celebration.

The stomping action here importantly serves very practical purposes. First, it imparts further liveness to the unjointed, inanimate figures, giving them sound and some kinetic as well as aural force. Also, given that the Fukaze tradition has no instrumental accompaniment, the stomping fills out the show's overall soundscape and helps keep beat with the rhythmic chanting, connecting recitation and puppeteering during performance. Importantly, by varying the speed of a puppet's movements along with the force of the stomping, the puppeteer defines different character types. Warrior figures are turned with swift energetic actions accompanied by strong, vigorous stomps. Female characters receive more graceful, legato gestures, and lighter footwork that barely makes a sound; the movement of elderly figures is characterized by slower, hesitant motions that integrate a slight shaking and no discernable stomping at all. Kita Yoshitake, the most accomplished member of the troupe, explained to me that these elderly figures are too weak to stomp.

Kita himself, however, in his seventies, appears anything but weak as he dances with his puppets, something he has been doing since he was sixteen years old [Figure 4]. There is speculation that Fukaze's puppets, with their limited movements, reflect an even older

style of puppetry than Higashi Futakuchi's or that of other surviving *bun'ya* forms Higashi Futakuchi's puppets are relatively more sophisticated in construction than Fukaze's. They also have a vertical stick with the puppet's head at one end that is gripped by the performer at the other. But the cross stick here serves as a shoulder girdle with the vertical stick inserted into it, which allows the head to turn independent of the body. In contrast to Fukaze's puppets, the whole body of a Higashi Futakuchi puppet doesn't need to shift for the head to face a different direction. Higashi Futaku-



Fig. 4. Kita Yoshitake, the most accomplished performer of the troupe, shows off one of Fukaze's puppets, used for the role of a young man. Kita wears a mask as the photo was taken during the COVID-19 pandemic. Photo: Claudia Orenstein.

chi figures generally have a wooden left arm, with a carved hand, which attaches to the shoulder bar and hangs down at the figure's side. The performer then lends their own right hand, placed into the puppet's right kimono sleeve, to act as the figure's other hand. This allows a character to pick up a sword for fighting or other props. By comparison, in Fukaze's puppetry, when a sword or other prop is needed, the puppeteer just holds it from



underneath the playing board so that it sticks up alongside the character. Some Higashi Futakuchi figures, generally female characters who are less physically active onstage and not engaging in battles, have two arms with carved hands, one hanging on each side [Figure 5].

Higashi Futakuchi's puppets also have a simple trigger mechanism on the vertical pole – similar to those commonly seen in *bunraku* and other traditional Japanese puppets – that allows the performer to move the character's head up and down by means of a lever, here operated by the performer's thumb. At their beautiful, well-equipped studio and performance space in their mountain village, the head of the Higashi Futakuchi Bun'ya Traditional Puppet Theatre Preservation Association, Michishita Jinichi,



Fig. 5. One of Higashi Futakuchi's female puppets, with two hands, hanging backstage at the troupe's studio. Photo: Claudia Orenstein.

demonstrated for my companions and me an old, experimental device that consisted of a hand and arm holding a sword that was meant to replace the use of the performer's right hand. It has a hoop attached to the arm that the performer could move with their thumb while holding the limb in place. The set-up, however, proved too cumbersome for performance and was dropped. In this prototype, we can witness the experimentations of local puppeteers as they have tried to create figures with more realistic features and

different kinds of movements. The simplicity of a puppeteer's direct engagement with and manipulation of a figure, without mechanisms, however, can sometimes be not only easier but more expressive than the use of elaborate devices. It is inspirational to see how much liveness and action Fukaze players get out of puppets that have so little flexibility built into them [Figures 6-7].



*Fig. 6.* A Higashi Futakuchi troupe's experiment for replacing use of the performer's hand for their puppets' right hand. The system proved too cumbersome for performance and was not adopted. Photo: Claudia Orenstein.





Fig. 7. Mishishita Jinichi, master performer and head of Higashi Futakuchi's preservation society, displays an unclothed puppet and the gripping technique for performance. Photo: Claudia Orenstein.

Higashi Futakuchi puppeteers also dance with their puppets. This troupe, however, attributes the term *dekumawashi* not to any turning gestures they make as they move figures from side to side, but to the overall swaying dance of puppeteer and object performing together. These puppeteers also stomp but additionally move by sliding their feet as they dance [Figure 8]. They refer to their overall performance as *deku no mai*, a sliding puppet dance. In demonstrating his technique for me, Doishita Jintaro, a long-time member of the company, described how one needs to move one's head in unison with that of the puppet for it to appear alive. Moreover, he says, a performer must feel in their heart

the same feeling as the character and express the emotion with one's heart as one dances with the puppet. Although their techniques are slightly different, both traditions emphasize the close interconnection of object and performer working together to bring emotional expression from the figures.

Today, both troupes perform with puppets that were crafted by professional carvers in Tokyo, commissioned within the last fifty years to make replicas of the troupe's older figures. Higashi Futakuchi houses their older puppets in their performance and rehearsal hall, some in enclosed cases. The



*Fig. 8.* Doishita Jintaro, from Higashi Futakuchi, demonstrates his performance technique. Photo: Claudia Orenstein.

Fukaze troupe's older figures, over thirty of them, which they stopped using in 1991, are kept in the Tsurugi Storage of the Hakusan City Museum, a museum that is no longer in operation.<sup>13</sup> However, curator of the Hakusan City Museum, Murakami Kazuo, graciously pulled the figures out of storage and set them up in a room of his institution for the current company members, me, and others connected to the tradition to inspect during my field

<sup>13</sup> According to Michigami Yurika, the museum was called 鶴来町立鶴来博物館 (Tsurugi town-run Tsurugi Museum) when it was decided that the old puppets would be stored there. Sakai says the troupe members were very happy about it at that time; however, the situation changed after Tsurugi Town was merged into Hakusan City. The museum was called 白山市立鶴来博物館 (Hakusan City-run Tsurugi museum) when it was closed. Whereas Dekumawashi and Fukaze people have been at the mercy of the municipal administration, Higashi Futakuchi was wise to keep their old puppets in their possession. E-mail correspondence with author, July 19, 2023.

research in April 2022. Fukaze performers themselves had not seen these original puppets in over thirty years.

Among those who joined in our viewing was Toki Kawagishi, 92, the oldest living member of the original village. She shared her memories of how each year, around February 7<sup>th</sup>, locals would pull out the puppets to inspect them and see what repairs were needed for that year's performance. She recalled, sometime in the 1940s, walking for a whole day through the snow with other women to a place where they could buy materials for puppet kimonos and hair ornaments. They used children's ornaments and children's cotton kimonos, adapting them for their even smaller puppets. Around 1960, she said, when Japan's economy improved, so did the materials they purchased for the puppets' outfits. Today, Fukaze's puppets, especially those playing noble figures, have clothes made from heavy, patterned and often brocade silk. She also noted that performances did not take place during World War II or at other times of hardship.

The women of Fukaze have long enjoyed and taken pride in dressing and caring for puppets, especially the headdresses and kimonos of the female figures [Figure 9]. As Yurika shared with me in e-mail correspondences over several months in 2023, in preparation for a special program in Hakusan in October that brought the remaining *bun'ya* troupes from around Japan together for a festival of performances and discussions, Katsuki Hisayo bought new *kanzashi* (hair



Fig. 9. The women of Fukaze village have long enjoyed and taken pride in dressing and caring for puppets, especially the headdresses and kimono of the female figures. Photo: Courtesy of Nakauchi Mikio.



ornaments) from the Tsumami Kanzashi Museum in Tokyo. Women from Fukaze, together with others living in the area where the puppeteers now have their studio, gathered, as in the past, to attach new hair and ornaments to the puppets, enjoying friends and conversation in the process. It took them a day to complete four small heads. With fewer puppeteers available, women have now taken on puppeteering as well, which was not common in the past, although at least one woman had tried. For newer puppets, the heavy wood of the figures was replaced with ropes to shape the torsos, making them lighter. This change, Yurika says, has been good for all the puppeteers, but especially for today's women performers.

While Fukaze's puppets certainly represent the familiar cast of character types common to the Japanese puppet stage – warriors, villagers, noblewomen – along with some devil figures, each seems to express an individual personality in its carving and painting [Figures 10-14].



*Fig. 10.* Presumed to be the oldest puppet in the collection, today a replica of this character is used for the *kōjō*, or prologue introducing the performance. Photo: Claudia Orenstein.



*Fig. 11.* One of Fukaze's older puppets from storage; a figure of an old man. Photo: Claudia Orenstein.



*Fig. 12.* One of Fukaze's older puppets from storage; a young girl wearing a brocade silk kimono and hair ornaments. Photo: Claudia Orenstein.



*Fig. 13.* An older Fukaze puppet from storage with a fancy, brocade, kimono. Photo: Claudia Orenstein.



*Fig. 14.* One of Fukaze's devil puppets. Photo: Claudia Orenstein.



Some faces are unlike any others I have seen in Japan. The one believed to be the oldest figure, the replica of which the company uses to introduce the performance program, has an unpainted, dark brown face, with eyes carved as slits slanted downward, a triangular nose, gruff frown, and no hair. Some of these characteristics may be the product of wear over the years that removed paint and hair leaving only the rough carving. The devils have almost comical faces with appropriately exaggerated painted features, horns inserted into holes in their scalps, and scraggly tufts of hair popping from the tops of their heads. The faces of good noble figures are painted white, but their antagonists have serious or angry red faces. The puppets were most probably made by the villagers themselves, although some appear more professionally executed than others. There exist no records about who carved what and the troupe members do not know.<sup>14</sup> Unlike *bunraku* puppets, where the heads can be removed from the bodies, allowing one to peek inside and see the name of the artist who carved it, the heads of these puppets do not come off the sticks that hold them and don't display any names. The hair used for the puppets most probably came from local animals, some likely from boars, and was inserted in groups of strands into holes in the heads.

### 3. THE REPERTOIRE

The combined Oguchi troupes have a repertoire of eight plays, each with several scenes. Four of the plays are performed by both companies: *Genji Eboshi-ori* ('*The Eboshi Hat-maker*'), *Kadode Yashima* ('*The Battle of Yashima*'), *Oeyama Shuten-dōji* ('*Shuten-doji at Oeyama*'), and *Taishokukan* ('*The Stolen Crystal Jewel*'). Fukaze has two more plays in its collection, *Kumai Tarō Kō Kō no Maki* ('*The Filial Piety of Kumai Tarō*') and *Kanadehon Chūshingura* ('*The Treasury of Loyal Retainers*'). Higashi Futakuchi also has two further plays, *Shusse Kagekiyo* ('*Kagekiyo Victorious*') and *Ōyama Uba* ('*The Old Mountain Woman*'). Some of the plays, like *Shusse Kagekiyo*, *Kadode Yashima*, and *Genji Eboshi-ori*,

<sup>14</sup> There was only one puppet whose carver was identified with any certainty. It was carved by Minato Masao (湊真佐男), an art teacher who spent time in Fukaze village in the 1960s and decided to make a puppet based on others he had seen there. Minato also joined our viewing of the puppets and discussed his figure.

are early works by Chikamatsu. It is common in Japanese traditional performing arts to feature popular scenes from very long plays, and the troupes don't necessarily have all the scenes of these plays in their performance traditions.

Working in collaboration, professors and graduate students from Kanazawa University, members of the two puppetry Preservation Associations, and other official organizations of Hakusan City, from 2008 to 2010, published a series of eight beautiful volumes that each has the text of one of the plays, in both the original version and in updated, contemporary Japanese, along with copious annotations on the texts. The stories of many of the plays are taken from the *Heike Monogatari* epic on themes that can also be found in Japan's other traditional forms like *kabuki* and *nō* theatre. They are full of complex relationships of loyalty and revenge, and the first page of each of the publications provides a synopsis of the story and a chart showing the relationships between the characters. In *Genji Eboshi-ori*, for example, Osada no Tadamune and Taira no Kiyomori, warriors of the Heike clan, are tasked by the Emperor Go-Shirakawa to set up a grave for Yoshitomo, a warrior of the Genji clan whom they defeated, and to take care of his widow and children since he had previously been the Emperor's loyal retainer. Kiyomori, however, seeks instead to have them killed. Found by her rivals, the widow, clutching her youngest child, still an infant, laments her fate as she prepares to sacrifice her life. The family is saved at the last minute by Tokuro Morinaga, who had been a servant to the Genji and who hears the family's cries. Later, Yoshitomo's sons, now grown, seek revenge on their father's killers. Central to this part of the plot is the son, Ushiwaka, buying an *eboshi* hat, which indicates his rank, and falling in love with the hatmaker's daughter, adding a love story to the already complex revenge tale. *Shuten-doji at Oeyama*, by contrast, is based on a folk story and recounts how three priests defeat a sake-loving demon who has been terrorizing their area. *Taishokukan* has mythic elements and can be read as a Buddhist allegory. It is about a warrior named Manko who is asked by the Empress of China, a Japanese woman married to the Chinese emperor, to take a precious crystal Buddhist jewel across the sea to her father in Japan. The Dragon King, who lives in the sea, tries to steal the jewel during the boat's crossing, first by force then by trickery, appearing in the guise of a forlorn maiden, who later reveals herself to be the fearful beast. A high point of Higashi Futakuchi's performance of this episode is the replacement of the maiden with a long, cloth dragon

puppet that two performers, one holding each end, undulate back and forth across the stage during the heated battle between Manko and the creature. The play continues with further adventures in trying to retrieve the jewel that include a mother's personal sacrifice for her son and, after her death, her ascension as Kannon, goddess of mercy.

A series of online videos made through Hakusan City Hall, available to watch on the municipality's YouTube channel, introduces viewers to some of these stories and the puppetry forms.<sup>15</sup> The series features the effervescent Gart T. Westerhout, an American who teaches at Kinjo University in Hakusan, along with Daniel Herriott from England, and Susan May from Australia, who were both at the time of filming Coordinators of International Relations from the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program working at City Hall. They tell viewers about the puppetry practices and elucidate the stories by means of a *kamishibai* (a Japanese picture storytelling form). The *kamishibai* stories, translated by J. Martin Holman, and the accompanying images, executed by Little Mou, have also been published by Hakusan City International Exchange Association as a series of softcover children's books. The online videos include clips of Higashi Futakuchi performances and brief interviews with troupe members. The combined online media and books offer a fun way to learn about the tales, emphasizing presenting the art as children's entertainment and cutting out most of what might be difficult to grasp in order to reach a wider audience. Hakusan City is very active in cross-cultural exchange with international sister cities in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, China, Germany, and France, and these videos help connect foreigners to the local arts. Hakusan also has a strong interest in making the traditions accessible to local viewers as these puppetry forms will need both younger performers and patrons to continue.

The videos explain how the troupe starts each event with important preliminaries: the Sanbasō puppet dance of blessing followed by the *kōjō* ('opening statement' or 'prologue') where a puppet introduces the main program. After the plays, the perfor-

<sup>15</sup> You can find the playlist of these particular videos here, on YouTube: <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LujCaUMDN1Y&list=PLmTr\\_Mb6sMcQloDapYrC1vwiCMzbTxrsP](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LujCaUMDN1Y&list=PLmTr_Mb6sMcQloDapYrC1vwiCMzbTxrsP)>. The following website takes you to all the Hakusan City Hall videos: <<https://www.youtube.com/@user-ok3ns7gn11/playlists>>. A full performance of *Shutendōji* with accompanying *hana bome* can be found at this website in Japanese without translation: <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_AT0sNctFV8&list=PLmTr\\_Mb6sMcQloDapYrC1vwiCMzbTxrsP&index=14](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_AT0sNctFV8&list=PLmTr_Mb6sMcQloDapYrC1vwiCMzbTxrsP&index=14)>.

mance ends with a *hana home* ('flower praise sequence') in which a puppeteer with his puppet uses copious word play as part of thanking the audience for coming and offering the artists the opportunity to perform. Fukaze's opening event, by contrast, is not a dance of blessing, but a short highlight from the main play. They also have a short *kōjō* before they begin their main program, announcing the plays that will be performed. They perform their *hana home* at intermission rather than at the end of the performance. Traditionally, at the end of the New Year event, the Fukaze performers and spectators, their fellow villagers, come together for folk dancing, singing, and *sake* drinking.

In the Fukaze troupe, it is Mr. Kita who chooses the episodes to be performed each year. In the old days each of the companies staged all their plays for their New Year celebrations, around sixteen hours of performance. Since the multi-day event has today been reduced to a single evening's presentation, for a long time the Fukaze troupe neglected some of their repertoire. Each year they presented the same few lively crowd-pleasers, which relieved the performers from having to rehearse new material. During my 2023 visit, Sakai looked at the repertoire list and remarked that some of the scenes that were rarely performed were left behind because they were boring. Other company members, by contrast, felt that these were just quieter scenes that nonetheless had their own interest. The troupe members all agreed that certain scenes wouldn't make sense unless offered within a sequence of connected ones. In recent years, Kita has made a point of including, at one time or another, each of the scenes in the repertoire in rotation so that the memory and the how-to of the performances can be preserved and passed down. Knowing his own time for performing is limited, he has also created detailed prompt books for each scene of each play with photos inserted that clearly show which puppets play which characters, and which are used in each section of the various scenes [Figure 15].

In February 2023, after three years of canceled New Year events due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Fukaze was finally able to resume their annual performance. For this revival presentation, Kita selected scenes from two plays, the one they deem to be the oldest in the repertoire, *Oeyama Shuten-dōji*, and the newest, *Genji Eboshi-ori*. These two plays, the company felt, could appeal to diverse sensibilities: *Oeyama Shuten-dōji*, with a cadre of devils and lively action, would be more pleasing to children, while *Genji Eboshi-ori*, containing philosophical ideas, would be of more interest to adults. Photos the

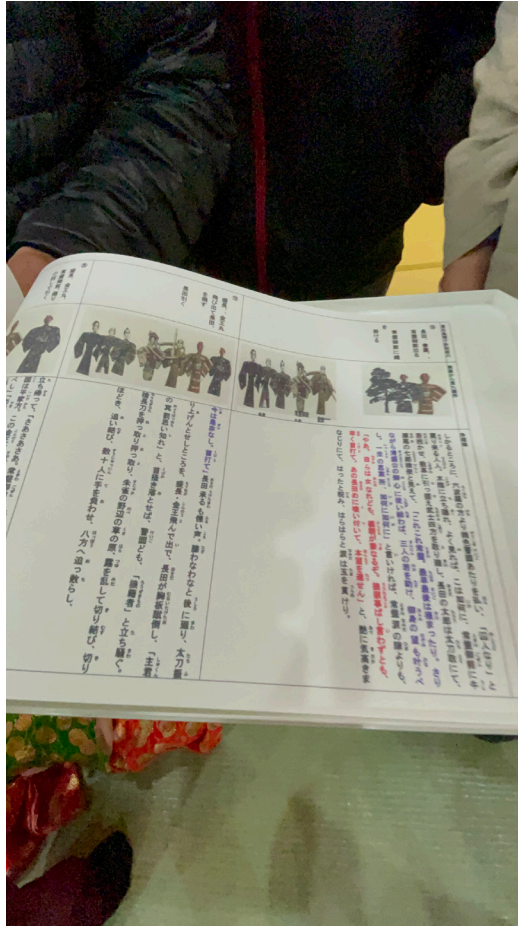


Fig. 15. A page of one of the prompt books Kita Yoshitake made that clearly illustrates which puppets are used in each scene. Photo: Claudia Orenstein.

troupe took of the event show that, although their small hall had a full audience for the performance, only one or two children attended. All the same, the troupe's attempt to appeal to a broad spectrum of spectators, especially children, could allow them to bring this performance back in other contexts in the future, perhaps for presentations in schools. *Oeyama* notably contains the beloved tradition of the devil figures throwing candy out to the spectators as part of the show. Elderly village members fondly remember chasing after the candies when they were young. Another novelty in this show is that one of the

many devils is not a puppet but a masked human performer, looming above his fellow puppet players [Figure 16]. The troupe does not stage *Oeyama* frequently because it requires sixteen puppeteers, a large number for a company straining to recruit new members. The cast requirements also create complications for the possibility of bringing the play to schools out of season. For the 2023 performance, Fukaze was able to round up volunteers to work alongside the usual corps team of trained, committed players so this crowd-pleaser could be revived.

Some members of Fukaze are interested in expanding their offerings, with projects like teaching programs in schools. But there is a division in the company of how to think about this folk art. Originally just a local community event, with very personal resonance, some do not feel the troupe should be paid for what they do or profess to greater professionalism than what their club-like, occasional participation warrants. Others would like to see greater possibilities for their art and further recognition and support for it locally, as well as other means of attracting new, younger performers to guarantee the beloved tradition a long future.



Fig. 16. Michigami Tetuo demonstrates the mask devil character that appears in Fukaze's *Oeyama Shuten-dōji*. Photo: Claudia Orenstein.



#### 4. CONCLUSION

In the vibrant cities of Kyoto and Osaka, bustling during the Edo period with people hungry for novel entertainment, puppetry was primarily a commercial art. Performers seeking to attract crowds, especially as their shows competed with other pastimes, could readily discard old practices – whether in terms of the plays they performed, the styles of chanting or musical accompaniment they used, or the types of puppets they built – trading them for newer, more trendy and popular fare. While Fukaze and Higashi Futakuchi villages each had their own lucrative commercial enterprises that helped sustain their puppetry, the puppet performances themselves were never commercial but, instead, beloved community traditions that brought locals together for festive celebration. The remoteness of the mountain villages, periodically locked in by snow and relatively free from outside influence, helped support the preservation of these arts with much of their early character intact, even as related forms died out elsewhere. The *Heike Monogatari* epic's dramatic episodes, especially popular during the period when *bun'ya ningyō* flourished, were central to fueling these artforms, providing them with tales of emotional depth and narrative complexity. The two traditions are not only of interest for how they reflect older models of puppet performance, but equally for each one's unique qualities – the particular style of their puppet heads and construction; the performative strategies each troupe uses to enliven their figures; the discourses of the local performers about their art; and, significantly, the way the traditions have been central pillars of community identity, especially for Fukaze, whose former citizens no longer have the terrain of a home village as a tangible place for connection to personal and collective histories and to each other. With the erosion of rural lifestyles throughout Japan and the aging of these forms' most engaged performers, it is difficult to anticipate what will become of these arts. Along with Hakusan City Hall, the preservation associations have experimented with many means of documenting the forms, finding new performance opportunities, and promoting their traditions to a broader public. Performers and spectators appreciating the distinctive artistic qualities these arts have to offer are as important to their continuance as valuing their conservation of bygone practices.



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