

# 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



"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.

Namahage Sedo Festival (in 2011)