

# Eisa

## Spirit of Okinawa

Eisa Night dancers



A mixture of dance, song and Obon rites, the folk tradition that is Eisa is an unmissable feature of the Okinawan summer. Eisa is also danced elsewhere in Japan and even overseas, notably Hawaii.

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**P**ULSATING thumps of *taiko* drums and animated shouts reverberate through Awase fishing port, Okinawa City.

Drummers in turban-like headdress and ornate costume move in unison across the ground, legs lunging and pirouetting, the beats of the drums punctuating their carefully choreographed steps.

Female dancers donning *yukata* glide gracefully in their wake, hands waving delicately.

Among the onlookers are children who mimic the drummers' dynamic moves, thrusting their legs laterally, hands clutching toy drums that they bang with tiny sticks.

They've gathered in Okinawa City to watch an evening of Eisa – a dance that's as representative of Okinawa as *shisa* (lion-dog) gargoyles or bitter *goya* melons.

"Eisa is Okinawa's sound of summer," says one of the onlookers, who has traveled from another part of Okinawa to enjoy "Eisa Night." "We call it *matsuri* (festival), but for Okinawans it's much more than that."

Indeed, while Eisa is an arresting spectacle, bringing together multiple dance teams who take turns strutting their stuff, it's also held to mark a more solemn occasion.

Eisa is pivotal to Obon, the midsummer custom of paying homage to departed ancestors, much like Pithru Paksha for Hindus, or All Souls' Day for Christians.

Obon in Okinawa, where the festival is called "Kyu Bon" (Old Bon), is celebrated on the thirteenth to fifteenth days of the seventh month of the (shorter) lunar calendar. The actual date varies according to the solar calendar, but Kyu Bon typically occurs in August.

The origins of Eisa's eye-catching dance are debated, according to Yuko Higa of the Eisa Museum in Okinawa City.

Scholars have proposed several theories, some suggesting Eisa was an indigenous custom practiced since antiquity. A more widely accepted claim is that it evolved from *nembutsu odori*, a Buddhist folk dance performed to pacify the spirits of the deceased.

Top, Yuko Higa and Airi Toma of the Eisa Museum in Okinawa City; middle, Children dance Eisa beating miniature *shime-daiko* drums; bottom, Eisa costumes unique to different regions of Okinawa

Originally, *nembutsu* chants were spread in Okinawa by a Buddhist monk named Taichu, who visited from his native Fukushima Prefecture, northern Japan, in 1603, staying in Okinawa for three years.

A centuries-old Fukushima tradition known as the Jangara Nembutsu Odori holds similarities to Eisa, adding weight to this view.

It is also postulated that *nembutsu* sect followers known as *nimbucha* were responsible for spreading *nembutsu* chants, or hymns, through funerals and other Buddhist ceremonies they held. As these took root in Okinawa they gradually became a key part of a folk tradition that mixed dance, song and Obon rites.

It became commonplace for performers to dance through their communities during Obon, welcoming home the departed and shouting “hi ya sa sa, hai ya” to keep time as they performed. The addition of a taiko drum or two served to ward off rogue spirits, Higa says.

Whatever theory is correct, Eisa has been a part of Okinawan culture for at least 400 to 500 years, says colleague Airi Toma.

In general, it is traditional for performers to greet their deceased ancestors during the night of the first day of Kyu Bon, before seeing them off on the last day and gathering at the local village hall to dance some more, says Toma who, like Higa, is a former Eisa performer.

“But there are local variations, both in the songs performed and the way they are sung – even the way drumsticks are wielded,” Toma says.

In more recent years, Eisa has undergone significant changes.

Following the end of World War II, Eisa in Okinawa City was turned into an officially organized annual contest, the Zento Eisa Konkuru (now the Okinawa Zento Eisa Matsuri), into which local youth associations entered teams of dancers that vied for prizes.

The competitive element naturally led to more elaborate costumes and performances, with dynamism boosted by an increase in taiko drums – from the large *odaiko* to the smaller *shimedaiko* – alongside the traditional three-stringed *sanshin*, a castanet-like bamboo instrument called the *yotsutake*,



and *kaneuchi* gongs, she says.

The competitive element has since been abandoned, though the costumes and instruments remain.

This year, many Eisa teams, some comprising fifty or more members, will take part in the sixty-fourth Zento Eisa Festival, to be held in August.

“I fell in love with Eisa when I was about three and used to try and mimic the dances,” says one dancer, 19, who performed at July’s Eisa Night. “It took about two years to get to a standard where I could take part in events like this. But I love the vitality and the camaraderie.”

Another dancer, also 19, says he also feels a sense of pride and achievement. “It’s harder than it might look, especially in this heat, but it’s worth it. I want to help ensure the tradition continues.”