

Bon Odori

Symbol of the Japanese Summer



Bon Odori, a dance performed every year for centuries by people of all ages across Japan, is for many the highlight of Japan's summertime festivities.

ROB GILHOOLY

A woman clad in *yukata* (summer kimono) skips elegantly around the narrow marble rim of a large circular fountain in Tokyo's Hibiya Park, hands waving gracefully above her head as hundreds of fellow dancers on less slippery terrain below cheer her on.

They had gathered for Bon Odori, a summertime dance festival that's the highlight of a centuries-old Buddhist custom called Obon, which is held annually throughout Japan for the repose of the souls of the deceased.

Despite the solemn roots, there's nothing remotely somber about this and many other Bon Odori events.

Although the dances performed and the music played tend to differ from region to region, typically residents dressed in *yukata* dance around a raised stage known as a *yagura*, which also functions as a bandstand for musicians and singers, who perform mostly traditional Obon music and *minyo* folk songs.

The dances, which take place on streets, inside parks or within temple grounds and usually beneath rows of *chochin* paper lanterns, involve relatively simple steps, with participants of all ages following an imaginary circle.

Dancers on the inside of the circle are often the more seasoned performers, while those with two left feet tend to stick to the outer limits - closer to colorful stalls selling food and beverages.

Typically it's a social event bringing communities together for a drink and chin-wag. But many people are here for one thing only: to dance the night away and, in some cases, carry on until sunrise.

"I love it so much, I simply can't get enough of it," says Kumiko Yamada, a member of a Tokyo-based group preserving traditional Japanese dances. "I go to other Bon Odori events outside of Tokyo, too. I love the lively atmosphere. It's a symbol of Japanese summer."

Bon Odori has its roots in dances called Nembutsu Odori, a Buddhist chanting ritual-cum-dance that dates back to the Kamakura era (1185-1333), according to Bijo Ageha, an expert in Japanese traditional dance who wrote his university thesis on Gujo Odori - one of Japan's "big three" Bon Odori dances.

Nembutsu Odori became an integral part of the Obon



Video by Satoshi Tanaka



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- 1 A woman wearing a *yukata* (summer kimono) dances around the rim of the Hibiya Park fountain
- 2 Young and old dance together

- 3 Bijo Ageha demonstrates a Bon Odori dance
- 4 Performers atop and in front of the traditional *yagura* stage

festival when it began in Japan around 500 years ago, adds Ageha, who is a professor with Japanese Folk Song & Dancing (Public Interest Incorporated) Foundation and also runs the Ageha School of Bon odori dance.

“It’s commonly believed the dance was performed to welcome and console the deceased, while the *yagura* stage was erected to allow deceased ancestors to come down and communicate with the living and enjoy the event together,” he says.

While some places strive to protect traditional dances, others, particularly bigger conurbations like Tokyo, have evolved, with more popular songs supplementing traditional ones.

Meanwhile, the typical musical ensemble - consisting of musicians playing *shamisen* (three-stringed guitar), flutes and other traditional instruments - is frequently replaced by recorded music.

Last year, Ageha was involved in a Bon Odori event in his own community – Tokyo’s Nakano City – that included guest DJs playing disco and rock tracks.

Among them was “Living on a Prayer” by US rock band Bon Jovi and a video of “Bon dance meets Bon Jovi” uploaded to social media was greeted by 150,000 likes and a message of appreciation from band frontman Jon Bon Jovi himself.

“Tokyo residents come from all over Japan so the Bon Odori events tend to be hybrids anyway,” said Yuto Takahashi as he danced with friends during the August dance at Hibiya Park. “Tokyo’s also pretty international, so it seems natural to include songs from other countries, too.”

Indeed the Hibiya event fused songs by popular J-Pop artists being played alongside overseas numbers and what is perhaps the capital’s well-known Bon Odori folk song, Tokyo Gorin Ondo.

That song was originally written for Tokyo’s last Olympic Games in 1964 (*gorin* is Japanese for Olympics), and a new version, with updated lyrics and simplified choreography was recently unveiled in anticipation of the 2020 Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games. Its release was accompanied by a humorous video showing the uninitiated how to perform the Bon dance.

“Song and dance are universal languages, entertainments enjoyed by everyone all over the world regardless of race, gender and status,” says Ageha, adding they are representative of the kind of “Unity in Diversity” to which the Olympics aspires. “I think it would be wonderful if, through Tokyo 2020, a quintessential aspect of Japanese culture could become a part of that global language.” 