



by Erin K. Schonauer and Jamie C. Schonauer

# DANCE THE BON ODORI

## FEEL THE THUNDEROUS BEATS

of the *taiko* (tie-koh). Watch graceful dancers perform in brightly colored kimonos. Admire the glowing lanterns as they illuminate the traditional Japanese folk dance — Bon Odori (bone oh-doo-re).

Bon Odori, or Bon dance, honors dead ancestors and family members who have come to Earth to visit for three days during the Obon Festival. The Japanese believe deceased spirits never stop loving them and return for Obon, which takes place in July or August, depending on the region. Those who are living welcome the spirits and help them find peace. As part of the festival, the Japanese light lanterns to guide the spirits to their home, prepare food that is placed at the family altar, and participate in Bon Odori, a joyous dance and trademark of the celebration.

The origins of Bon Odori can be traced to two

Buddhist stories. In one, a monk named Mokuren (moe-koo-ren) was in deep meditation when he saw his deceased mother's spirit. She was suffering in a place called the Realm of Hungry Ghosts. Distraught and upset, Mokuren asked Buddha for help. He received a message to give food to the sacred monks. Mokuren completed the thoughtful task and soon his mother's spirit was released. Mokuren danced in celebration. From his dance, came Bon Odori. Traveling to the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the Bon dance can be linked to the Nembutsu (nam-boo-too), an ancient Buddhist chant. A monk named Ippen danced while reciting the Nembutsu. His popular dance also established the beginnings of Bon Odori.

Today in Japan, Bon Odori not only honors the lives of those who are no longer living, but also celebrates those who are. The lively dance is

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Beautiful kimonos are often worn during traditional dances.



• Legend has it that O Shorai Sama (oh-sho-rye sah-ma), a figure who represents all ancestors' spirits, rides in on a white horse from the "land of darkness" at the beginning of the Obon Festival.

performed at temples, outdoor parks, or in the town's streets. Everyone is invited to participate, from young to old. During Bon Odori, most dancers perform in circular patterns, though in one region, they dance the Kagoshima Ohara, which is performed in a straight line through the streets of town. They move their arms elegantly and clap their hands. Some dance on a wooden stage that is decorated with vibrantly colored lanterns, while others move around the stage, often using wooden clappers or fans. It's common for dancers to perform in a *yukata* (yoo-kah-tah), a kimono made of light material, perfect for the warm summer weather. Others sway to the beat in a *happi* coat, a short jacket similar to the style of a kimono. Their wooden clogs, or *geta*, tap as they dance the night away to live or recorded music.

Several different dances are performed. Some tell stories about Japanese people. For example, *Tanko Bushi*, or the coal miners' dance, incorporates movements such as digging and cart pushing to tell the story about local coal miners. *Soran Bushi* depicts the life of a fisherman. Dancers move their arms as if

they're dragging nets and lifting crates.

As the stories unfold, powerful sounds enrich the dance. One of the instruments heard is the *taiko* or drum. The *taiko* has a rich history dating back thousands of years and is associated with spiritual beliefs. During the dance, the drum rests on a platform or *yagura* (yah-goo-ra). Musicians strike the *taiko* with their drumsticks known as *bachi*. This helps keep the time and tempo for the dancers. You might also hear other instruments such as flutes and wood rattles called *binsawa*.

After dancing and honoring the spirits, the Obon Festival nears its end. But before it's all said and done, the Japanese partake in a ceremony called *Toro Nagashi*. They light lanterns and attach them to small boats filled with food offerings and slips of paper with names of the deceased written on them. Then, they set the mini-boats in a river and let them float away to the sea, trusting the spirits will find their way back.



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