



An Important Intangible Folk
Cultural Property of Japan

Nishimonai Bon Odori

August 16th to 18th

Graceful into a dreamlike world

The Nishimonai Bon Odori is held every year from August 16th to 18th in Ugo Town, in the southern part of Akita Prefecture.

This dance has a history of more than 700 years, has been designated as an Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property of the Japanese government, and is one of the three major Bon festival dances in Japan. Surrounding the bonfire lit on the central street of the town, the valiant and lively musical accompaniment played by men and the exquisite beauty of women dancing gracefully in colorful costumes create a "beauty of dissonance" and makes the viewer feel they're in the world of fantasy.

Ugo Town, Akita Prefecture

Dancing inherited over 700 years



The fusion of two dance styles

The Nishimonai Bon Odori is said to be a fusion of two dances that started at different times. One, a dance to pray for good harvests, was performed within the temple grounds of Zaogongen (the current site of Nishimonai Mitake Shrine) built by a monk named Genshin roughly 700 years ago. The other, a dance for memorial service, was performed by the vassals on the grounds of Hosenji Temple in memory of the Onodera Lord, the lord of Nishimonai Castle, who lost in the battle with the Mogami clan about 400 years ago. The two styles were fused at some point and, in the latter days of the Edo Period, the venue was moved to the current Nishimonai Honcho-dori where it continues to take place today.

Nationwide debut in 1935



Due to the participation in the 1935 "9th National Folk Dance Folk Song Tournament" (sponsored by Nippon Seinenkan, Tokyo), the Bon Odori, which was a local event, has been greatly redesigned.

The dancers have relearned the traditional dance choreography and have prepared a fine color scheme and dyeing method for their costumes. And the accompaniments added shamisen, drums, and gong to make the performance more rhythmic. Through these efforts, the "a dance to show" was completed. And with this performance as a trigger, the Nishimonai Bon Odori became known all over the country as a graceful dance like no other.



Designated as an Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property

The Nishimonai Bon Odori was first canceled in 1945 due to the influence of World War II, but it was resumed immediately the following year, and after that, the "Nishimonai Bon Odori Preservation Society" was established to train successors and done performance activities in 1947. In 1971, the Nishimonai Bon Odori was designated as an "Akita Prefecture Intangible Cultural Property" and an "Intangible Folk Cultural Property for which measures such as creating records should be taken". Then, on January 21, 1981, it was designated as an Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property of the Japanese government, and had been called now one of the three major Bon Festival in Japan along with "Awa Odori" in Tokushima Prefecture and "Gujo Odori" in Gifu Prefecture.

Origin and development

The Shouu Era (1288 to 1293)	Dance began as prayers for good harvests on the temple grounds of Zaogongen (the current site of Nishimonai Mitake Shrine)	(sponsored by Nippon Seinen-Kan) held in Tokyo at the recommendation of the prefecture.
Around the time of the Battle of Sekigahara (1593 to 1601)	Misfortunes fell upon the Nishimonai feudal lord Shigemichi Onodera and his clan, bringing about its downfall. The retainers' heirs started the Bon Odori to console the spirits.	1945 Canceled amidst the confusion surrounding the end of the war
The Tenmei Era (1781 to 1788)	The Bon Odori venue was moved from the grounds of the Housen temple to Motomachi-dori. Dancing continued for five days in fair weather from the start of Okuri-bon.	1947 Formation of the Nishimonai Bon Odori Preservation Society
1935	Participated in the Ninth National Folk Dance & Folk Song Festival	1955 The birth of Ugo Town as the result of merging one block and six villages of west Ogachi district into a single town
		1971 Designated as an intangible cultural asset of Akita Prefecture
		1981 Designated as a significant intangible cultural asset by the national government. Participation in the San Francisco Cherry Blossom Festival in April.
		2005 Completion of Nishimonai Bon Odori Hall in Motomachi-dori

Costumes

Renowned for its beautiful costumes, dancers are dressed in “Hanui” (patchwork) kimono or “Aizome” (indigo-dyed) yukata.



Hanui (patchwork) Kimono

Specifically worn by women, “Hanui” are characterized by a symmetric, and are made by sewing several types of carefully selected old silk cloths. As “Hanui” are considered as a prestigious costume, it can only be worn once their dance gets approved by everyone.

Aizome (indigo-dyed) yukata

Worn by both men and women, “Aizome” is a type of yukata that uses the traditional dyeing technique of this region. Historically, “Aizome” had been a more common option for dancers, as only wealthy households were able to have “Hanui”. In contrast to the elegance of “Hanui”, “Aizome” is known for its refined beauty that gets imbued further through use.

Another indispensable contains for Nishimonai Bon Odori outfit is “Amigasa” (straw hat) or “Hikosa Zukin” (black hood).

Amigasa and Hikosa Zukin

Completely covering the face of dancers once worn, “Amigasa” used in Nishimonai Bon Odori are characterized by half-moon shape with curved edges. “Amigasa” are worn by dancers with either Hanui or Aizome - the neckline from behind are aesthetically projected by the moonlight. “Hikosa Zukin” are characterized by its black, bag-shaped mask with two holes for eyes, and are worn alongside Hachimaki (traditional headband). Although its historical background remains unclear, it is believed to have derived from sunshades or masks used during farming, or from the Kuroko outfit of Kabuki. Only worn by dancers in Aizome outfit, it creates a unique atmosphere that is called ‘dance of the dead’.



Amigasa



Hikosa Zukin

Two types of dance

“Ondo” is a beautiful dance renowned for its elegance. The dance is believed to have been influenced culturally from Kyoto and Osaka, as a result of shipping interactions during the Edo period. It consists of two subtly different choreography, and are danced alternately. Due to its relatively easy to learn, dancers first learn “Ondo” before moving onto mastering “Ganke”. In contrast, “Ganke” is faster in tempo and more challenging than “Ondo”. There are several theories on the origin of the name, such as Gankei (appearance of a goose flying in the moonlight night), Kange (Buddhist missionary activity) and Gansho-kesho (expression of grief towards present world and prayer for the felicitous afterlife). There are also two types of choreography, characterized by the turn that is believed to represent reincarnation - another reason behind its called ‘dance of the dead’.

Nishimonai Bon Odori consists of two dances: "Ondo" and "Ganke".



Composition and music of Hayashii

Musical accompaniment of Nishimonai Bon Odori - called “Hayashi” - is composed of traditional instruments such as fue (flute), shamisen, kane (gongs) and drums of various sizes. Moreover, singers perform “Jiguchi” and “Jinku” alongside “Hayashi”. On the day of the event, musicians and singers perform on a special stage built by the street with the same outfits consisted of yukata, shoulder garment and Hachimaki headband. Repertoire of “Hayashi” consists of four music - “Yosedaike”, “Ondo”, “Tori Ondo” and “Ganke”.

“Yosedaike” is performed to signal the start of Bon Odori. It enlivens the atmosphere with energetic drumming and rhythmical melody of high-pitched flutes, and is also played at the finale of the dance.

“Ondo” is one of the music for dancing. It starts with a call of “Ya-to-se Yoiwana Seccha”, followed by the dance. After that, the phrase of “Ondo” is performed repeatedly with various lyrics called “Jinku”.

“Tori-Ondo” is also one of the music for dancing, and it is performed immediately after “Ondo”. Led by flutes, long phrase of mournful yet enrapturing melody resonates through the venue.

“Ganke” is also music for dancing, but unlike the previous two, it creates a tranquil atmosphere through simple melody. In “Ganke”, the lyrics called “Jinku” are sung. The dance finale is closed with “Ganke”. The tempo changed gradually to the end and it stimulates the dancers and audience to become more active and makes the venue lively.



Jiguchi (lyrics of Ondo)

Despite some subtle differences, “Jiguchi” of Nishimonai Bon Odori is very similar to that of folk songs in Akita prefecture, and its lyrics are composed of six phrases of 8,8,9,8,8,9. Sung in an improvisational style, lyrics of “Jiguchi” have wild phrases, humorous stories, satirical songs towards worldly matters, and to rustic eroticism of peasants.

An example of lyrics
♪Jisei-ha-doudemo Seken-ha-nandemo
Odoriko-odotanse Nippon-kaibyaku
Amanoiwato-mo Odori-de-yo-ga-aketa

Meaning
Let's dance together regardless of whether the world situation is good or bad
Because as described in the legend of Amano-Iwato in Japanese mythology, this world was dawned by dancing.

Jinku (lyrics of Ganke)

“Jinku” is a typical format of the Japanese folk song, and it consists of the four phrases of 7,7,7,5. Many of the lyrics sung today are selected through contests for soliciting lyrics ideas. In contrast to the rustic atmosphere of “Ondo”, emotional and artistic lyrics of “Jinku” add a refined and noble atmosphere towards the “Ganke” dance.

An example of lyrics
♪Obon-koishiya Kagaribi-koishi Mashite-odoriko-nao-koishi

Meaning
I want the Obon season to come early.
I miss the bonfire that is lit during the Obon.
I can't wait to see the Bon Odori dancers.

The Nishimonai Bon Odori Exhibit Hall

This hall is the activity base of "Nishimonai Bon Odori". This is also the place for tourist cultural exchange activities of the town. It was opened in August 2005. Artistic dance costumes with a history of over a hundred years are displayed inside the hall, as well as fifty hand-made miniature dolls that portray the dance steps and graceful movements. Anyone can watch the videos of Bon Odori through the 200 inches wide screen inside the hall. In addition, there are performances of Nishimonai Bon Odori regularly every second Saturday of the month (first Sunday only in August). Everyone can enjoy the lively music and dance regardless of the season (with fee/1,000JPY).

(Admission is free of charge/9:00 - 17:00/Closed every Monday (Next day if it is a holiday), 12/29-1/3 / TEL 0183-78-4187)



An event of Aizome and Hanui costumes

This is an event before the Nishimonai Bon Odori in which each house that owns "Aizome" (Indigo-dyed Yukata) and "Hanui" (Patchwork [Kimono]) display such elegant and artistic costumes in front of their house or in the vicinity garden.

By observing this, all will be able to discover more about the charm of Nishimonai Bon Odori, the history and culture associated with the elegance of dance, and charm of "Aizome" and "Hanui".

Each of the exhibits or displays has its own design and styles, for this, the town seems to be an art museum of historical kimonos. It is held every year of the first Sunday of August, starts at 10:00 in Nishimonai area.



◀Costumes are decorated in house with this mark

Dance Practice Session

The "Nishimonai Bon Odori Preservation Society" holds a practice session for the general public. Their aim is to popularize and pass down the Nishimonai Bon Odori to the new generation. The members of them provide guidance according to the level of the learners from beginners to advanced. Anyone can participate without any application needed.

For inquiries, please contact the Nishimonai Bon Odori Exhibit Hall. Practice sessions are as follows: Every third Saturday of the month (excluding January and August) at 19:00 - 21:00 in the Community Center from April to December. Then, in Nishimonai Bon Odori Hall from February until March.



FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions)

Q. What is the etymology of "Nishimonai"?

A. There are various theories, but based on the Ainu language "nishi" means "valley", "mo" means "little" and "nai" means "river". As interpreted "the place of the valley where the stream flows". As the meaning implies, the Nishimonai River, which flows from the mountain runs through the center of the town.

Q. Why they hide faces while performing the dance?

A. There are various purposes, such as to enjoy dancing without worrying about differences in status, or to become one with the spirits of deceased ancestors. It might also be the way of Akita people to conquer their shyness in dealing with the crowds.

Q. What is the content of Nishimonai Bon Odori?

A. It is divided into two parts. The first half of the dance is participated by children and the beginner dancers. Then, later at around nine in the evening, expert dancers gradually join in. As the dance is about to end, the rhythm of the musical accompaniment and the tempo of the dance change drastically, and the venue becomes lively and more excited.

Q. Are there available bleachers?

A. Yes, there are prepared bleachers in the venue. There is an advance drawing to purchase tickets for the bleachers. And there is also a first-come-first-served sale on the day. For more details, please check the website of Ugo Town Tourism and Products Association. It's allowed to bring your own chair for viewing at places other than the bleachers.

Q. Are there available parking lots near the venue?

A. Yes, there are. During the Bon Odori Event, there are temporary parking areas (with fee) at facilities around the venue such as the Town Hall parking space. Parking is available from 13:00, and one can go out temporarily by presenting the parking ticket. Please remember that it is often full from 20:00 to 21:00.

Q. What will happen if it rains?

A. If bad weather is expected, the dance performance will be hold at the town's "General Gymnasium" next to the Town Hall. There's an official announcement at around 14:00, if there are changes. If you have already purchased a ticket, you can use the reserved seats in the gymnasium.

Q. Does anyone can participate in the dance?

A. Yes, but Nishimonai Bon Odori is a traditional event and it's a culture that the local people (residents) have carefully preserved. So, if you want to participate, you need to wear appropriate costumes and learn the rules of the dance.

Q. Are there hotels to stay for?

A. Ugo Town has few hotels, and reservations for the Bon Odori season are filled up quite earlier. Therefore, some other tourists often stay in the neighboring cities such as Yuzawa and Yokote City. It is better to have an early reservation because it will be full during that season.



Soba Noodles Information

In Ugo Town, "Nishimonai Soba noodles" is famous food and there are many restaurants. Please try to eat.

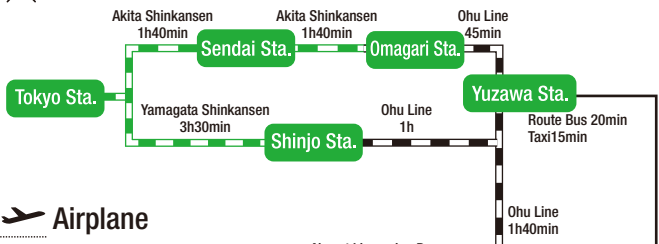
Dance time 19:30~23:00
(Until 23:30 on the 18th)

Traffic regulation

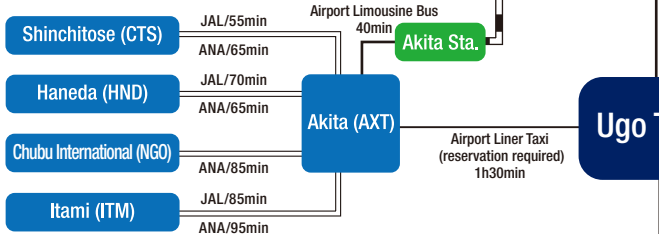
Dance venue 14:00~24:00
Around the venue 18:00~24:00 (Until 24:30 on the 18th)

Traffic Guide

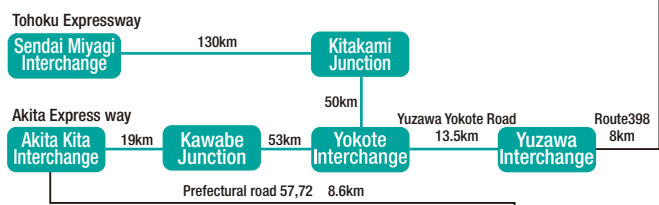
Railroad



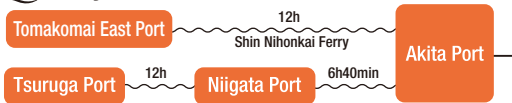
Airplane



Highway



Ferry



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