

The 'fools' dance'

How the nation's capital came to embrace the traditions of Awa Odori and Yosakoi

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'O doru aho ni miru aho, onaji ahonara odorana son son (Dancing fool and watching fool. If both are fools, then dance, or you'll lose big)."

It's a verse from "Yoshikono," the song that pulses at the beating heart of Awa Odori -- the frenzied spectacle that engulfs Tokyo's Koenji district at this time every year with dancing and drinking as participants and spectators alike immerse themselves in both with equal gusto.



Hundreds of Awa Odori dancers parade in the Koenji Awa Odori festival in 2005. PHOTOS COURTESY OF TOKYO KOENJI AWA ODORI SHINKO KYOKAI

The 12,000 "dancing fools" and 1.2 million "watching fools" expected to help Koenji celebrate the 50th anniversary of its Awa Odori this Saturday and Sunday make the event the nation's biggest such festival and one of the wildest of any kind.

There's no need to take offense at being called a fool either.

"It's meant to suggest that people hang loose and have a good time together," says Hisaya Yanagita, who runs the Web site "Bon Odori no Sekai (The World of Bon Odori)," which introduces various bon festivals that he and his friends visit each summer across the country.

While Koenji's Awa Odori has become legendary, it is not the first such festival but merely the oldest spinoff from the one held annually in Tokushima Prefecture, in Shikoku, during the *bon* holiday from Aug. 13 to 15, when Japanese honor the souls of ancestors in accordance with Buddhist tradition. The dance consists of hundreds of men and women in groups -- wearing colorful *yukata* (cotton kimono), *tabi* (socks), *geta* (wooden sandals), straw hats or cotton towels around their heads -- pivoting their feet back and forth, waving their hands and marching forward while drenched in sweat to the loud upbeat tune performed on instruments including *shamisen*, *yokobue* (bamboo flute), *kane* (bells) and *tsutsumi* (drums). This spectacular sight and raucous atmosphere captivates spectators, who start to sway to the rhythm.

Tokushima's Awa Odori, which attracted 1.26 million spectators over four days from Aug. 12 this year, dates back some 400 years. While there are many theories as to its origin, no one really knows how the "fools' dance" began. Some say it shares the same roots as *noh*, while others speculate it came from the dance celebrating the completion of Tokushima Castle in 1586. Most observers believe it is a type of *bon odori* -- a spiritual folk dance performed annually during and around bon to pacify the souls of ancestors.

Typically, what is referred to as bon odori comes in two types: one moves in a circle around a temporary platform erected in the center,



and another goes in a straight line.

Most bon odori are of the circular kind and much gentler in movement and pace than Awa Odori, says Yanagita.

Awa Odori, however, is so raucous that one may be forgiven for wondering if it really is a prayer any longer.

Whatever its origins, Yanagita observes a recent trend of communities introducing Awa Odori, or to a lesser extent other bon odori, as a way to revive their communities, and he concludes that people are starting to recognize the fun in this tradition.

"Among Japanese folk art, bon odori is probably the only one thing that existed all over Japan that everyone could participate in and enjoy," Yanagita said. "So it's a very important part of our culture, but people didn't pay much attention to it [in the past]. Now people have started to revisit the attractiveness of these dances."



Dancers at the Tokushima Prefecture Awa Odori festival on Aug. 14 ASAIO MOTOKI PHOTO

There are more than 70 cities and towns that host Awa Odori festivals in summer. Koenji embraced Awa Odori purely by accident. Local businesses got together five decades ago to start a festival that would revive their community, says Takeyuki Tomizawa, a board member of the

nonprofit organization that runs the event.

"Koenji was the only town in the vicinity that burned down during World War II, and people had to start from temporary shelters," Tomizawa says.

Neighboring town Asagaya, which is the next stop on the JR Chuo Line, was attracting people to its Star Festival (honoring the myth that on a clear night once a year Vega, the Weaving Star Princess, meets Altair, the Cowherd Boy, on the edge of the Milky Way) in early August, and that drove Koenji to seek out something vibrant too.

Someone in the group had seen "something called Awa Odori" on film and decided to try it, Tomizawa said. They tried to replicate what they saw, but the first Awa Odori apparently was a poor copy of the original. After several years, however, they began to get more serious and sought out veteran dancers who had moved from Tokushima to Tokyo. Some even went to Tokushima to practice the real thing, and also invited groups from Tokushima to participate in the festival. Eventually, Koenji Awa Odori stood on its own feet, and some

enthusiastic participants have even gone abroad to introduce this element of Japanese culture to foreign audiences.

"If it was just to boost sales or attract people, I don't think our Awa Odori would have lasted this long," says Tomizawa, who is 47 years old and has been dancing since he was 3. "It's taken root here because this dance has such a charm."

Borrowed traditions

The reason the most famous summer dance festival in the nation's capital is an import from elsewhere in Japan is that, despite being the capital for the Tokugawa Shogunate between 1603 and 1867, Tokyo had none of its own. The only exception is the Tsukudajima Bon Odori Festival in Chuo Ward that takes place in July, celebrating bon according to the lunar calendar.

Yanagita speculates that people of the Edo Period (1603-1867) may have voluntarily refrained from holding such festivities because they lived adjacent to the political capital of the shogunate and did not want to cause trouble.

Eager to fill that void, Tokyo has searched out traditions to make its own, and it may come as little surprise to learn that another prominent dance gaining popularity in the capital comes from the prefecture neighboring Tokushima. Yosakoi is originally from Kochi Prefecture, and, again this weekend, visitors to Harajuku can view some 6,000 yosakoi dancers at the Harajuku Omotesando Genki Matsuri Super Yosakoi 2006.

As bon odori, by definition, has a spiritual aspect to it, Yanagita says yosakoi is not technically a bon odori, although the phenomenon is quite similar.

Yosakoi was launched in 1954 by local businesses in Kochi Prefecture to boost the region's economy. There for four days from Aug. 9 every year, over 15,000 dancers in different groups hold *naruko* (a traditional wooden device to scare away birds from the fields that sounds like a castanet) and dance as they parade through the streets.

Yosakoi is unique in that there is no specific choreography. The only rule is to hold naruko and use yosakoi-bushi (the original music) as part of their dance music. The beat chosen is up to each group. In the past few years, yosakoi has been



Dance group Rikioh of Tokyo is seen performing at the Harajuku Omotesando Genki Matsuri Super Yosakoi in 2004. PHOTO COURTESY OF ATSUKO KOBAYASHI

adopted in dozens of communities including Ikebukuro and Daiba in Tokyo.

Harajuku started hosting Super Yosakoi in 2001 with the cooperation of Meiji Shrine. Despite being one of the most successful commercial districts, local businesses were looking for a new attraction. "There was a sense of despair in the Japanese economy, and we wanted to do something that could show the energy of Japan," says Akira Kezuka of the Harajuku Omotesando Keyakikai, the local shop-owner's group that hosts the event. "Yosakoi is very free in style and music, and that freedom met Harajuku," he says.

This weekend, about 100 yosakoi dance groups from Tokyo as well as Kochi and several other prefectures, and a team from Ghana will perform in Omotesando Avenue, in front of Meiji Shrine and other spaces nearby.

Among the dance squads participating is Rikioh, which was formed three years ago by elementary school teachers in Musashino City in western Tokyo. Yoshinori Tanaka, 39, the leader of the group, says the attraction of yosakoi is the very fact that it has no strict tradition or form to follow.

"It's such a great feeling to be able to perform something that we created as a group, and to be able to express ourselves to our heart's content," he says.

A fascination for frivolities

Humidity and heat make August insufferable in Japan. But Bradley Logg believes it's easily the best time of year -- because of Awa Odori.

"There's so much going on. . . . Matsuri adds genius to this country," says the 41-year-old business consultant from Los Angeles, Calif., who has lived in Japan for 12 years. "It would be really tough without the festivals. I don't know what I'd do."

Logg is a core member of Awa Odori group Damudanren and has been dancing for almost a decade. This summer, Damudanren has already performed in

Kagurazaka in Tokyo and also in Tokushima Prefecture in Shikoku. They are preparing for their last event of the summer, the Koenji Awa Odori starting Saturday.

To be at their best, Logg and his teammates start practicing weekly in spring and work on their choreography and formation. They tape their practice to review themselves and polish their presentation. Logg even practices in front of the mirror at home. Eventually, before the actual performance, the practice increases to twice a week, and then to every day the week before.



Tokyo resident Bradley Logg performs at the Kagurazaka Awa Odori festival held in late July. PHOTO COURTESY OF BRADLEY LOGG

While maintaining a certain discipline for the performance, Logg says the group also likes to have fun.

"We're more interested in making sure that everyone has a good time, ourselves and the crowd," he says. "Awa Odori is driven by the energy of the crowd. Without the crowd you wouldn't do it."

Logg's encounter with Awa Odori came about by accident. He was moving his home from Chiba Prefecture to Kagurazaka in 1997 when a friend introduced him to Damudanren's leader, who lived nearby. Logg was invited to show up for practice. Not knowing what it was like, Logg went to check it out and was amazed.

"When I saw them practice '*chanka, chanka, chanka, chanka* [the beat of the music]," Logg says, briefly demonstrating the steps and the arm movements as he took this rhythm, "I thought, 'Oh my god, what have I got myself into.' "

Despite now being a veteran of the group, Logg admits that he wasn't a skilled dancer at the beginning. But over the years his performance improved and the bond with his teammates became strong.

Awa Odori seem to give him something more. While considering himself to be a relatively quiet person, Logg admits that he takes on a different persona during Awa Odori. "I'm still, to a certain extent,

myself, but I really go over boundaries that I will never step over as me," he says. His buddies in the team gave him *kanji* characters for his first name, which read "Bu-ra-dori," and literally mean "Dancing Naked Bird."

This weekend, you'll find him dancing the night away as he channels the energy of the group, the crowd and the heat of summer.

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