

Bon-odori

Dancing for the dead?

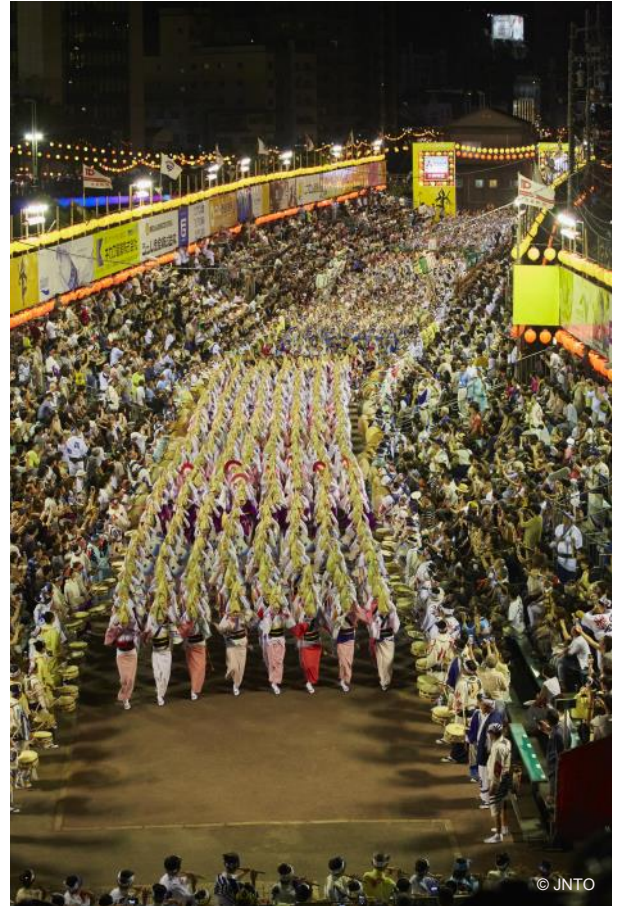
Bon-odori dancing has become a staple of summer festivals in Japan. People dance around a raised platform called a *yagura*, and in some places groups of dancers progress through the streets. While the dance has local and regional variations, they share in common a simplicity of movement - basically anyone can watch and with minimal or no practice join in! This is the stuff of many travel memories, snapshots of people wearing the lightweight summer cotton kimono (*yukata*) or *happi* coats as they dance and enjoy the relaxed festival atmosphere.

In contemporary Japan, many people have separated the *bon-odori* (盆踊り) from its origins as a dance to welcome back the souls of ancestors and to bid them farewell as the souls leave at the end of the **O-bon festival** (お盆). Arising from the Buddhist *nembutsu odori*, the first recorded mention of *bon-odori* is from the late 1400s, and by the Edo Period (1603-1867) it was a wide-spread custom.

O-bon is the name of an annual observance which alongside the New Year celebrations is one of the most important times for families to come together in Japan. O-bon is traditionally a time to remember one's ancestors and many families still observe centuries-old customs, venerating the generations that have come before them.

O-bon occurs in most places in mid-August, and many employers give workers time off so that they can return home. In some regions the observance is a month earlier in July. The 13th of the month is the day to welcome back the ancestors and on the 16th they are bid farewell. Many Japanese take the 14th and 15th off to go and visit family graves and make offerings.

Rituals centre around family graves and household shrines called *butsudan*. Families will clean the family grave and on the nights of O-bon they light fires (now probably light bulbs) in stone lanterns to welcome the spirits and prepare the path back to the house. There, a 'spirit altar' is placed in front of the *butsudan*, which is a Buddhist family altar*. Offerings of flowers and food are made at the altar. You will often see a cucumber and an eggplant stuck on toothpick legs. These eggplants and cucumbers are not food, but animals. The cucumber is a horse and the eggplant is a cow to transport the ancestors to and from the family home. Why a cow? That is for the return journey, the cow being much slower to take beloved ancestors away.



Knowing a little about the roots of festivals can make for a richer experience should you get the opportunity to take part in them. Several *bon-odori* or O-bon related festivals have become famous throughout Japan - Tokushima's Awa Odori shown above is one, and another is the lighting of the great fires on Kyoto hillsides (known as Daimonji) on 16 August to send the spirits on their way.

Indeed *bon-odori* has travelled the world. There is a large bon-odori in La Plata, Argentina, thanks to the Japanese community that migrated there (an online search will bring up a video). Here in Sydney, *bon-odori* has also featured more modestly at the largest Japanese festival in Sydney, the Matsuri-Japan Festival, held at Darling Harbour in December.

Even the most uncoordinated should give *bon-odori* a go!

* Footnote: *Butsudan* became common during the Tokugawa shogunate (1603-1867), which required families to register with Buddhist temples. Buddhism combined with the original Japanese beliefs and practice of ancestor worship.