

# Japanese Musical Performance and Diaspora

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Contract laborers from Japan were brought to Hawai'i in large numbers beginning in 1885. The first generation of Japanese immigrants, or issei, were primarily farmers, fishermen, and country folk. By 1920, forty percent of the population in Hawai'i was Japanese. Issei immigrants paved the way for their children (nisei, or second generation), grandchildren (sansei, or third generation), and great-grandchildren (yonsei, or fourth generation). The Japanese impact on local Hawaiian culture can be seen in many areas, including foods, customs, architecture, and public music and dance festivals.

Bon odori (or bon dance) in Hawai'i has endured many changes since the first group of issei arrived on the islands. During the plantation period (1880s to 1910s), the immigrants steadfastly kept the tradition alive despite low working wages, difficult living conditions, and isolation from their homeland. In the 1930s, with the new homeland established, the tradition was strengthened by new choreographies, new music, contests, and scheduled dances. During this time the bon dance became a popular social event that appealed particularly to the younger generation. After the outbreak of World War II in December 1941, priests were detained, temples were closed, and Japanese were discouraged from gathering in large numbers. It became dangerous for Japanese to make any public expressions of national pride. Bon dance activities probably did not take place again until after the war ended in 1945.

But during the 1950s and 1960s, a revival of bon odori took place. In addition to temple festivals, bon dances were sponsored by groups outside the temples for non-religious functions. During the 1950s, for example, local and tourist audiences could participate in bon dance events. In 1951, bon dances were held to commemorate the men who had lost their lives in World War II and in Korea. Eight years later, bon dance played a role in official celebrations of Hawai'i's statehood. Bon dance was also part of the 1976 U.S.-Hawai'i-Japan Bicentennial Culture Festival in Honolulu. Nowadays, the bon dance is recognized as a distinctive Japanese cultural and social event that attracts people from all ethnic groups in Hawai'i.

## Performance Practice

Japanese plantation laborers carried their religion, Buddhism, with them to Hawai'i. The first Buddhist priest officially sent to Hawai'i by mission headquarters in Japan arrived in

1889. By the early 1900s, Jōdo, Nichiren, Sōtō, and Shingon Buddhist sects had established temples in the islands. Religious worship gave early immigrants a sense of spiritual well-being, and religious festivals helped to make plantation life more tolerable, reinforcing family kinship and helping recreate the good times associated with their increasingly distant homeland.

Obon is the Japanese festival of the dead: a celebration of one's ancestors and deceased loved ones. Obon generally occurs in mid-August (though, in some places, in Japan it is celebrated in mid-July). During that time, it is believed that ancestral spirits return to their earthly home where they are honored and celebrated. Rituals associated with Obon include visiting cemeteries, washing tombstones, making offerings of lanterns, flowers and food, and performing rituals of sending visiting spirits back (often via waterways and to the sea). By far the most visible aspect of Obon is the bon odori, which refers to the dances performed during the Obon festival as well as all the festivities surrounding the bon dance. The Obon festival traditionally lasts only three days in Japan, but in Hawai'i, the bon dance season lasts several months, from June to early September. The bon dance remains an important Japanese cultural event of religious origin that has developed links to the larger community in Hawai'i.

On the island of O'ahu, bon dance clubs, made up of musicians and dancers, are invited to perform at different Buddhist temples during the bon dance season on Friday and Saturday nights from around 7:00 or 8:00 p.m. until as late as midnight. On the other islands, musicians are organized more informally, often associated with a particular temple, Buddhist sect, or geographical area. The temple usually decides on the format for the evening's event, including the order of pieces played. Club members meet on special occasions aside from performances and rehearsals during the bon dance season. Also, they occasionally play at non-temple events, including social gatherings and official state functions.

## **Music**

Each bon dance club specializes in the music and/or dance repertoires from one of Japan's prefectures. The two main repertoires include Fukushima ondo (ondo means "folk song") from Fukushima Prefecture, and Iwakuni ondo, from Yamaguchi Prefecture. The two repertoires differ in musical accompaniment, subject matter of the lyrics, and the music itself. Most people would identify the Fukushima ondo as the "fast songs," and the Iwakuni ondo as the "slow songs." Bon dance events often consist of two "sets," or divisions separated by an intermission. The first set begins with Fukushima ondo and ends with Iwakuni ondo. The second set reverses the order. In performance, live playing alternates with commercial tape recordings, and sometimes drummers accompany the recordings.

The Fukushima style includes one or more ondotori (singers), hayashi callers (hayashi are vocal interjections), fue (bamboo flute), one or more kodaiko (small drums), ōdaiko (large drums), and sometimes kane (hand-held metal gongs). The dances include folk dances brought by Japanese immigrants, ondo dances introduced since the 1930s, and min'yō (folk music/dances) popular since the 1960s. The singers alternate verses; each singer usually sings about five verses, and each verse lasts about one minute. Hayashi occur between verses as filler and to connect the verses between singers. Hayashi singers encourage the dancers and create a lively atmosphere.

The Iwakuni dances in Hawai'i use only vocalists and drummers. The Iwakuni ensemble includes one or more ondotori, hayashi callers, and ōdaiko player. The ōdaiko is prepared before a performance by spraying sake on the head of the drum. Singers stand on the yagura, a ten- to twenty-foot tower that serves as the central focus of the dance. They may hold an umbrella, possibly used to direct the vocal part down from the yagura to the dancers, and a fan, which may have the text written on it. The dancer-drummers dance in a smaller circle just below the singers. The twirling of the sticks and the movement of the feet are all highly stylized. The drum pattern is the same for each verse, but melody and verse length varies.

Fukushima ondo texts describe lighter subjects such as the pleasures of love, dance, the bounty of the harvest, or the virtues of a particular place. In the Fukushima style, the singers aren't necessarily telling a story, but each singer contributes his or her own verses that may or may not relate to the other verses. Subject matter of the songs may relate specifically to Japanese experiences in Hawai'i and are fitted to standard tunes such as "Fukushima Ondo."

Iwakuni song texts revolve around a few important themes. Many of the texts relate famous historical tragedies and acts of bravery. There are narrative texts about twentieth-century battles and Japanese-American heroes of the U.S. 100th Battalion and 442nd Regimental Combat Team during World War II who fought against German forces in Italy and France. (The 442nd has been described as the most decorated unit in United States military history.) Iwakuni texts impart moral values while other texts, composed during the plantation period, describe the difficulties in adjusting to life as new immigrants in Hawai'i.

Overall, the bon dance operates as part of broader efforts by members of the Japanese-Hawaiian community to maintain cultural links with their Japanese homeland.

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### **Suggested Reading**

For more information, check out more about Bon Festival:  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bon\\_Festival](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bon_Festival)