

Dancing for Drink

Okinawa's distinctive Eisa is called a "folk dance," but is actually an energetic mixture of dance, song, music, and colorful costumes. Eisa groups stroll through the streets as they dance and play music. Although its roots are thought to be in Buddhist chants and ancestor-worship ceremonies, Eisa has, over time, developed into a popular performance art. The biggest Eisa competitions last for days and attract hundreds of thousands of spectators.

For centuries, Eisa has been danced as part of the summer Bon festival, when ancestral spirits are venerated and invited to visit their descendants. Traditionally, a small group would dance and sing in the streets as they visited their neighbors in turn. Often, two of the party would carry an earthenware jar to receive a little awamori as thanks at each house. On their return, they would drink their reward.

There are now several hundred Eisa groups in Okinawa. They include dancers, singers, *sanshin* (a banjo-like Okinawan instrument) players, drummers playing drums of various sizes, and banner bearers. At one time, the dance was performed only by men, but in recent years women also take part.

The first all-Okinawa Eisa competition was held in the city of Okinawa in 1956. Over time, this annual event has encouraged groups to feature more dancers and show off increasingly elaborate costumes and choreography. "Creative Eisa" developed in the 1980s and is often danced to contemporary pop songs.

Okinawans who went to live overseas brought the Eisa tradition with them, notably to Hawaii in the 1920s and to the Japanese mainland following World War II. Eisa is now performed in many different countries.