

Takinomiya Nenbutsu Odori

Nenbutsu Odori (“Buddhist prayer dance”) is a performance art and ritual associated with the town of Ayagawa. It is performed annually on August 25 at two Shinto shrines: Takinomiya Shrine and Takinomiya Tenmangu. A designated Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property, the dance is said to date back more than a thousand years.

Legend states that in the year 889, the Sanuki region (present-day Kagawa Prefecture) was in the throes of an unprecedented drought. Seeking to end the suffering, Sugawara no Michizane (845–903), the governor of Sanuki, fasted and prayed for seven days and seven nights. The heavens answered his pleas: rain finally came, and the overjoyed people danced wildly at Takinomiya Shrine. This is considered the origin of a dancing ritual performed locally to thank Michizane and appeal for a plentiful harvest. The simultaneous prayer to Buddha was added some 300 years later by the religious reformer Honen (1133–1212), and so the Nenbutsu Odori was born.

Every August 25, three of the 11 dance groups active in Ayagawa gather at Takinomiya Shrine to perform the Nenbutsu Odori. They then parade to the nearby Takinomiya Tenmangu for one more performance. Another three groups perform the next year and so on. Once every five years, all 11 troupes perform together as part of the So-odori. The next So-odori is scheduled for 2023. The Nenbutsu Odori is an energetic, colorful affair in which the dancers wear elaborate costumes and local children participate by playing drums.