

Ōmiya Odori

The Ōmiya Odori is a traditional dance at the center of Maniwa's celebration of Obon, a Buddhist holiday during which the spirits of one's ancestors are said to return to earth.

Celebrated throughout Japan for three days each summer, Obon is one of the biggest holidays on the cultural calendar; children return home to share family meals and make offerings at family gravesides. Obon festivals often culminate with a lively group dance, called a *bon odori*, to welcome the ancestral spirits home. With pounding *taiko* drums and call-and-response chanting, it tends to be a lively affair.

The *bon* dance seen in Maniwa, however, is unusually restrained and stately. Called the Ōmiya Odori, it has slow, precise moves and is accompanied only by a lilting chant and a single hand-held drum. The position of the dancers' hands, as well as their back-and-forth steps, are said to mimic the wary movements of a fox. In Japan, foxes are viewed as symbols of rain and fertility, both of which are highly important to farming communities.

The dance's connection to fertility is not limited to agriculture. Traditionally, the Ōmiya Odori also afforded an opportunity for young people across Hiruzen to meet and pair up, often resulting in marriages and children who would sustain the community for another generation. The desire to produce progeny is clearly demonstrated by an unusual segment of the dance in which two performers pantomime the sex act, one holding a sesame-grinding mortar and the other a wooden pestle, stand-ins for reproductive organs. In addition to its marriage-making function, the celebration was a time of loosened mores, when free love was acceptable. Children conceived out of wedlock during this period were considered a blessing to the mother, regardless of her marital status.

The Ōmiya Odori takes place on multiple days in July and August at different venues around town. Dance movements vary slightly from neighborhood to neighborhood, and keen-eyed locals can tell where someone lives just by observing which version of the Ōmiya Odori they perform. The main event takes place on August 15 at Fukuda Shrine and culminates in a fireworks display. This shrine is also called "Ōmiya-sama," which is how the dance gets its name. In front of its inner sanctum is a covered dance floor, a rare surviving example of this architectural feature. Most of the year, it serves as a sheltered place to pray and drop a few coins in the offering box, but during the festival the box is removed, clearing the floor for the dancers.

Another key venue for the Ōmiya Odori is a small wooden hall called Yoshimori-dō, where the dance is performed under the gaze of a 400-year-old wooden statue of Amida Buddha. Behind and to the right of the hall (on the other side of a modern warehouse) stands a modest cluster of graves, of which the oldest are believed to date to the early fourteenth century. They testify to the enduring sacred character of the site.

Another unique feature of the Ōmiya Odori is *shirige*, decorative paper cutouts hung from the bottom of a large rectangular lantern that is suspended over the dance floor.

The images, painstakingly cut from handmade *washi* paper, range from simple designs of fruit and vegetables to elaborate, kimono-clad women or landscapes that rival the works of ukiyo-e woodcut masters. These delicate artworks are often created during the winter months, when snowed-in locals daydream of warmer weather and the merry festival period. Many beautiful examples of *shirige*, as well as videos of the Ōmiya Odori, can be seen year-round at the Hiruzen Local History Museum.

While the exact origins of the Ōmiya Odori have been lost to time, its similarity to ancient court dances suggests a history of more than 1,000 years. With mountains on all sides, Maniwa has been geographically isolated until fairly recently—allowing this version of the *bon odori* to be passed down intact through the centuries. In 1997, the dance was declared an Intangible Folk Cultural Asset by the government, in recognition of its unique regional characteristics and its role as a precursor to the modern *bon odori*.