

Eisa Okinawan Folk Dance

Reviving the Dance of the Dead

Eisa is an Okinawan folk dance that was traditionally performed at the Okinawan Festival of the Dead (*kyubon*) in commemoration of the ancestors on the 15th day of the seventh month of the traditional lunar calendar. Possibly because of the disruption caused by World War II and the population migration that followed it, the *eisa* tradition died out on Tokashiki. As the island evolved into a tourist destination, however, the locals revived the *eisa* to help make the island more attractive to visitors by providing exposure to traditional Okinawan culture.

The Tokashiki Young Men's Association revived the *eisa* in 1996. To learn how to perform the forgotten dance, they set up a knowledge swap with Urasoe, a town near Naha. The young men of Tokashiki taught the people of Urasoe how to make the large rice-straw ropes used in the traditional Okinawan tug-of-war, in return for which they were taught seven *eisa* songs.

At the Festival of the Dead, ancestors' spirits are believed to return to their former homes to relax and have fun. The job of the *eisa* dancers is to lead the spirits to the right house through drumming, dance, and song. The lyrics of the songs they sing are therefore highly practical, essentially saying: "Don't go to the wrong place. This is the house you want here. Now enjoy yourselves!"

Tokashiki's *eisa* troupe performs on the first two days of the three-day-long Festival of the Dead. They dance in the villages of Tokashiki and Tokashiku on the first day (*unke*, "the welcoming of the ancestors"), and in Aharen on the second day (*nakabi*, "the middle day"). They perform in front of houses where someone recently died (if granted permission by the bereaved family), or in front of recently opened businesses to bring them luck.

There are several kinds of performers in Tokashiki's *eisa*: *jikata* are musicians who play the Okinawan three-stringed banjo; *uchite* are drummers who play either the *odaiko*, a large barrel drum supported by a sash slung over the shoulder, or *shimedaiko*, a smaller, hand-held drum with a higher-pitched sound. There are also *chondara*, experienced performers dressed like clowns who shout instructions to make sure the whole performance runs smoothly.

Each drummer wears a black waistcoat, a black hat, white shorts, and a belt marked with patterns of four squares and five squares representing eternity. The *odaiko* drummers set the rhythm for the whole troupe, dancing vigorously as they play, while the *shimedaiko* drummers make more idiosyncratic moves. The *chondara*, meanwhile, whiten their faces and wear conical straw hats and black-and-white striped jackets.

The Tokashiki Young Men's Association also performs the *eisa* at the Tokashiki Marathon, during the spring Golden Week holiday, and at the Tokashiki festival. In July and August, they put on a 30-minute performance at Aharen every Saturday, followed by a fireworks display (currently suspended due to coronavirus).