

## Ondo Boatman's Song

The “Ondo Boatman’s Song” is said to be one of Japan’s three great fishermen’s chanties. Local fishermen once sang the song as they rowed through the Ondo-no-seto Channel, which separates Honshu from Kurahashi Island. Originating in the Edo period (1603–1867), the song has been passed down for generations and is still sung today. The song’s original composer is unknown.

A stone monument standing next to the Ondo-no-seto Channel commemorates the “Ondo Boatman’s Song.” The first verse is engraved on the monument:

*Sendō kawaiya, ondo no seto de, ichi-jō go-shaku, ro ga shiwaru*

Poor sailor, upon the Ondo-no-seto Channel, the one-*jō*-five-*shaku* oar is bending

The words *jō* and *shaku* refer to traditional units of length, and “one *jō* five *shaku*” is approximately 4.5 meters. Fishing boats were generally propelled by a single long oar affixed to the back of the boat. The Ondo-no-seto Channel is very narrow, and its current runs strong and fast, making it difficult for a boatman to guide their craft. The song’s lyrics express this by describing how the strong current bends the boatman’s long oar.

As motorized boats became more common, the song was sung less frequently, and slowly it faded from the community’s collective memory. In 1960, however, a new arrangement by Seto resident Takayama Kuniaki revived the chanty’s popularity. Today, the local elementary school teaches Kuniaki’s version of the “Ondo Boatman’s Song” as part of the fourth-grade curriculum, and most residents of the town can sing it. It is also sung at the Ondo Kiyomori Festival. In 1979, the Ondo Sailors’ Song was designated an Intangible Cultural Property by the city of Kure.