

Koori San Odori in Omura

Three traditional dances performed at the autumn festival in the city of Omura celebrate the victorious homecoming of Lord Omura Sumikore (dates unknown) to his domain in 1480, after years in exile. He returned to challenge the rulers of the nearby Shimabara Peninsula, the Arima clan, after defeat at their hands six years earlier. The counteroffensive was successful, and Sumikore and his troops were finally able to regain control of the Omura lands. Each of the dances, or *odori*, of the Kuromaru, Okita, and Suko districts is said to celebrate this victory.

The Kuromaru Odori is performed by elementary school-aged boys, accompanied by musicians playing traditional drums, flutes, and cymbals. Four adult dancers play a *taiko* drum while carrying a towering bamboo garland of handmade paper flowers fixed to their backs. The garland fans out on bamboo ribs like a parasol, weighs around 60 kilograms, and measures 5 meters in diameter. Good fortune is believed to come to those who pass beneath the ribs of the garland.

In the Okita Odori, schoolboys and girls perform a stylized battle dance. The older youths carry a *naginata* polearm and the younger ones carry a short sword called a *kodachi*. The dancers perform attacking and defensive movements, accompanied by drums and flutes.

Both girls and boys perform the Suko Odori, also a stylized war dance. They dance in two parallel lines, dressed in kimono and woven straw hats, and represent the attendants of lord Omura Sumikore. A lead dancer dressed as the lord keeps time by striking a *taiko* drum. The lead dancer's face is concealed by a veiled headdress decorated with a half-moon motif.

The three dances are performed during the city's autumn festival in Omura Park, each October or November. Historical accounts show that the dances have changed little since they were first performed. The Kuromaru and Okita dances were registered as UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage events in 2022. All three dances are recognized as Important Intangible Folk Cultural Properties of Japan.