

AWA ODORI: THE POPULARITY OF A JAPAN'S TRADITIONAL DANCE FESTIVAL

*Tran Hoang Nam**

Abstract: Awa Dance (Awa Odori) is a traditional performing art that originated in Tokushima Prefecture, and is one of the major Bon festival dances in Japan. The history of Awa Odori dates back more than four centuries ago. Awa Odori has been born and developing along with the lives and culture of the local common people. Every year in August, the main Awa Odori Festival is being held in Tokushima City with involvement of more than 100.000 dancers and attracting more than 1.3 million visitors. Awa Odori is also being practiced by more than 1.000 registered dance groups over Japan, while gradually gaining popularity abroad. This paper is aimed at introducing the background, characteristics and the factors that contributed to the rise of Awa Odori as a representative dance festival of Japan.

Keywords: Awa Odori, Bon, Tokushima

I. Introduction

In Japan, there are thousands of traditional festivals, and each of them has its own long history. Although the date and nature of each festival varies from community to community, these festivals all are energetic, exciting and enjoyable for any people to join. Normally, a festival is sponsored by a local shrine or temple and is organized by the local community. People wear a typical festival costume and holding a parade with floats or portable shrine around the street for blessing the town and people. In another form, matsuri sometimes refers to a dancing performance or an artistic competition event held in a local area.

Among the numerous festivals of Japan, the Awa Odori is distinguished by its large scale in terms of total numbers of dancers, dancing groups and spectators. Moreover, Awa Odori as a rare case where folk dance in one locality has become a tourism resource and expanded nationwide. The first recorded Awa Odori dates back more than 400 years ago. Awa Odori is a term combined “Awa” – the old name of Tokushima prefecture, and “Odori” – dance. The home of Awa Odori – Tokushima Prefecture is located in the east of Shikoku island, having a population of 728,633 (2019). Tokushima’s major economic sectors are agriculture, forestry, and fishery; the prefecture is particularly well-known for products such as Aizome (indigo blue dyeing), Naruto Kintoki (sweet potatoes) and Sudachi (citrus fruit). Besides the Tokushima City, the prefecture’s major towns are, Anan, Naruto, Yoshinogawa.

Awa Odori Festival is known to be the largest traditional dance festival in Japan. It is also one of the three Japan’s Great ‘Bon Odori’ Dance Festivals (along

* **Assoc. Prof. Tran Hoang Nam Ph.D.** – Tokushima University, Japan, e-mail: tran@tokushima-u.ac.jp

with Gujo Odori in Gifu Prefecture and Nishimonai Bon Odori in Akita Prefecture). Awa Odori is also known as “The Fool’s Dance” as it is formed as a pop culture developing along with the lives of the common local people. Nowadays, Awa Odori is being practiced over Japan by more than 1,000 registered dance groups and gradually gains some popularity abroad.

Every year, the Awa Odori festivals are being held in numerous places in Japan and abroad. Among which, the “Tokushima City Awa Dance Festival” is the biggest event of all the Awa Odori festivals, is being held from August 12th to 15th every year, during the day and night. During the Tokushima City Awa Odori Festival, the entire city stays actively outdoors. There are about 100,000 dancers are participating in more than 900 dance groups. The men, women and children wear summer cotton kimono and straw hats, dance on the main streets. More than 1.3 million spectators get together for this festival make it a spectacular sight. The visitors can not only watch the performances, but they actually can join the dance on the streets.

The popularity of Awa Odori in Japan is a rare phenomenon in which a local festivity has been successfully transformed into a national attraction and a tourist resource. There are many studies have been done on the formation and development of Awa Odori, however most of the materials are written in Japanese language. There still very few publications have been published in languages other than Japanese.

This paper is aiming at describing (1) the factors that contributed to the formation and development of Awa Odori from a local dance festival into the Japan’s biggest street dance festival and the popularity of Awa Odori as a representative dance festival of Japan; (2) characteristics and diversity of the modern Awa Odori. The information is collected from relevant literature including books, journals publications and internet resources.

II. Formation process of the Awa Odori

The history of the Awa dance has been extensively studied in Japan. Many sources mentioned that the beginning of Awa Odori dates back more than four centuries ago, and there are several main factors contributed to the formation of Awa Odori in its modern forms. In fact, the essential elements of Awa Odori are found to be existed from much earlier periods.

Awa Odori comes at the same time of the year with Bon – a Buddhist custom to honor the spirits of ancestors. This custom has evolved into a family reunion holiday during which people return to ancestral family places, when the spirits of ancestors revisit the family altars. Folk dances and songs have traditionally been used as a part of Buddhist custom to welcome visiting spirits and over time this evolved into people joyfully dancing accompanied by flutes, drums, prayer gongs and shamisen during the three days of the Bon festival. Throughout Japan the Bon dance began as a spiritual dance – a dance meant to invite the spirits of the ancestors back to earth. On the localities with long seaside coast such as Tokushima, Bon dance also meant to call back home those lost at sea. It has been celebrated in Japan for centuries and traditionally includes a dance, known as Bon Odori. The festivals of Bon usually last

for three days, with variations within different regions of Japan. In Tokushima, Bon Odori may have been evolved into the modern Awa Odori dance.

Figure 1 proposes a timeline describing factors influencing the formation process of the modern Awa Odori. The Awa Dance has its roots in the Bon Festival Dance, known to be existed at the Kamakura Period (12~14 century), which were events accompanied with Buddhist song and music. There were two early types of Bon Dance; the marching dance (koshin), and the revolving dance (mawari). The marching style, which was more dynamic and better suit for performing on the narrow streets of Tokushima, seems to survive over time keeping its popularity. The revolving style (god’s dance – Kami Odori) has some religious aspects as praying for good weather, harvests and crops, honor the moon. In Tokushima it was differentiate into variations such as drum (Taiko) dance, hat (Kasa) dance.

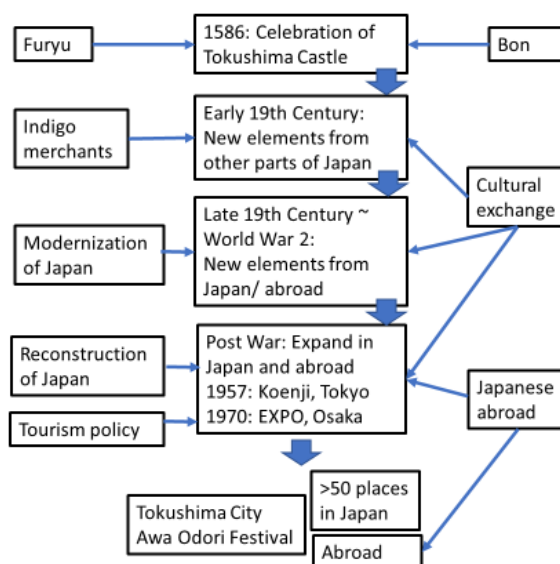


Figure 1. Formation process of the Awa Odori (compiled from different sources).

Awa Odori also has been influenced by Furyu – an old form of Noh theater which represents Japanese musical drama, and one of the oldest forms of theater. Furyu was a performing art originating in the Heian Period (8~12 century) and widely performed in the Kyoto-Osaka district. This traditional Japanese folk dance features vibrantly colored costumes and the music of gongs and taiko drums. There was a Furyu event held in Awa province as early as the 1500s, and this performance was believed to influence the birth of Awa Odori in the region. The first evidence of the Bon Dance in Tokushima was recorded at a summer festival in 1578 that included performance of a Furyu Dance group from Kyoto, which immediately became extremely popular at that time.

However, it is believed that the Awa Odori has been officially started at the time when Hachisuka Iemasa – the feudal lord of Awa celebrated the completion of Tokushima Castle in July 1586. This event is widely recognized to be the very beginning of the modern Awa Odori. This fact is mentioned in the famous song “Yoshikono Bushi” of the Edo Period (17~19 century) saying that “Hachisuka left Awa Odori to us”. At the grand celebration event, people were allowed to eat and drink as much as they can without caring their behavior. Awa Odori was thought to be formed by the people who danced and drunk wildly since that time.

Later on, the raise of Awa Odori’s popularity was greatly influence by the activities of the indigo dealers. As indigo was the principal product of Tokushima, indigo dealers in Tokushima were known to be wealthy, and they became leaders of the nationwide cultural exchange during the early 19th century. During this time Awa Odori integrated various elements of other festivals from different places in Japan. In this way Awa Odori, which was based on Bon Odori, had eagerly embraced various cultural elements and had taken root as a traditional art of Tokushima, developed along with the lives and culture of the common people.

The culture in Japan modernized drastically during the Meiji-Taisho periods (1868 – 1926). At the same time, Awa Odori was also modernized in various ways, such as adding a violin, clarinet or jazz musical elements, or wearing outfits with bright stripes etc. From the end of the Taisho to the Showa period, Awa Odori was introduced outside Tokushima Prefecture through radio and posters and became widely recognized throughout the country. Although activities were temporarily refrained during World War II, the number of people who danced Awa Odori as a symbol of reconstruction increased rapidly after the war, and the culture of Awa Odori spread throughout the country. In 1946, the known Bon Festival Dance was renamed by the authorities into a new name – Awa Odori as we know today. By the 1950’s, Awa Odori associations were set up and the number of dance groups scaled up. It was being held regularly and number of tourists exploded. Awa Odori has grown into one of the biggest festivities in Japan, boosting development of local economy.

In 1957, an Awa Odori festival was held in Koenji, Tokyo, which became the first Awa Odori held outside of Tokushima. After that, Awa Odori festivities continue to expand outside Tokushima. During the International EXPO held in Osaka in 1970, Awa Odori dance performance had become well known on the stage. Then its popularity has been furtherly expanded abroad. Since that time, Awa Odori had changed its image as a “local festival in Tokushima” into its new identity of a “traditional festival of Japan.” The Awa Odori dancers and groups started to change their performance concept from “dancing for selves” into “dancing for showing Awa Odori and attracting people”. Then the dancing and the sound were changed to a more sophisticated style of performing art: Kumi dance, which has been the oldest type of dance came as a variation of the Furyu; Zomeki dance refers to a lively style which later evolved into the most popular forms of modern Awa Odori; Niwaka dance adds freshness and spontaneity to the traditional dance. Some groups dance with an 8-beat rhythm, other than the traditional 2-beat rhythm. This has led to a greater diversity and uniqueness among the numerous Awa Odori groups.

Today, Tokushima hosts the largest Awa Odori festival in Japan every year in mid-August. This dance festival is formally become “Awa Odori Festival” when the local Tokushima government began promoting the dance as a tourist attraction for the region. It is sponsored every year by Tokushima Prefecture Government since 2008. In 2019, Tokushima City also hosted “The First World Awa Odori Summit” attracting Awa Odori community from all over Japan and abroad. Unfortunately, in 2020, the Tokushima Awa Odori Festival has been cancelled due to Covid-19 pandemic.

III. Characteristics of Awa Odori

The modern Awa Odori is a dance with a relatively high degree of freedom. Individual dancer’s movement is described by raising hand and dancing to the musical accompaniment. In its basic form, Awa Odori dance has the two-beat rhythm. The dancer puts his right hand forward along with the right leg. Then the left hand comes forward with the left leg and so on. His back is kept straighten and his chest is pushed out while he is looking forward, holding elbows above shoulder, stretching his hands up high, and rotating his palms back and forth.

As for a group dance, its dancing styles could be various. There are different groups of dancers: large and small, male and female or children, young and old, local and foreigners, skilled and beginners. The group members could be local residents, members of organizations, company employees, students etc. Each group keeps the basics of Awa Odori, but has its own unique dances, music, costumes, and performance styles.

At the group performance level, there are three major styles of Awa Odori group performance: Aho (aggressive), Kochadaira (slow), and Nonki (carefree) respectively. Usually, each group dance applies to one of the three mainstreams. Aggressive style, which was born from the famous Aho-ren, is characterized by dancing aggressively among the three mainstreams. The male dancer moves rhythmically in a forward leaning posture. He often holds lanterns in his hands with masterful movements. Slow style was born from the Kochadaira-ren, is characterized by its movements that match the relaxed and regular musical accompaniment. In the male dance, the dancer lowers his hips as if crawling on the ground, and while judging the fan, he walks on his feet. Carefree male dance, which was born from the long-established Nonki-ren, is characterized by the movement of stretching the back, sitting down, and raising the toes. Of the three mainstream dances, it has the brightest and most friendly atmosphere.

Regarding the costumes, in the old days, each dancer wore his own yukata, but as the dance later evolved into lining up and group formations, the costumes have become standardized into uniforms of each group, but there is still great variety and customized variants of costumes for dancing. Today, the members of the dance groups are roughly divided into two types, “male dancer” and “female dancer”. The female dancer has a specially designed conical hat (amigasa). Originally these hats made from straw were used on scarecrows. Traditionally, the costumes have been made from the blue indigo products of the local industry. The female

dancers' costume set includes a Japanese summer coat (yukata), an amigasa, and wooden clogs (geta) among the other items. This kind of costume let the female dancer to move with characterized elegance and supple movements. The male dancer wears a yukata or "happi coat" (a type of coat for festival) and specialized socks. The male dancers' performance is characterized by dynamic movements that dance freely and greatly, and basically dance with bare hands, but sometimes it dances with a fan or lantern.

Not only dancing and movements, human voices, songs and instrumental performances also are the important elements that make up the Awa Odori. The main refrain of modern Awa Odori: "We're fools whether we dance or not, so we may as well dance!" is associated with the song Yoshikono Bushi, which was come along with the indigo tradesmen during the Tenpo period (1830-44). The original song of boatmen has been spread from Kyushu to many parts of Japan, finally came to rest in Tokushima and became associated with the dance. In order to create atmosphere and engagement there would be an exchange of shouts "Yattosa yattosa! Yatto yatto!, Eraiyattcha!" between the dancers. This is known as "hayashi kotoba".

Live music performance is an attractive feature of the Awa Odori Festival. Musical instruments (narumono) are indispensable for performing Awa Odori. Among each dance group, there are specialized musicians who play musical instruments. The following are the main musical instruments being performed during the Awa Odori Festival. Paintings from the Edo period have shown some musical instruments for Awa Odori such as shamisen, small drums, drums, trumpets, etc. In the Taisho period, western instruments such as violins, clarinets, accordions begun to appear. The dance was free-spirited, and it felt like any musical accompaniment could be played.

The style in which the dancer advances in front of the musical accompaniment is remained unchanged from the past. After the war, when the number of dancers increased and the formation became longer, the head of the formation could not hear the sound of the musical accompaniment. So, the large drums play an important role and have become the main instruments for accompaniment. Nowadays, the major instruments remained flute, shamisen, gong, and several types of drums. Gong (kane) has a high-pitched sound that resonates. It leads the dance by giving signals when the dance begins and when the tempo is raised. Awa Odori experts and the group leader are often in charge of gong. Flute (fue) produces a clear sound that plays an emotional melody. The traditional flute "Shinobue" is often used. Shamisen is a melody instrument as the flute, which produces a crisp sound. Large drum (odaiko) is characterized by a loud sound that resonates and plays a role in producing the liveliness and dynamics of Awa Odori. Small drum (shimedaiko) is smaller and plays a light sound. Tsuzumi is an instrument that plays a tone that accents a musical accompaniment. It has the effect of tightening the performance by putting a "matching hand" with the drum.

IV. Popularity in Japan and beyond

In Tokushima Prefecture, besides Tokushima city, Awa Odori Festival is being organized in the major towns such as Naruto, Anan, Yoshinogawa etc. Beyond

Tokushima prefecture, the number of major Awa Odori festivals exceeds 50 events in all over Japan. There are over 1.000 registered dance groups (ren) in Japan, many of which is practicing year-round. Most groups, however, tend to gather up for practice several months before August. The groups could represent companies, universities, schools, communities, organizations that use practice time as a way to make network and socialize. Figure 2 shows the major Awa Odori Festivals which is being organized annually in Japan.

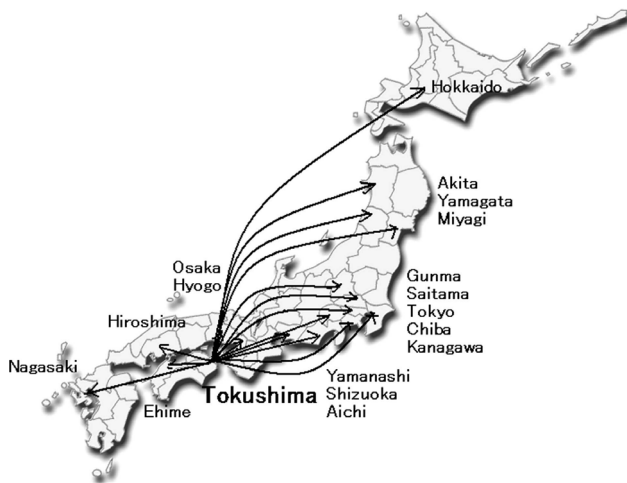


Figure 2. Major Awa Odori Festivals over Japan
(Source: Kobayashi, 2005).

In the Tokyo area, August is crowded with many Awa Odori events. “Tokyo Koenji Awa Odori” is held every year in late August on the streets of Koenji Station. Approximately 880,000 people attended, making it the largest festival in the metropolitan area. Koenji Awa Odori has been celebrated since 1957 and sees approximately 10,000 dancers parade their way through the streets. Nevertheless, “Minima Koshigaya Awa Odori” is held around Minami Koshigaya Station usually attracts around 750,000 spectators each year. Festivals in the Tokyo metropolitan area also include “Tokyo Otsuka Awa Odori” (end of August) and “Hatsudai Awa Odori” (end of September). Awa Odori is seen as a typical tool for revitalization of the shopping districts and regions nationwide. Awa dance is suitable for the festival at a shopping street because of its characteristics such as “marching style”, “cheerful tempo”, “various styles and skills of dancing”. Shopping districts of the whole country imitated example of Koenji in Tokyo, and Awa Odori spread out in all parts of Japan. In Tokyo alone, there are more than 20 locations such as Mitaka, Otsuka, Kagurazaka, Koganei, and Itabashi.

Outside of Japan, regional Japanese communities perform it on occasion all over the world, and it certainly has a fan base in Portugal, thanks to the Portuguese

writer Moraes (1854-1929). Since 2015, Awa Odori Festival is being organized in Paris with dancers sent from Japan. It gained popularity also in Brazil, Germany and other countries. The members of Tokushima University's Alumni associations are also playing active role in popularizing Awa Odori in their respective countries.

More and more foreign tourists come to Tokushima for seeing the Awa Odori. Since its opening in 1999, Awa Odori Kaikan in Tokushima City is receiving more than 300,000 visitors every year, both domestic and international. This is a facility where visitors can experience Awa Odori as a stage performance all year round. The number of foreign group visitors who have made reservations has increased sharply, reaching over 22,000 visitors per year, majority of whom come from Asian countries such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, Korea, China.

Awa Odori has become a regular event for international students who enrolled in universities in Tokushima. Even among the students who come to Tokushima for short term study, it is highly evaluated as a must-see culture landmark. Every year, Tokushima University hosts several summer schools to attract students from foreign universities to study and experience Japan's culture. The participants come from different universities from Asia, Europa, America. Most of the participants were coming to Japan for their first time. During the summer school, the participants received basic training on how to dance Awa Odori. Moreover, some participants have had chance to dance on the stage at the Awa Odori Kaikan, or to dance on the street during the festival. According to the participants, their exposure to Awa Odori was one of their best experiences in Japan. For most of foreign students, who have never seen such an event, the impression is always overwhelmed. As they commented: "I experienced more than I ever expected. That's true Japanese culture", "Very active dance but at the same time elegant and beautiful! For me it was a perfection!"; "I want to try more dance because the time was so short"; "It was not just a dance, it was a whole atmosphere with sounds, music, people, boats, streets, foods, landscape which brings inspiration".

V. Summary

Awa Odori has been started as a popular festivity and during a long process of development, it has become a representative dance festival of Japan. It continues to develop, reflecting the lives of local citizens while incorporating various cultures and shapes. Awa Odori is seen as a phenomenon that a local dance festival has transformed into a performance attraction and an entertainment dance that could be enjoyed anytime and anywhere. It is well transformed into a tourist resource and tool for revitalization of regions and shopping streets over Japan. Originally a simple community dance, it is developed and differentiated into various performance styles. The variety of dance groups, sets of skills, costumes, accompanying sound, stage dance has become more and more sophisticated and diversified. Awa Odori has maintained its core features, and yet embraced the changes over time seeking for new possibilities. Awa Odori still continue to develop, expand and transform, gaining popularity in Japan and abroad.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Matsumoto 1980: Matsumoto Susumu: Awa Odori. *Tokushima Shi Kanko Kyokai [Tokushima City Tourist Association]*, 1980.

Miyoshi 1988: Miyoshi Shoichiro. Awa Odori Shi Kenkyu [Historical Research of The Awa Dance]. *Tokushima Ken Kyoiku Insatsu Kabushiki Kaisha [Tokushima Prefecture Publishing Company]*, 1988.

Nakamura 1993: Nakamura Hisako: Shinbun kiji ni miru sengo no Awa Odori sengo no Awa Odori o sasaeta mono [Awa Dance in the post-war period viewed through the newspaper articles – what supported Awa Dance in the post-war period]. *Tokushimadaigaku sogo kagaku ningen kagaku kenkyu [University of Tokushima Science and Human Sciences]*, Vol. 1 (1993), pp. 1–11.

Moraes 1997: Moraes W. Okamura (tr.): Tokushima No Bon Odori [The Bon Dance of Tokushima], *Kodansha Gakujutsu Bunko [Kodansha Research Library]*, 1997.

Wisniewski 2004: Mark Wisniewski: Dyeing to Dance: the Awa Dance Festival & Indigo Dyeing Method of Tokushima. *Hiroba International*, 2004.

Kobayashi 2005: Kobayashi Katsunori: Kanko shigen toshite no Awa odori no seiritsu katei to sono yoin [How and Why Awa Dance Have Become Tourist Resources of Several Cities in Japan?]. *Bunkyo daigaku kokusai gakubu kiyo [Bulletin of Faculty of International Studies, Bunkyo University]*, Vol.16, No.1.

Sada 2017: Sada Yuka: Yaku 400-nen no rekishi, Tokushima natsu no fubutsushi Awa Odori okori ya tokucho o shirabeyou [Characteristics of Awa Odori – A Tokushima summer tradition with about 400 years of history]. Retrieved October 2020 from: <https://resemom.jp/article/2017/08/17/39864.html>

Kobayashi 2018: Kobayashi Atsuko: Awa odori ni okeru odori no henyo 1929 nen kara 2017 nen o chushin ni [Transition in the Dance of Awa Odori—A Focus on 1929 to 2017]. *Meiji University Graduate School of Information and Communication*. Doctoral Thesis.

Sato 2019: Sato Masashi: Chiiki minkan geino no kanko shigenka to chiiki shinko Awa Odori no jirei kara [Regional People’s Entertainment Tourism Resources and Regional Promotion from the case of Awa Dance]. *Keiei joho kenkyu [Management information research]*, Setsunan University, Business Management Faculty, Vol. 26, No. 1–2 (2019), pp. 109–130.

Tokushima University: *Summer Program Reports 2015 – 2019*.

Hagiwara 2020: Hagiwara Hachiro and Inai Yumi: Burajiru ni okeru Awa Odori Repra ren no hatten to sono yoin [An Analysis of the Development of the Repra Awaodori Group in Brazil]. *Shikoku daigaku keiei joho kenkyujo nenpo [Bulletin of the Information Business Research, Shikoku University]*, Vol. 25 (2019), pp. 1–10.

Awa Odori Kaikan. Retrieved October 2020 from: <https://awaodori-kaikan.jp/>