

See, Feel and Enjoy

Okinawan Performing Arts





## Discover Exquisite Arts Embellishing the Southern Islands



In Okinawa, we have songs. Along with these songs, dances, music and performances have developed. Once you set foot on this charming southern island resort of 160 islands both large and small, you will see the contours of this kingdom of performing arts.

Since the days of court rule long ago, Okinawan people have composed poems while gazing out at the cobalt blue sea, sung songs while strolling along the beaches, danced under the shining sun, and played the Sanshin.

Relax and take a leisurely look at the many performing arts living and breathing everyday on these southern islands.





## Court Dance and Melodies Captivating the World

Kumi Odori, registered as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO, Ryukyuan dance, embodying a wide range of styles from classical to popular dances and Sanshin music adds hues to the splendid stage performances. Court culture, which blossomed during the days of the Kingdom of Ryukyu, still endures.



### Kumi Odori

Kumi Odori is a performance with song and dance. During the reign of the Kingdom of Ryukyu, it was developed early in the 18th century by a man named Tamagusuku Chokun, who would have been what we now call a producer, to regale Chinese "sapposhi" envoys. Using traditions handed down from old and tales from Ryukyuan history, over 70 works have been composed. Kumi Odori is a nationally-designated Important Intangible Cultural Property along with Nogaku, Kabuki and other Japanese arts, and it has also been inscribed as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. This popular classical performing art representative of Japan, Kumi Odori, entertains visitors from countries around the world.

### Ryukyuan Dance

Since well before Kumi Odori was refined, Ryukyuan Dance developed as court performance art during the Kingdom of Ryukyu. Ryukyuan dance comprises Onna Odori (women dances) performed with Bingata costumes and exquisite poise as well as other dances known as Wakashu Odori (young men and women dances), Rojin Odori (elderly dances) and Niisee Odori (young men dances). From the Meiji era, Ryukyuan Dance came to have a greater following outside of court circles, and these traditional classical dances have been handed down over generations. Yet, Zo Odori (popular dances), which present animated portrayals of common people's lives and emotions, and popular dance, created in post-war period, took root as a new form of Ryukyuan Dance.

### Classical Music

The signature Okinawan music Uta-Sanshin is known nationwide. Lyrics are composed to the rhythm of traditional Ryukyuan poetry, which consists of four metrical units of 8, 8, 8 and 6 syllables, and the melody is played on a unique score known as "kun-kun-shi." Performances of Kumi Odori and Ryukyuan Dance are accompanied by Uta-Sanshin, koto, Ryukyu flute, Chinese fiddle, drums and other musical instruments. They are an essential part of Okinawan performing arts and play important roles.





## Unbroken tradition of folk performances and culture loved by the public

Eisa is a Bon Festival event having its roots in ancestor worship. Popularized in the Meiji era, Okinawan plays are spoken in the Okinawan language. This is a performance culture well known to people of many generations that vividly expresses the lives and emotions of the common people.



### ❁ Eisa

Eisa is a type of a Nenbutsu Odori for the repose of our ancestors and is performed on the last day of the Bon Festival in Okinawa (July 15th on the lunar calendar). While beating drums and dancing to the melody of Uta-Sanshin, performers parade through the streets. These days, it is mainly youth groups that are maintaining the tradition. Each community shows off the distinctive traits of its dances and costumes.

### ❁ Okinawan Plays

Okinawan plays first appeared in the middle of the Meiji era. Okinawan plays come in two types: "lyric dramas" which depict the lives and tragic love stories of common people in lyrics expressed through song, and "Okinawan language lyric dramas" which are performed using lyrics similar to everyday Okinawan language. Today, these public performances are also popular with many people, and the special performances given by theatrical companies on Mother's Day are annual events.



### ❁ Lion Dance

Since long ago in Okinawa, the lion has been thought of as an animal which purges evil influences. The Lion Dance is performed during the harvest festival and other events. Lion heads are made of wood from the coral tree and the body uses basho (banana fiber cloth) fibers. This combination is unique to Okinawa. The dancing lion figure is instinctively dynamic. Many lion dances have been handed down to us in locations throughout the prefecture.

### ❁ Folk Songs

Folk songs, which have their beginnings in people's lives, were spread throughout by a variety of songs that circulated around each island and community, and handed down among the common people. The lyrics of these songs contain words in Okinawan language particular to the location, whose distinctive atmosphere and essence can be felt. From the Meiji era, a style of singing accompanied by sanshin became the mainstream, and, even today, new songs are being enthusiastically composed.



### New Wave Allowing Us to Perceive the Current of the Times

In Kumi Odori and Eisa, new styles have emerged. Incorporating cutting-edge technology, so as to evoke the hearts of those watching, new compositions and works are continually being released.



#### Modern Kumi Odori

This style of Kumi Odori breathes ingenuity into music and performance methods to open new horizons. While based on Kumi Odori's basic rules for lyrics, dances and music, the dance themes of these works can be freely chosen. Ambitious works are being created one after the other, spanning the range from child-friendly topics to historical fantasy.

#### Modern Eisa

Based on traditional eisa, choreography and music are freely arranged in this new style. Groups devoted to new contemporary eisa can be found not just in Okinawa, but in other prefectures and countries. Many such teams participate in the annual Worldwide Eisa Festival. They make Okinawan performing arts better known as a form of entertainment.

#### Contemporary Okinawa Performing Arts

Okinawan arts comprise not only classical, but numerous contemporary works as well. There has been an increase in the number of works enjoyed even by beginners regardless of age. These involve comedies with verse in "Uchinaa-Yamatu-Guchi (Okinawan-style native Japanese language)," Kabugeki enjoyed with sessions of classical music and violins, and "Modern Kumi Odori" comprising performances adopting modern music and dance.

#### Local Junior and High School Students Star in Leading Roles, Demonstrating the Appeal of Modern Kumi Odori.

Modern Kumi Odori solidified its standing as a new Okinawan performing art with the first performance of "Kimutaka-no-Amawari" in 2000. A distinguishing feature of this art form is that children in communities where performances of these works are held take central part in the productions. Some children are on stage acting, others live the atmosphere with music or dance, and still others devote their energies to working behind the scenes. For these students, the experiences gained through such performances form a lively educational tool enabling them to actively discover the pride and charm of their homeland.



# 音楽・織物 Music Textiles

## A Number of Outstanding Supporting Instruments Sustain Okinawan Performing Arts

Sanshin with its unique musical scales and other instruments along with Bingata and other traditional costumes are important elements embraced in Okinawan performing arts.

### ✿ Sanshin & Music

Sanshin, which has transcended this island's history from the Kingdom of Ryukyus as well as the pre-war and post-war periods, is a genuine treasure for the people of Okinawa. A wood body is covered with python skin, and three strings strung along the neck are played by plucking with a pick, which is made from the horn of a water buffalo or other animal. Drums Familiar in Eisa and Ryukyu flutes are essential in expressing the rhythm and emotions particular to Okinawan music.

### ✿ Bingata

Bingata is an exemplary dyeing technique used in Okinawa. Employing stencil-dyeing strokes commonly used in mainland Japan, the most distinguishing feature of Bingata is that any design, no matter how complex, can be dyed with a single stencil. In the Kingdom of Ryukyu, only members of the samurai class or higher in the social structure were permitted to wear Bingata, so many colorful and ornately designed kimonos were created. Recently, Bingata has become familiarized and are used on t-shirts, purses and products other than Ryukyuan and Japanese-style clothes.



Photo Courtesy : Shiroma Bingata Studio



Photo courtesy : Okinawa Convention & Visitors Bureau

### ✿ Bashofu

Bashofu is a dyeing and weaving technique particular to Okinawa, in which fibers are used from a certain type of banana, Musa liukuensis, for the thread. The fabric's texture, light and softly smooth, is well suited to the hot and humid climate of the south. Since long ago, it has been a favorite cloth for daily attire by everyone from royalty to farmers. When performers wearing Bashofu take the stage in performances of Zo Odori (popular dances) and Okinawan plays, it brings out the "Okinawan essence," further enhancing the ambience.

### ✿ Kasuri

Kasuri is a weave incorporating a pattern of "hazy edges." Pre-dyed thread is woven vertically and horizontally to produce a finished weave in a set pattern. Since long ago, Kasuri have been manufactured all over Japan, but its roots are said to have arisen from the Ryukyu Kasuri weave. Kasuri products are still popular today, and are a cherished tourist souvenir.



Photo courtesy : The Ryukyu Kasuri Cooperative Association

## Kuruchi-no-Mori 100-Year Project in Yomitan

The Kuruchi-no-Mori 100-Year Project in Yomitan originated with Kazufumi Miyazawa, who initiated the project in 2012. Kuruchi refers to a black tree, from which the Sanshin neck is made. The material is hard, so warping or curving almost never develop, making it perfect for the Sanshin neck. However, today, kuruchi wood is rarely harvested in Okinawa, and we are dependent on imports from other countries for the supply. The goal of this project is to make a Sanshin with prefecturally grown black tree wood in 100 years, and the plan calls for new trees to be planted every year.