

Traditional Performing Arts of Iwate

Hoping for the long healthy lives of the people, wishing for rich harvests, and the performances born from appealing to the gods to expel evil spirits during religious events—these are all a part of what is known as *minzoku geino*, or traditional performing arts. As an appeal to nature, and to the gods, these traditional arts have long been conducted as a way to seek solutions.

Of course, there are many different kinds of performing arts, each with their own unique features, including Kagura, Daikagura, Nenbutsu Odori, Onikenbai, Shishi Odori, Taue Odori, Bon Odori, and various others. At the Kitakami Michinoku Performing Arts Festival, over 100 groups from throughout the area show off some of these many performances, including Kagura, Onikenbai, Shishi Odori, and Taue Odori, all throughout the city.

So let's take a look at some of Kitakami's traditional performing arts.

The Origins of Onikenbai

Onikenbai, which can be translated as "Demon Sword Dance," is certainly an active performing art in Kitakami. To be precise, this performance is actually a kind of Nenbutsu Kenbai dance, but has received its own unique name of *Oni* (demon) *Kenbai* (sword dance) due to the performers, who



are said to symbolize an incarnation of Buddha, wear demon-like masks during their dance.

There are varying theories as to the origins of Onikenbai.

1. One theory suggests that it began between the years 701 to 704 (during the Taiho era), the founder of *Shugendō* (a type of mountain asceticism), who was known as En no Gyoja Ozuno, began dancing while calling out Buddhist chants, also known as *nenbutsu*, in order to spread the Buddhist teachings.
2. Another theory maintains that between the years 806 to 810 (during the Daido era), a high-ranking monk of Mt. Haguro, Zenkoin was initiated into the dance by the deity Oniwatari of Arasawa, as a way to expel evil spirits and advance toward enlightenment.

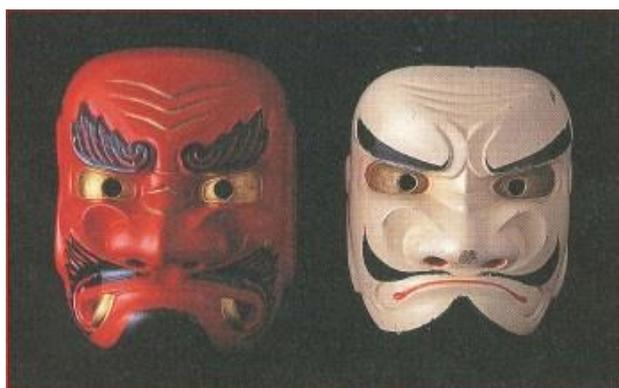
And on the theories continue...

The Costumes, Tools, and Masks of Onikenbai

Performer's costumes are intricately predetermined, and worn throughout nearly any version of the dance.



Onikenbai is typically performed by eight people, with one person wearing a white mask, and the other seven wearing blue, red, and black open and closed-mouthed masks. As these four colors are meant to represent Buddha, who is said to save people, the masks have no horns, meaning they are actually not demons.



Types of Onikenbai

At most, there are 18 varieties of the performance, though usually only 12 of them are actually performed.



◇ Ichiban Niwa (also known as Reibu)

One of the most basic versions of the performance, a generally calm and graceful Buddhist dance.

Over 100 groups participate in the Kitakami Michinoku Performing Arts Festival, and that includes those who perform not only Onikenbai, but also Kagura, and Shishi Odori (Deer Dance), so feel free to come and have a great time!

1	Ichiban Niwa
2	Ichiban Niwa no Kurui
3	Niban Niwa (eight person dance)
4	Sanban Niwa (eight person dance)
5	Sanban Niwa no Kurui
6	Katanakenbai (eight person dance)
7	Katanakenbai no Kurui
8	Hitori Kago (one person dance)
9	Futari Kago (two person dance)
10	Sannin Kago (three person dance)
11	Hachinin Kago (eight person dance)
12	Mugiri
13	Chugaeri (one person dance)
14	Kani Mukuri (two person dance)
15	Zenmai (one person dance)
16	Kakkata no Odori
17	Dotori no Odori
18	Kitsune Kenbai (one person dance)