

"BON" AND "BON-ODORI" IN HAWAII

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With the introduction of Buddhism into Hawaii came the *Bon* festival, which, to the Japanese, is one of the two great holidays of the year, the other being New Year's Day. *Bon*, falling as it does in the middle of the year, July 15, holds a particular significance to the Japanese. If New Year's Day represents birth, *Bon* is the period of full bloom, to be followed by the end of the year, symbolizing death.¹

Origin of Bon. The observance of *Bon* as a season to honor the dead was an ancient primitive religious custom, antedating the advent of Buddhism in Japan.² The introduction of Buddhism with its version of *Bon* into Japan in 552 A. D. merely served to strengthen and give added significance to the existing folkway. For this reason, although *Bon* today is regarded chiefly as a Buddhistic function, the festival is observed in many Japanese Christian homes in Hawaii by visits to the graves of the dead ancestors, not in observance of the Buddhistic *Bon*, but as an expression of a beautiful traditional folkway of old Japan.

The Buddhistic word *Bon* is a contradiction of *Urabon* which in turn is a corruption of the Sanskrit term *ullambana* meaning "to salvage souls from the agony of being hanged head down."

The Buddhistic origin of *Bon* is found in the scriptures and is well described by Lafcadio Hearn.

"Dai-Mokenren, the great disciple of Buddha, obtained by merit the Six Supernatural Powers. And by virtue of them it was given him to see the soul of his mother in the *Gakido*—the world of spirits doomed to suffer hunger in expiation of faults committed in a previous life. Mokenren saw that his mother suffered much; he grieved exceedingly because of her pain, and he filled a bowl with choicest food and sent it to her. He saw her try to eat; but each time that she tried to lift the food to her lips it would change into fire and burning embers, so that she could not eat. Then Mokenren asked the Teacher what he could do to relieve his mother from pain. And the Teacher made this answer 'On the fifteenth day of the seventh month, feed the ghosts of the great priests of all countries.' And Mokenren, having done so, saw that his mother was freed from the state of *Gaki*, and that she was dancing for joy. This is the origin also of the dances called *Bon-odori*, which are danced on the third night of the Festival of the Dead throughout Japan."³

The version that Mokenren's mother danced with a *bon*, a round Japanese tray, and thereby gave the name *Bon-odori* to the dance, is obviously an addition to the story after the introduction of Buddhism into Japan from Korea.

Bon, then, honors and reveres the memory of the ancestors and helps to stimulate and to encourage ancestor worship and filial

1 Heibonsha, "Dai-Hyakka-Jiten", Vol. 24 p. 1

2 Heibonsha, "Dai-Hyakka-Jiten", Vol. 24 p. 5

3 Lafcadio Hearn, "Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan," Vol. 1 pp. 125-126

piety. It is the occasion when the spirits of the dead return to visit their former existence. On the last night of the three day visit by the departed souls, a dance is held to entertain and cheer them on their journey back to the land of the dead. This is the *Bon-odori* that we see in Hawaii.

Bon in Hawaii. From late June to early September, the Buddhists in Hawaii observe the *Bon* festival, the most conspicuous feature of which is the *Bon-odori* that goes along with the occasion. Normally, *Bon* itself falls on July 13, 14, and 15, but in Hawaii the season is lengthened for three reasons:

1. The temple may observe *Bon* according to either the solar or the lunar calendar, there being approximately a month's difference in time.

2. The practice of having a priest from a neighboring temple as guest speaker for the services tends to prolong the *Bon* season.

3. In an effort to make the *Bon-odori* a success, the sponsors try to choose a weekend relatively free of *Bon* dances in the neighboring communities. Except for Honolulu, rarely does a community witness two sponsors attempting *Bon-odori* on the same weekend. Should such an occurrence be unavoidable, two different kinds of dances would most likely be featured for there are about four popular varieties of dance to choose from. This postponement of the dance and the practice of stealing a march on the other fellow usually prolong the *Bon* season for several weeks.

The Buddhists in Hawaii observe *Bon* or *O-bon* in much the same way as they did in Japan. The altar of the family shrine receives a special cleaning and is decorated more elaborately than on ordinary days. Fruits, *O-dango* (a kind of steamed wheat cake), *mochi*, candy or *somen* (Japanese macaroni), may take the place of the usual offering of rice. A *chochin* or Japanese lantern is lighted before the shrine a week before and during the festival. Flowers from the florist's replace the usual *o-hana* (flowers) from the family backyard.

On the first *Bon* following the death of any member of the family, the relatives and friends bring *chochin* to decorate the home. The lighted lanterns, beautiful in shape, of all sizes and designs, present a gay picture and, hanging closely together, 50 to 100 in number, are supposed to help relieve the gloom and sorrow occasioned by the departed ones.

Relatives, neighbors, and close friends are invited to attend the services held at home for the dead person, usually two or three nights before the observance of *Bon* at the temple. While the priest is chanting the *sutras*, a tray with an incense burner is passed around. The head of the family offers and burns incense and prays to the memory of the dead one. Next come the members of the immediate family after which the tray is passed on to the relatives and finally to the friends and the neighbors. All this while, the priest continues to chant the *sutras*. As soon as everyone has finished burning incense, a brief and appropriate sermon, followed by a reading from the scriptures, completes the services. The group is then served foods in which no meat or fish has been used. The memory of the deceased is recalled and the crowd gra-

dually relapses into general discussion. Not long after, the people start to leave with much bowing and profuse thanks on the part of both the hosts and the guests.

After the services, most of the lanterns are donated to the temple to be used for the *Bon* festival. If they are kept, they are used again the next year.

On the first night of *Bon*, special open air services are held at the local cemetery by the priest. The graveyard is clean, for a week before *Bon* the young men and women of the community have turned out *en masse* for a general cleanup of the cemetery. White hanging lanterns are hung before the graves which are decorated with flowers. Offerings of fruit, candy and *mochi* are also made. Incense is burned and prayers are offered for the dead whose souls are supposed to visit this earth yearly at *Bon*. At twilight, scores of people can be seen moving quietly about the graves. The white smoke rises endlessly from the sticks of burning incense. The lighted lanterns flicker uncertainly in the dusk; occasionally a sudden flare from a burning lantern lights up the scene. In the distance can be heard the monotonous chanting of the *sutras* by the priest.

At the temples, decorated with colored electric lights and scores of lanterns, of all shapes, sizes, and designs are held special services for the dead. Visiting priests supply an incentive for the people to attend. As is usual in most Buddhist temples in Hawaii, the older people far outnumber the younger. Boys of the second generation are notoriously poor in temple attendance and the girls usually outnumber them.

The Bon-Odori. The most attractive feature of the season to the second generation Japanese is the *Bon-odori* or dance that goes along with the observance of the festival of the dead. The *Bon-odori* is usually held in the temple yard where an impromptu shed called *yagura*, fifteen to twenty feet high, is erected in the center for the drummers, the singers and the musicians. The people dance in a large ring around this *yagura*, which is decorated with lanterns, red and white cloth, the traditional colors for all festivities, and cherry blossoms made of tissue paper and tinted with red ink. As the musicians sing and the beat of the drums create the rhythm, the dancer wave their arms, shuffle their feet forward and backward, sway their bodies in unison and finally end by clapping their hands. Every once in a while, the dancers shout in chorus, *Betcho-betcho, dokkoi-sho, Arya-sa korya dokkoi to-na*, or *Tenyo-tenyo-ichiriki-ye-sa-sa*, depending upon the dance. In a particularly popular dance like the *Niigata*, six or seven hundred may dance in three or four large rings so close together that to make a complete circuit may take fully an hour. Any one may join in the fun of dancing to the chant and the continual thump-thump of the drums. In spite of an old Japanese saying that "he who dances is a lunatic; he who looks on is a fool" (*odoru wa kichigai, miru wa baka*), the crowd that gather to see these dances number well into the thousands. The male dancers are clad in *kimono* called *yukata* while the girls are resplendent in their gay *kimono* and *obi* (sash). Each dancer has a towel, a contribution

from the sponsors, thrown around his neck. Under the light of a full moon, a well conducted *Bon-odori* with dancers properly dressed and carefully trained is a sight well worth seeing. However, such is a rare occasion.

The *Bon-odori* of Hawaii are primitive folk dances of Japan transplanted bodily by the immigrants. These dances are believed by some authorities to have been in existence when Buddhism was first introduced into Japan.⁴ With the rise in power of Buddhism as a religious force in Japan, it gradually absorbed the customs and folkways of the primitive religions and made *Bon* and *Bon-odori* a purely Buddhistic function. However that may be, the dances popular in Hawaii are of four varieties, the *Niigata*, the *Fukushima*, the *Iwakuni* and the *Ryukyu odori*. All are named after the prefectures of origin, except the *Iwakuni odori* which is named from the city of Iwakuni in Yamaguchi prefecture.

Different Bon Dances. The *Iwakuni odori* is the most graceful and the most beautiful of all the *Bon-odori* in Hawaii. Its chief beauty lies in the stately, deliberately paced rhythm and in the graceful sweep of the hands. Executed properly, it is one of the finest folk dances to be introduced into Hawaii. The quiet leisurely tempo of the accompanying drum and chant, easily distinguishable by two intervals between the beats of the drum, the first long and second short, followed by a clapping of the hands after the second interval, permits the dancers many variations which are impossible in the other dances. Common are the umbrella and the fan dances, each with at least three versions. Among the more elaborate variations are sword fighting and the dance of the forty-seven *ronin*. A clever device by which the dancer lights an electric flashlight bulb on his forehead at each beat of the drum adds to the novelty of the dance and is very popular with the youngsters.

Four or five drummers, each keeping time with the dancers take turns in beating the drum attached to the lower part of the *yagura*. Often the center of attraction of an admiring group of children, their fancy twirling and clever manipulation of the drumsticks and the unusual pose these drummers take to strike the drum are as much a part of the exhibition as the dances.

Another feature of the *Iwakuni odori* that distinguishes itself from the other dances is the official chanter—*ondo-kudoki*—who stands on the platform of the *yagura*, with an open umbrella in one hand and a fan in the other, and chants an episode from a popular drama of old Japan. A clever singer may meet the approval of the fans by a recitation of a modern tale, but the usual run of chanters stick to the standard stock-in-trade favorites of filial piety, valor, and chivalry of old Japan. The older folks sit by the hour, oblivious of the noise and the revelry going around them, and listen enraptured to the different stories sung by the different chanters in turn. A chanter usually receives \$5.00 a night for his services, plus any *hana* (literally flower) or money from admiring fans. However, to the second generation youth, the chanters mean

⁴ Heibonsha, "Dai-Hyakka-Jiten," Vol. 24, Pg. 5

very little, due to their poor command of Japanese and to the unfamiliar background of most of the stories. To them, the chanters are just a necessary adjunct to the dance.

It is only natural that the dances of Niigata and Fukushima prefectures, which are next door neighbors in Japan, should be similar. Both dances are lively and spirited. Similar in tempo to the American fox-trot, these two are particularly popular with the second generation. Youths of other races who join in the fun experiences little difficulty in mastering the simple steps. Dancing the *Niigata* or *Fukushima odori* is quite exhausting and few can continue to keep up the pace without some rest. The soloist on the *yagura* sings at the top of his voice in order to be heard above the din of the drums. One of the dancers may burst into a song which is joined in by the others. The distinguishing marks of these dances are the use of the *minteki* (flute) and the fast and furious tempo of the incessant drum beating.

The latest addition to the *Bon* dances is the *Ryukyu odori*, commonly known as the *Okinawa odori*, with its primitive and plaintive music. Its popularity among the spectators rivals that of the *Iwakuni odori*, but the number of participants is limited because of the intricate and numerous parts to the dance. Most of the dancers are trained from two to three weeks in advance; the general public does not participate in these dances as it does in the others. The *Ryukyu odori* is easily distinguished from the others by the drummers (usually two) who are at the head of the ring of dancers beating time on a small drum. The use of a low pitched *samisen* (three stringed instrument) and the monotonously plaintive singing on the *yagura* are the unique features of the dance.

Paradoxically, the people who come from Hiroshima prefecture in Japan have failed to perpetuate their dance in Hawaii, in spite of their large numbers here.⁵ Some ten years ago, the *Okō-odori* of Hiroshima was introduced, but as soon as its novelty wore off after a season or two, it disappeared completely from active competition as a *Bon* dance. The *Okō-odori* itself is leisurely like the *Iwakuni* but without the distinctive features of the latter and not lively enough to suit the taste of the second generation. Probably these two things explain the early disappearance of the *Okō-odori* of Hiroshima.

Bon and the Second Generation. The average second generation youth has a rather hazy notion of *Bon* and its meaning. He remembers the occasion as a Japanese Memorial Day—to honor the dead. Should he be a Buddhist, a death in his family brings home the meaning of *Bon* rather forcibly to him. Should he be an avid *Bon-odori* fan, he anticipates the approach of *Bon* with eagerness; if not, *Bon* is just another Japanese festival. He participates in the *Bon-odori* more for the pleasure and fun he derives from it than for the religious significance attached to it, namely, to entertain the spirits of the dead. He very seldom attends the *Bon* services at the temples. To him, *Bon-odori* is a social event

⁵ In 1924, 21% of the Japanese population in Hawaii claimed Hiroshima as their home prefecture. (Statement of Dr. Andrew W. Lind)

in much the same way as American dancing is recreation. He drives out to a dance with his friends, enjoys a good evening of free entertainment and bothers little about its meaning or its effects on him. As often as not, Christians and non-church goers participate in these dances as well as Buddhists.

Occasionally, one does come across instances where *Bon* is deeply appreciated and is observed for what it is. A restaurant owner in Honolulu, having lost his mother and father within a year, sponsored an elaborate *Bon-odori* in memory of his parents, paying for all the expenses involved in staging the dance. Another youth, on the first *Bon* following his father's death, declared that he was dancing to welcome his father's spirit back to earth, although he had never danced the *Bon-odori* before. Another young man, Christian by faith, observes *Bon* by visiting the graves of his parents who were Buddhists, offers incense and makes the usual offerings of candy, oranges, and lanterns.

With the second generation having such a hazy idea of the meaning of *Bon*, it is not surprising that the religious element in the *Bon-odori* is almost completely gone. Although the dances are still sponsored by the temples, the *Bon-odori* has been almost completely secularized and is now regarded as a purely seasonal social affair and to be enjoyed as such. To the second generation, *Bon-odori* is a departure from the American style of dancing. To sway to the marked rhythm of a Fukushima dance and to clap hands in unison help to while away a pleasant summer evening when dancing in stuffy overcrowded dance halls becomes more of an ordeal than enjoyment. To the hundreds who do not dance at all, these affairs have enough color to attract them in huge numbers every weekend. One is bound to meet unexpected friends in the big crowd of people who assemble to witness these affairs. The *Bon-odori* serves as a fine recreational center for the young folks. Many a romance has blossomed from casual acquaintances at these dances to culminate in marriage. Even in the strictest of families where American dancing is strictly taboo, the girls are allowed to participate in the general merrymaking and given a chance to enjoy themselves. All in all, *Bon* is a season when friends reunite, boys meet girls and everyone is generally in a gay mood.

A significant development can be seen in the contributions to the *Bon-odori* fund. Formerly the *Bon-odori* was a source of profitable income to the temple that sponsored one. After the expenses for the drummers, musicians, chanters, food and towels had been paid, a neat profit amounting to \$150 or \$200 was not uncommon. Lately, the revenue has been dropping gradually, due to the decrease in numbers of first generation Japanese who still are the chief supporters of the temples, and the reluctance of the second generation to donate more than a mere pittance toward the *Bon-odori*. Invariably, the contributions by the second generation are smaller than the amounts donated by the first generation. Of the numerous dancers who travel from one community to another enjoying the hospitality of the temples, very few, if any, offer any sum to help support these dances. One temple has already consi-

dered the possibility of abolishing the dance because of the great expense involved, while another has not sponsored a *Bon* dance for the last five years.

On the other hand, in those communities where the *Bon-odori* are still very popular and profitable, the second generation has taken the lead in sponsoring and staging these dances. Through careful planning and hard work, these affairs are financial successes, although the support still comes largely from the first generation. By taking over the work of staging these dances, the boys and girls of the second generation are fulfilling a duty of filial piety and helping to preserve the friendly relations between the two generations.

Modifications in Hawaii. These folk dances transplanted from Japan have been modified during the twenty odd years since their introduction into Hawaii. Many of the finer points of each dance have been lost while newer features have been added. The *Niigata* and the *Fukushima odori* have degenerated the most in the hands of the second generation in Hawaii. Very little changes is noticeable in the *Iwakuni* and the *Ryukyu odori*, although one seldom sees the numerous variations of the umbrella and the fan dances which make the *Iwakuni odori* so colorful.

In the *Fukushima odori*, what was once a dignified and manly dance is now a leap-frog affair with no regard for the proper coordination of the hands and the feet. The hands, instead of being waved gracefully and smoothly, are thrust out jerkily and awkwardly somewhat in the manner of a man shadow boxing an opponent at close range. In the inelegant if somewhat expressive language of one youngster: "We like the *Betcho* best (meaning the *Niigata* and the *Fukushima odori*). We go git 'em. We no dance, we jump around"—is reflected the change that has taken place in these dances. Another young man terms the *Niigata* and the *Fukushima odori* as the Japanese version of American truckin'. A first generation woman from Fukushima declares, "The drummers and the musicians are excellent, for they come from Japan, but the dancing is terrible. In the Fukushima dance there is no jumping and there is correct coordination of the hands and the feet. What the young folks are dancing is the *Hawaii odori* and not *Fukushima odori*."

The Hawaiian born boys and girls dance the *Niigata* and the *Fukushima adori* in identically the same manner — the *Hawaii odori* just mentioned — and fail to differentiate between the two. They refer to these dances simply as the *Betcho-odori* because the dancers sing out *Betcho-betcho* at frequent interval in these *odori*. The term, used commonly and innocently enough in Hawaii, is really a vulgar expression (not standard Japanese, but a form of dialect from Fukushima) which is used only by people of the lowest type. When and who introduced it is not known, but the expression has become popular. However, very few, if any, of the young boys and girls who shout *Betcho-betcho* in the *odori* seem to know its true meaning.

In all of the *Bon-odori* in Japan, the dancers disguise themselves by costume, makeup or by the simple expedient of a towel

over their faces. When the *Bon-odori* was first started in Hawaii, the dancers followed the old country custom of concealing their faces, and part of the fun of the *Bon-odori* lay in trying to identify the dancers, especially the shy girls. Today, practically no one takes the trouble to conceal his face; to do so is to be old-fashioned and unconventional. The towel which every dancer is entitled to receive from the sponsors is now thrown or tied around his neck. Although the towel has lost its usefulness in Hawaii, it is still given out to each dancer.

During the *Bon* season in 1932, a group of new dances called the *ondo*, set to modern music, was introduced from Japan. The overwhelming popularity of these *ondo* threatened for a time the very existence of the regular *Bon-odori*. A keen theatrical promoter who saw financial possibilities in these dances staged the first of series of *ondo* contests. A group of 50 to 75 dancers dressed alike would compete with other groups for cash prizes. Each group would present a dance for ten or fifteen minutes to the strains of an Occidental orchestra. At the end of the competitive program, the audience would be invited to participate in the different dances including the traditional *Bon-odori*. Until the novelty of these affairs wore off, they were highly profitable; in fact, a number of organizations composed of second generation members have found these contests a highly successful method of raising funds.

Although non-religious in origin, these dances, coinciding at the summer season with the *Bon* festival, made serious inroads into the popularity of the *Bon-odori*. Many a protest was raised against this commercialization of the "sacred *Bon-odori*" and numerous religious organizations passed resolutions condemning these practices. However, the more liberal minded pointed out that the *Bon-odori* had already been so secularized that the added fact of commercial exploitation was really nothing to get excited about.

Then, the sponsors of the *Bon-odori*, capitalizing on the immense popularity of these new type dances, began to incorporate them as a part of their regular *Bon-odori* program. This shrewd move no doubt helped to hasten the doom of the *ondo* contests. With this invasion of the modern style of dancing, a new feature has been added to the *Bon-odori* in Hawaii. Instead of just the *Iwakuni* or the *Niigata odori* being danced exclusively on one night, part of the evening would be devoted to the *Tokyo Ondo*, the *Sakura Ondo*, the *Hanami-odori* or others too numerous to mention. This change in the program necessitated the introduction of the saxophone, the guitar, the violin and other Occidental orchestral instruments and, of course, the inevitable loud speaker. Those who cannot afford to hire an orchestra resort to the radio-phonograph for their music.

To counteract the influence of these *ondo*, the *Bukkyo Ongaku Kyokai* (Buddhist Musical Association) has issued a song, "*Bon-odori*", religious in meaning, with modern orchestral accompaniment, but it has had little or no success in Hawaii. It is possible that most of the temples do not even know of the existence of this dance.

Opposition to Bon-odori. The *Bon-odori* has come in for its share of criticism. The late hours kept by the dancers for many weekends are very bad for them, it is pointed out. At the same time, the dust that is stirred up in an evening's constant shuffling of myriads of feet on the bare ground (seldom is a temple ground or school yard planted with grass) is breathed in by the dancers and the spectators—a situation that is far from hygienic.

Strenuous opposition arises from the amount of drinking that goes on at these affairs and its attendant results. During the days of Prohibition, some of the opponents of the dances tried to discredit the sponsors by pointing out the drinking that went on, but the police tactfully ignored these protests on the grounds that the liquor was used for religious purposes. As an aftermath of drinking, fights are not infrequent. Sometimes, these occur right among the dancers, often in the neighborhood, and, although a hired policeman is always nearby, the disturbance is annoying, if not actually dangerous to the populace.

Considerable agitation has been stirred that these *odori* tend to lower and endanger the morals of the younger set. In spite of the existence of a curfew law, children are allowed to run loose, often times unchaperoned until late in the night to mingle with adults. The long rides to and from the dances are contributory causes to the moral laxity of the younger set, it is claimed. The sloppy manner in which the dancers dress—a kimono flung carelessly over the shirt and trousers—is held to be a lowering of moral standards.

The *Bon* festival, in spite of its religious significance, has become so secularized that most of its meaning is lost among the second generation in Hawaii. There seems to be a somewhat decreasing attendance among the ranks of the dancers as well as the spectators, but the crowds are still very large. Many of the second generation youths look forward eagerly to the coming of the *Bon* season as a social event. Others simply ignore the *Bon-odori*. In spite of some opposition to the *Bon-odori*, they will remain with us for some time as a seasonal social affair to be enjoyed by both the young and the old.

