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Iwate brings traditional dance into present

Sustainable Japan Magazine

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Northern Honshu's Tohoku region consists of six prefectures: Aomori, Iwate, Miyagi, Akita, Yamagata and Fukushima. In "Kojiki" and "Nihonshoki," ancient history books compiled in the first half of the eighth century, it is called Michi no Oku, meaning a land far from the capital. Beyond the reach of the imperial court, Michi no Oku had its own culture.

These days, of course, access from the current capital has improved dramatically with the opening of the Tohoku Shinkansen in 1982 (reaching Shin-Aomori in 2010), the Yamagata Shinkansen in 1992 and the Akita Shinkansen in 1997. Each prefecture also has airports, making it possible to reach them by air as well.

Because of Tohoku's cold climate, its festivals are concentrated in the summer months.

The three most popular are Nebuta (Aomori Prefecture), Kanto (Akita Prefecture) and Sendai Tanabata (Miyagi Prefecture), which together are known as Tohoku's "three major festivals." Since the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011, another festival has been held: Tohoku Kizuna Matsuri, which brings together elements of the three major festivals and three others, namely Morioka Sansa Odori in Morioka, Iwate Prefecture, Yamagata Hanagasa Festival in the city of Yamagata and Fukushima Waraji Festival in the city of Fukushima.

The prefectures take turns hosting the event, which is aimed at remembering the victims of the disaster and promoting reconstruction. Last year it was held on June 8 and 9 in Sendai. This year it will be suspended due to Expo 2025 in Osaka, but in 2026 it will be held in Morioka.

Shishi odori

In the Tohoku region of northeastern Japan, the traditional performance art called *shishi odori* originated four centuries ago as a ceremony by hunters to

honor the animals they killed. At some point, this expression of thanks and remembrance for the spirits of all living things came to encompass human spirits as well. The dance is performed at the village festivals that take place in summer and fall.

The city of Tono in Iwate Prefecture has its own variation on the *shishi odori* dance. It was the centerpiece of the Tono Meguritoroge art festival, a four-day event held for the first time in November 2021 that integrates contemporary art and music and gives participants an up-close window on local culture. Weaving together folk culture, performance art, food, music and other cultural traditions of Tono, the event offers many new opportunities to get involved in carrying on these local traditions.

At a typical art festival, artists converge on a chosen location to create artwork on a curated theme. While artists were invited to Tono for the Meguritoroge festival, they were asked to delve deep into the culture and history of the Tono region. The festival was thus envisioned as a means of sustaining local culture and connecting traditional performance art with contemporary culture.

Festival co-organizer Gaku Tomikawa left an advertising career in Tokyo to move to Tono in 2016. Today he is a tour guide and exhibit and event planner working to share Tono's rich cultural heritage with a broad contemporary audience. "Shishi odori captivated me when I moved to Tono, and I became a dancer myself," he said. "The dance represents the balance between people and nature, with one dancer playing the sacred beast and another playing a person with a sword.



Shishi odori is a traditional performance art of the Tohoku region. Originally performed to honor the spirits of deer killed in hunts, the dance portrays a confrontation between a sword-wielding human and a shishi, a generic word for four-limbed animals. Today it is performed at festivals in the northeast as well as when people die, to honor their spirits. The Iwate city of Tono alone has 13 shishi odori troupes, with many variations on the dance and costumes. RYO MITAMURA

These days humans often try to control nature, but in *shishi odori*, the human is overpowered by the beast. I feel like this attitude of facing nature head-on can offer insight for how to interact sustainably with the present-day world."

Watching the *shishi odori* is a highlight for participants joining the festival's three days of tours around Tono. In addition, artists put on live performances inspired by the dance that may include the use of melodies from the *shishi odori* in an original composition.

Tomikawa suggested that by presenting a traditional performance like *shishi*

odori as "art," the Tono Meguritoroge festival has opened up a new avenue for cultural transmission. "All over Japan, fewer people are carrying on local performance arts, and some groups can't even afford to repair their costumes," he said. "In the midst of this crisis, everyone is searching for new ways to get people from outside the local communities involved in traditional performance arts. In that sense, I think the work we put into creating opportunities to enjoy the dance as a part of contemporary culture rather than as something old will help us connect with a wider swath of people." In fact, he said, the festival has already

inspired new dancers to join the *shishi odori* troupe.

"It's important to pass on history and culture to the next generation, but not everything should be kept exactly the same over time," he said. "All sorts of changes have probably taken place in these traditions over the course of history. As people living at this particular point in time, I think the important question is how sincerely we can work to keep alive the traditions that we want to see continue."

The Tono Meguritoroge festival, which has been held variously from late summer through autumn, has forged new connections between traditional and contemporary culture each year.

Morioka Sansa Odori

Morioka Sansa Odori was started in 1978 as a sightseeing event that combined traditional Sansa Odori festivals that had been held around Morioka since the Edo Period (1603-1868). It is believed that the dance festivals stem from the legend of Mitsuishi.

The story goes that an evil demon appeared in the southern part of the Morioka domain and terrorized the locals, who prayed to the god of the Mitsuishi Shrine for help. Hearing their prayers, the Mitsuishi god captured the demon and made it put its handprint on three huge rocks in the shrine grounds and vow not to misbehave again. (This same tale is thought to explain Iwate Prefecture's name, as "iwa" means rock and "te" means hand.) Delighted that they had been saved, the locals danced around the Mitsuishi Shrine, calling out, "Sansa, sansa!" — and this was the origin of the dance.

The highlight of the festival is a parade involving more than 5,000 taiko drums and 6,000 flutes. Spectators are welcome to join in the dancing.

This article is a combination of two articles that were published in the Sustainable Japan Magazine, a monthly publication exploring sustainable lifestyle choices and the future of our planet from the perspective of our everyday lives. To subscribe to the magazine, scan the QR code.



The shishi mask is a composite of animals such as deer, lions and dragons. RYO MITAMURA



COURTESY: ORGANIZING COMMITTEE OF MORIOKA SANSA ODORI FESTIVAL

Ebitei-Bekkan

Toyama restaurant keeps traditions fresh



TAEKO TERAO
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Toyama, home to the restaurant Ebitei-Bekkan, is the capital of Toyama Prefecture, facing Toyama Bay to the north and the Tateyama range to the east in the Northern Japan Alps. As a government-designated "environmental model city," it is currently aiming for a "compact city" urban design. Historically, the area flourished as a castle town and had devoted followers of the Jodo Shinshu (True Pure Land) school of Buddhism.

Ebitei-Bekkan's predecessor, Ebitei, was a traditional restaurant that opened in 1911. Its fourth-generation owner-chef, Kentaro Mura, trained at the restaurant Aoyagi in Tokushima Prefecture before taking over the family business in 2004 following the death of his father. Mura remodeled the restaurant in 2009 and changed its menu. Business flourished after a famous guidebook bestowed a high rating and the opening of the Hokuriku Shinkansen train line brought more visitors to Toyama. In 2018, however, Mura closed its doors.

"It was time to rebuild the restaurant, since the structure was deteriorating with age and our financial outlook was good," Mura said. Starting afresh at the age of 40, he headed to Tokyo and worked at a highly



Address
Ebitei-Bekkan
2-4-10 Yasunoya-cho,
Toyama-shi, Toyama
Prefecture
<https://ebitei-bekkan.com>

regarded Japanese restaurant. Renewed in 2022, the atmosphere of Ebitei-Bekkan is modern and the course menu, starting at ¥27,500 (\$180) including tax, is served at a counter and in private rooms. The ingredients used are from Toyama Prefecture and other areas of the Hokuriku region. In spring, there are Japa-

nese glass shrimp, cherry salmon and firefly squid. The winter menu includes crab as well as bear or boar meat. The generous use of superb antique dishes handed down over generations is a luxury unique to the venerable establishment. Incorporating fresh ideas while preserving tradition is an approach that matches the character of Toyama.

HACHIRO NITTA
GOVERNOR OF TOYAMA



I would like to extend my heartfelt congratulations to Ebitei-Bekkan. Toyama Prefecture is blessed with a rich and beautiful natural environment, featuring an impressive 4,000-meter elevation difference from the Tateyama mountain range to Toyama Bay. It is truly a treasure trove of fresh seafood, local produce and mountain delicacies. At Ebitei-Bekkan, guests can experience the essence of Toyama's renowned bounty through exquisite cuisine. I warmly invite you to visit Toyama Prefecture and immerse yourself in its culinary delights and diverse attractions.

HIROHISA FUJII
MAYOR OF TOYAMA



I am truly delighted that Ebitei-Bekkan has been selected for The Japan Times' Destination Restaurants 2024. Toyama city is nestled between the majestic Tateyama mountain range and Toyama Bay — often referred to as a "natural fish tank." In this exceptional environment, local ingredients are transformed into exquisite dishes through the refined, meticulous craftsmanship of fourth-generation owner Mr. Kentaro Mura. We invite you to savor these culinary masterpieces at a leisurely pace, immersing yourself in an unforgettable dining experience.

Sony award recognizes women advancing medicine, technology

Media partner

HIROKO NAKATA
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Four experts in technology fields received the first Sony Women in Technology Award with Nature on Feb. 5, which celebrates pioneers in global academic areas including bioengineering, computing and biomedical science.

"Technology has countless applications because human creativity has no bounds. It can also be a tool that creates a positive impact on society," Sony Group Corp. Chairman and CEO Kenichiro Yoshida told the audience at the award ceremony at Sony's headquarters in Tokyo. "To create new value through technology, I strongly believe that the people driving that creativity should be diverse as well. Through this award, we aim to support women in the field of technology who share the same vision of shaping a better world."

The editor-in-chief of Nature, Magdalena Skipper, said: "For too long, women have been underrecognized, underappreciated and not given sufficient platforms. Awards like this are much needed." Skipper, the first female editor-in-chief in the science journal's 155-year history, co-chaired the judging panel of 10 technology experts, including Sony and Nature executives and tech startup CEOs.

One midcareer winner was Kiana Aran, a professor of bioengineering and medicine at the University of California, San Diego. She has developed fingertip sensors for viral detection and explored how artificial intelligence combined with advanced sensor technology can analyze biomarkers to detect cancer and age-related neurological diseases at an early stage.

The judging panel said they value not only Aran's accomplishments but also her aspiration to be a role model for female semiconductor experts.

"My journey in science has always been driven by the belief that the greatest breakthroughs happen at the intersection of disciplines," Aran told the audience in her speech. "The challenges we face today, whether in health care, sustainability or artificial intelligence, require collaborative effort across many disciplines." In developing its technologies, her team needs to cooperate not only with physicists, chemists, computer scientists and engineers, but also entrepreneurs who can commercialize their technologies, she said.

Another midcareer winner is Amanda Randles, a computational scientist and biomedical engineer at Duke University who received the award for her innovative research in "digital twin" technology for cardiovascular disease treatment. A digital twin is a virtual copy of a physical object or system. By running data from wearable devices on heart disease patients through their models, she and her team can provide personalized insights into treatment strategies.

"In a field that is still heavily male-dominated, it is critical to have awards like this that shine a light on the contributions of women, ensuring that our work is seen, celebrated and valued," Randles said in her speech. Currently, Randles and her team are investigating how digital twin technology can be applied to early intervention for cancer.

Yating Wan, an assistant professor at the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology in Saudi Arabia, won this year's early-career prize for her studies on "silicon photonics," a new optical technology based on silicon chips that enhances data transmission speed and energy efficiency.



Karin Markides, president and CEO of the Okinawa Institute of Science and Technology, delivers keynote remarks. SONY GROUP CORP.

"This award is, of course, not only about my research. It's about a reminder to all the females that belong to this field that your voice matters, your contributions matter and you have the power to make a difference," she told the audience. "I've been very lucky throughout my journey to have so many inspiring role models and mentors who have guided me. I hope in the future I can also be this kind of inspiration for others."

The panel of judges gave another expert, Jiawen Li, an associate professor at the University of Adelaide in Australia, a special commendation for her biomedical technology. Combining nanoscale 3D printing and optical fiber technology, she created a hair-thin endoscope that cardiologists can use to investigate blood vessels to check a patient's risk of a heart attack, aiding in prevention and personalized treatments.

"We use cutting-edge technologies, especially those in photonics and optics, to address online biomedical challenges," Li said in her speech. She emphasized that in her field, collaboration among experts with diverse backgrounds is key. "We bring different expertise and different perspectives. We may also bring different priorities, timelines or even speak different languages. And this kind of diversity of thoughts definitely becomes a strength for us," she said. She also said that although such diversity can often cause tensions, women can play the role of empathetic listeners and foster collaboration.

Aiming to highlight issues related to a sustainable society, The Japan Times gave its support to this event by becoming a media partner.



From left: President of Sony Research Hiroaki Kitano, winners Kiana Aran and Amanda Randles, Sony CEO Kenichiro Yoshida, winners Yating Wan, Jiawen Li and Hatice Gunes, and Nature Editor-in-Chief Magdalena Skipper SONY GROUP CORP.

Destination Restaurants 2024 AUTHENTIC JAPAN SELECTION

