

# Report: Michinoku traditional folk performing art festival~Oni-kenbai

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## Tohoku Region is a Treasure Trove of Festivals

□When we say “Tohoku” (the Northeast) region of Japan, there is a kind of plaintive image. Japan has developed mainly around the western part of the country. Since ancient times, the capital was located near Nara and Kyoto, and the Kyushu region continued to have a large influence as a point of contact with the continent. The Kanto region, where the current capital city of Tokyo is located, did not appear on the historical stage until the 10th century, and it was not until the 18th century that Tokyo became the center of the country. Tohoku, on the other hand, had long been considered a land to be conquered. When Tohoku region had come on the historical stage several times, each had ended with a pathetic

story. But on the other hand, it was also a land that produced a lot of rice and, above all, gold, which the central government wanted to acquire at all costs. The Tohoku region was seen as just a gold mine. At the time of the Great East Japan Earthquake, it was the Tohoku region that was far more affected than the Kanto region.

□At the same time, the supply of agricultural products is abundant and plentiful, making it a fertile region, which many people think of when they think of rice and sake. It is also a place where a lot of folklore has been handed down from generation to generation.



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□Summer in the Northeast is short. Long winters come earlier than in other parts of Japan. For this reason, summer in the Northeast is the season when people are passionate about their momentary emotion. Especially in the first week of August, several of Japan's most iconic festivals are held. These include the Nebuta Festival in Aomori, the Kanto Festival in Akita, the Tanabata Festival in Sendai, and the Hanagasa Festival in Yamagata

## **What is the Michinoku traditional folk performing arts festival ?**

□At the same time, the Michinoku Performing Arts Festival is being held in Kitakami City, Iwate Prefecture. Iwate Prefecture is the largest prefecture in Japan and is said to have the largest number of traditional performing arts in Japan. The Ohshu □□ Kaido (a highway road), the most important road from ancient times, runs through the center of the city, leading north to Morioka, the capital of the prefecture, east to the Pacific Ocean, south to Hiraizumi, famous for its Golden Temple, and west to Akita.

□During the three days from Friday evening to Sunday, various

traditional performances, said to be more than 100, will be held throughout the city. In this article, I would like to focus on the performing arts using masks.



**Iwate prefecture**

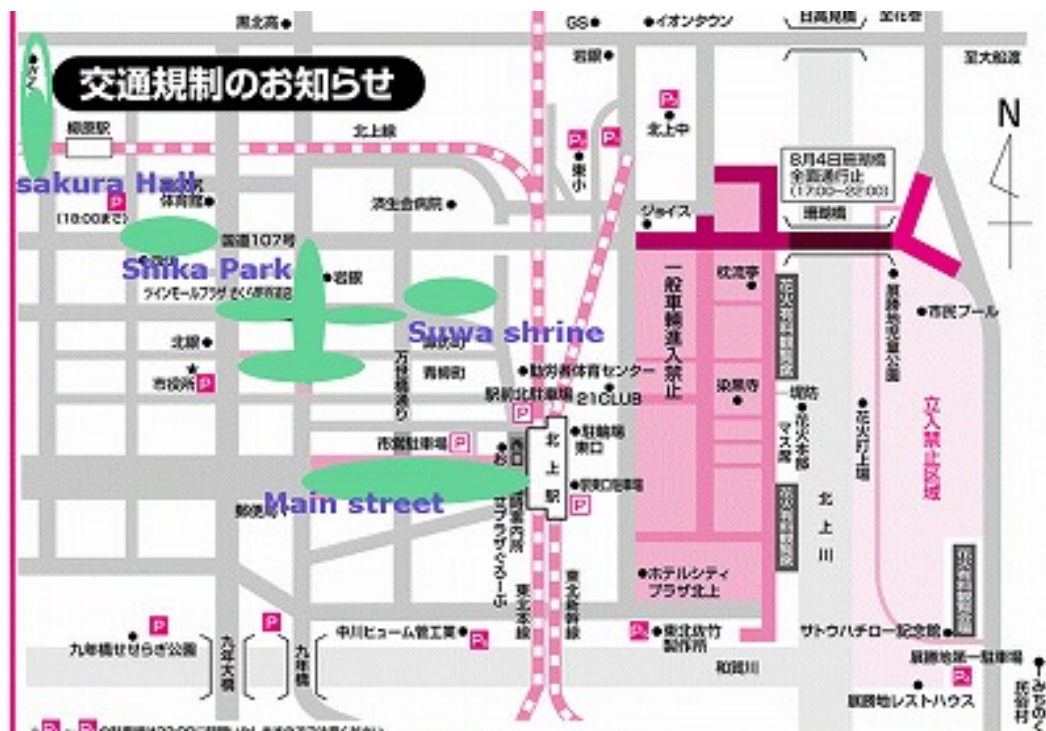


**Kitakami city**

## **Outline of the festival**



**front of Kitakami station**



## venues

□The area is divided into several locations and varies by time of day. On Friday, the first day of the festival, there is a parade on the main street in front of the station and a dance troupe called “Onikenbai,” which is the most popular form of entertainment in the city. On the next day, in the morning, there are performances at the site of Iwasaki Castle and Nyoirin-ji Temple. In the afternoon, various places such as squares, parks and shrines are used for the performances. At night, The festival reaches its first highlight. More than 50 performing arts will be performed in a little over two hours on the main street in front of the train station. On Sunday, most of the performances end in the morning. In the afternoon, the Oni-kenbai (ogre sword dance) is performed in the hall. And on the last night, a fireworks display finishes the whole schedule.

□As for transportation, there is a city bus service (500 yen per day), which is the most convenient. However, the Iwasaki Castle, Oni no Yakata and Nyoirinji-temple are not included in the route, so you have to take another city bus (about 30 minutes from the station). There are several rental bicycles

in Kitakami City, so it may be easier to use them. By the way, it took us about 30-40 minutes by bicycle. As for the other venues, they are well within walking distance.

□Despite this it is certainly limited to the performing arts of the Tohoku region, especially around Kitakami City, it is perhaps the festival that provides the most direct insight into Japanese folk arts. There are two main performing arts, “ogre sword dance (Oni-kenbai □□□) and “deer dance (Shishi-odori □□). But I’ll focus on the former this time, and at last, I’d introduce the rest.

## **Oni-kenbai (Ogre sword dance) □□□**

□It is impossible to see this festival without mentioning “Oni-kenbai” □□□ (the ogre sword dance). Sophisticated movements and elaborate figures. The dance is a seamless, well-trained dance. The most impressive feature of the dance is the masks. Although the mask is called an ogre mask, it is said to be an incarnation of a Buddha. The evidence of this is that it has no horns, which a ogre should have. Oni Kenbai is one of the sword dances. It is just one of the forms of sword dance that incorporates elements of various predecessors and refines the dance and design. This may be due to the fact that this dance had been performed in front of the lords of the time. In other words, at that moment, it was transformed from a mere folk art to an official art form.





□The Waga □□ clan reigned as the lords of this area until about the 17th century. After that, the Nambu □□ clan replaced them, but the dance is still loved by the lords, and it has remained so to this day. Although Iwate Prefecture is a large area, each region has its own performing arts that are representative of the region. Morioka City has the “Sansa”, Tohno City has the “Deer Dance with a large group”, and Hanamaki City has the “Hayachine Kagura” and “Deer Dance with its own drum”. And most of all, Kitakami City is famous for its “□□□ ogre sword dance”. That’s why the people of Kitakami City are so passionate about this dance, that they have become connoisseurs. Children learn it the same way they learn to play soccer or baseball (which are the two most popular sports

in Japan). Motifs related to the ogre sword dance can be found throughout the city. Currently, there are 12 organizations active in the city. Therefore, this dance is very much a part of this festival.

## **Oni-kenbai ~feature~**

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□As I mentioned earlier, the feature of this dance is the use of masks. There are four types of masks. They are white, red, blue, and black, and each one has its own meaning. And a pair of eight masks is the basis of the form. White is a special color, and only one person who is skilled in the art is allowed to wear it.

□On the head, they wear hairs called “zai”. This is made of horse hair. It is considered good to have this “zai” standing during the dance. They also wear a sword at the waist. Now a fake sword is used, but it is said that in the past a real sword was used.

□In addition, the “Ohguchi □□” draped from the waist in the back, and a small jacket draped over it. This is remnant of the past where it was taken off and draped over the waist. The “Ohguchi” is decorated with pictures of heroes who once ruled the land and fought fiercely against the central government. On the chest is drawn the crest of a Chinese bellflower, the crest of the Waga family, who once ruled this area. When the lord of the castle in this land invited the Waga family to his castle, he showed them a performance of the ogre sword dance. It is said that the lord of the Waga was so pleased with the dance that he allowed the dance group to use this crest. In addition to this, there are people who are in charge of the accompaniment. They support the dance with drums, bells and flutes under a leader called “Dotori □□□”.



Oguchi 〇〇

## 〇〇Watch “Oni-kenbai”<sup>1</sup> ~The Iwaski castle ground and the museum of Ogre

〇You can enjoy the ogre sword dance in several venues. The main venues are the main street throughout the city, the site of Iwasaki Castle grounds, Oni no Yakata (the museum of ogre), and Sakura Hall. On the first night, if you want to learn the charm of the ogre sword dance, you should wait for it on the



main street. You will see a big group dance of the junior group (junior high school students and under) ogre sword dance. They are only a select few who are allowed to dance here. You may underestimate them as juniors, but they will surely show you breathless and impressive dancing. Every year, after the opening parade, the dance starts at 8:00 pm and lasts for about 30 minutes.

□Next morning, you should go to the Iwasaki castle ground. This place is near “Oni no Yakata (the museum of ogre). The museum opens at 9:00 a.m., so you’ll have an hour or so to visit before the sword dance starts at 11:00 a.m. The museum has a display of goods related to demons (ogre) not only from the ogre sword dance, but also from all over the country and even abroad.(500 yen for adults, as of October 2020)

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map **Oni-no-Yakata (Demon museum)**



**Oni-no-Yakata (Demon museum)**



□The site of Iwasaki Castle is located on top of a small hill a short distance up from the museum. For about an hour, several groups will perform a ogre sword dance here. This is said to be a memorial service. The first thing to do is to pray in front of a stone monument in honor of the Waga clan.





□There are about 15 to 18 different kinds of ogre sword dances being handed down, depending on the group. One of the most noteworthy performances is the one in which dancers dance alone. This is a special dance that only those wearing a white mask are allowed to dance. Since the basic performance of “Oni-kenbai” is a group dance, there are not many opportunities to see this dance in detail. There are many groups in the venue, but only a few of them dance, partly because of time constraints. It is not difficult to imagine the honor and pressure of dancing alone in the midst of all that attention. It will all be over by 12:00. If you want to get back to the city after this, you’ll have to hurry. Most of

the events will start at 1:00 in the afternoon. If you want to enjoy the Oni-kenbai more, there will be another one hour performance in front of the “Oni-no-Yakata (ogre’s museum). However, there are some opportunities to see the Oni-kenbai in other parts of the city.



## □ Watch the Oni-kenbai 2 ~on the street

When the dance takes place on a street corner, there is another way to enjoy it compared to a genuine performance. The proximity between the performers and the audience adds a kind of street performance element. Some of the performances are



acrobatic and others are very exciting, such as the use of many swords. One of the most noteworthy is the program called “Kakkata”. I have already mentioned that there are four basic types of masks used in “Oni-kenbai”. Each of them represents the north, east, west and south, but this “Kakkata” represents the center. The expression on the mask is also much different. The expression on the mask is rather droll. Unlike other performers who use fans or swords, this Kakkata uses a long stick. He put it between his legs and swings it up and down. This suspicious performance the audience laugh. He also invitees one from the audience out onto the stage and makes them laugh even more with his joking motions, as he lies down to watch. His role is like that of a circus clown. But that doesn’t mean he should be underestimated. This is a special role that can only be played by someone who knows it all. If you see him on a street corner, I would like you to enjoy his performance.





## Watch the Oni-kenbai 3~Saturday night

□Saturday night is when the performances are at their best; every 20 minutes starting at 6:00 p.m., The main Street will be filled with local entertainment. Among them, you can see the “Oni-kenbai”. The sideshow-like performances are especially performed. Many of them are fun to watch, such as the one in which the dancer dances so as not to drop the flat

tray in his hands, and the one in which the number of swords in his hand is increased one after the other. And at the end of the day, the time is usually 8:00 a.m. The biggest highlight of the festival comes at 8:00 a.m., when about 20 groups of eight people perform a dance in unison. A bonfire is lit at regular intervals, and the performers begin to dance in unison as the musical accompaniment set up on the stage in the center of the street begins to sound.



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□ Local audiences will stay in front of their favorite (often local town) groups before them. There's hardly any moment breathing during the "Oni-kenbai". It just resembles an intense aerobic dance. It is done with masks on and swords in



hand. It's not hard to imagine the intensity of the dance. In the darkness of the night, the figures that emerge from the bonfire, filling the main street, is sure to leave a strong impression.

When it's over, they become temporary heroes. Children begin to dance with pamphlets in their hands as if they were swords. People are so excited and they want to shake hands and take pictures with them. Of course, anyone who asks them to do so will do so. The town of Kitakami is filled with the "Onikenbai" fever. On the way home, the melody of the dance echoes in our heads forever.









## □□Watch the Oni-kenbai 4 ~Sakura Hall

□More performing arts exhibits will continue until the final day, Sunday morning. If you walk around the city, you can

expect to see “Oni-kenbai” at every corner. In the afternoon, the Oni-kenbai will be performed at Sakura Hall. This is where all the groups will perform and all the acts will be performed. If you are interested in “Onikenbai”, you can’t miss it. There is a fee of 1,000 yen for advance purchase and 1,500 yen at the door, but it is worth it. Advance tickets are available at all time until the show starts, so you can buy them if you arrive at the hall a little earlier.

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There are thirteen to eighteen different types of “Oni-kenbai”, depending on the group. The basic group is made up of eight performers and is called the “Niwa”. There are also other forms that alter the basic form.



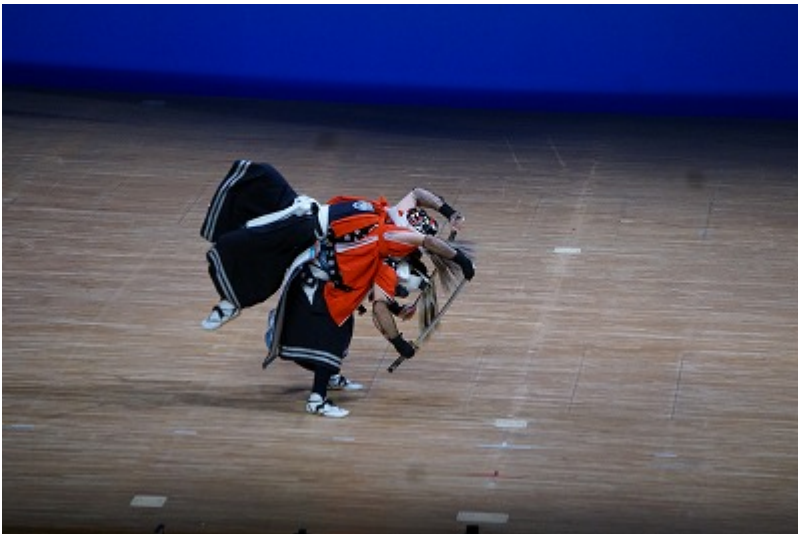
The number of people in the dance is not limited, so the number of dancers can be as small as one or two. I've already mentioned the one in which the dancer dances without dropping holding trays, and the one in which the dancer rotates his body while increasing the number of swords which he holds. There are also other movements that look like gymnastics.

□Lastly, I would like to introduce the "Kitsune-kenbai (Fox Sword Dance)". It is a part of the "Oni Kenbai" and uses a fox's mask and moves in a slightly different way. Once upon a time, there was a man who could not come to the dance due to illness. This is based on a mysterious legend that a god disguised himself as a fox and joined the dance. The performance lasts about three hours, and then all the performances are finished.

□Next time I would like to introduce the dances other than the Oni-kenbai.







To be continued in the next article.

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