



Sanriku International Arts Festival: Project to Spread Awareness of Folk Performing Arts Around the World as the Region Overcoming the Great East Japan Earthquake

Performance at the Sanriku Geinoh Discovery Summit

Photo: Sanriku International Arts Festival



Exchange with a performing arts group from Indonesia

Photo: Sanriku International Arts Festival

The Japan Cultural Expo 2.0 aims to build momentum for the upcoming Expo 2025 (World Expo 2025 Osaka, Kansai), to support renewed interest in inbound travel to Japan, and to encourage further demand for domestic tourism. It also features a focus on “The Beauty and The Spirit of Japan,” promoting Japanese cultural arts and spreading awareness of their diverse and universal charms within Japan and around the world. This is a large-scale project with Japanese cultural facilities, arts organizations, and many others hosting and participating in a diverse range of projects and events. In this article, from among these participants, we will focus on the Sanriku International Arts Festival, which is held in the Sanriku coastal area¹ of the Tohoku region.

Moribe Shinji

Initiatives to restore and pass on the rich culture of Sanriku

The tsunami tidal waves triggered by the Great East Japan Earthquake² in March 2011 brought devastation to the Sanriku coastal area and its beautifully rugged shoreline. Since then, along with efforts to restore livelihoods and social and industrial infrastructure, projects have been underway to rebuild the region’s cultural heritage, which is the spiritual home of its people. One such project is the

Sanriku International Arts Festival, which was launched in 2014.

The idea for the Sanriku International Arts Festival was born when a contemporary dance artist visiting the disaster area drew attention to the heritage of folk performing arts in the Sanriku coastal area, such as *kagura* (traditional Shinto music and dance), *shishiodori* (deer dance), and *kenbai* (sword dance).³ Many artists who were the backbone of the local folk performing arts passed away or emigrated from the area in the March 11 disaster, and

many performing arts groups were worried if they would even survive. The Sanriku International Arts Festival was established to restore the traditions of these precious folk performing arts and pass them on to the next generation. The program of the festival included not only performances by Japanese artists, but also the participation of performing arts groups from other Asian countries, with the Japan Foundation Asia Center as a project partner. The festival also fostered mutual exchanges and hosted a variety



There have also been performances on board the trains of the Sanriku Railway, which connects the coastal area of Sanriku from the north to the south.

Photo: Sanriku International Arts Festival



Gyozan-ryu Sasazaki Shishiodori

Photo: Sanriku International Arts Festival

of performances in theaters, cultural venues, and train carriages.

In 2018, Iwate Prefecture and a number of municipalities in the Sanriku coastal area (currently 15 municipalities) established the Sanriku International Arts Committee with the participation of Sanriku Railway and private-sector organizations. In 2021, the committee collaborated with Indonesian and Cambodian performing arts groups to create joint productions that were broadcasted on YouTube. In 2022, it held the Sanriku Kagaribi Bonfire Festival, where several local groups performed together.

Fostering the next generation of artists and spreading awareness of folk performing arts around the world

Based on these results, in fiscal year 2023, the Sanriku International Arts Committee is currently holding the Sanriku International Arts Festival 2023 SHIFT as part of the Japan Cultural Expo 2.0.

In September, the Sanriku Nodamura Future Performing Arts Festival / Nodamura Meeting for Geinoh Beginnings and Beyond was held in Noda Village, Iwate Prefecture, at Iori Hikatai, a 160-year-old Nanbu

Magariya-style house⁴ that survived the March 11 disaster. Junior high and high school students also participated in the event, which was held with the objective of fostering the next generation of performing artists. In October, Ofunato City in Iwate Prefecture hosted the Sanriku Geinoh Discovery Summit, a collaboration between performing folk arts groups from the Sanriku coastal area and Indonesian performing arts groups.

The efforts to disseminate information made by the organizers of the Sanriku International Arts Festival to promote the event are particularly noteworthy. These efforts include the creation of bilingual Japanese-English brochures and leaflets that provide an overview of the main performing arts and event dates, as well as information on the nature, food culture, and accommodations in the Sanriku region. The organizers also propose model courses for sightseeing tours, etc. All this information is available on the official website of the Sanriku International Arts Festival.

Thirteen years after the Great East Japan Earthquake, the Sanriku coastal area continues to recover and rebuild. Visitors to the area, which boasts some uniquely beautiful Japanese scenery, a rich food culture, and tradi-

tional folk performing arts, are sure to enjoy them.



Poster for the Sanriku Nodamura Future Performing Arts Festival. Members of the Namomi Preservation Society wearing *namomi* (demon) costumes at the Namomi Festival held every year on January 15 in Noda Village, Iwate Prefecture. *Namomi* are deities from the outer world (*raiho-shin*) in demon masks who visit each home to pray for the growth and health of their children.

Photo: Sanriku International Arts Festival

Sanriku International Arts Festival website
<https://sanfes.com/en/>

1. The Sanriku Coast is a coastal region on the Pacific Ocean that extends about 600 km from south to north, from Samekado in Hachinohe City, Aomori Prefecture, along the Rikuchu Coast in Iwate Prefecture, to the Oshika Peninsula in Miyagi Prefecture.
2. The magnitude-9.0 earthquake that struck off the Pacific coast of the Tohoku region on March 11, 2011, caused massive damage. More than 20,000 people lost their lives or went missing in the quake, the resulting massive tsunami waves, and the fires.
3. *Kagura* (lit. "entertainment for the gods") is a sacred dance ritual performed at Shinto shrines. *Shishiodori* (deer dance) is performed by dancers wearing deer masks, and *Kenbai* (sword dance) is performed by dancers with swords. Both are as a ritual to ward off evil spirits and repose the souls of the dead. In the Sanriku coastal area, these dances are performed in different forms depending on the region.
4. Literally "bent house." A traditional style of farmhouse architecture in which the house and barn are combined in an L-shaped building. This style of architecture is preserved in Iwate, Aomori, and other prefectures, with several buildings designated as National Important Cultural Properties.