From Hidden Valley Secrets to the Pulse of an Open Region: A Paradigm Shift in Transmitting Minami Shinshu's Traditional Arts to the Future

Minami Shinshu, Japan
Minami Shinshu Tourism Bureau
Local Destinations (including villages, cities, municipalities, islands)
Culture & Heritage

Summary of Good Practice Story

Minami Shinshu in southern Nagano Prefecture, Japan, holds over half of the prefecture's Nationally Designated Important Intangible Folk Cultural Properties, but depopulation and strict hereditary succession rules that once restricted festival roles to specific lineages were accelerating a shortage of successors, threatening to permanently sever centuries of community memory in marginalised villages. Rather than turning festivals into tourist spectacles or trying to freeze them unchanged, the region integrated Oshika Kabuki into junior high school curricula in Oshika Village so youth directly inherit the tradition, welcomed outside migrants to learn and help sustain the Wago no Nenbutsu Odori Buddhist chanting dance in Anan Town, and developed limited-capacity, high-value experiential tours under strict DMO-set visitor caps that fund the repair of expensive festival implements and tools. This created a self-sustaining hybrid model where tourism revenue directly supports cultural preservation and youth take on core performance roles, while a broader "Minami Shinshu Folk Performing Arts Transmission Promotion Council" now protects even undesignated small-scale folk arts. The lesson: protecting tradition requires both the courage to open doors to outsiders and the discipline of firm rules — visitor limits set by a DMO can bring new funding and vitality into a community

without diluting cultural authenticity, and sustainability has no finish line, only continuous adaptation.

Setting the Scene: Destination & context
Located in the southern part of Nagano Prefecture, the Minami shinshu region features an isolated topography shaped by the steep mountains of the Japanese Alps and the Tenryu River. Yet, since ancient times, it has also served as a vital crossroads where Eastern and Western cultures intersect. Thanks to this unique environment, a densely layered array of performing arts has been preserved. These include the Toyama Shimotsuki Matsuri, which retains medieval religious beliefs, as well as Oshika Kabuki and Kuroda Ningyo (puppetry), which were introduced from urban areas during the early modern period. Home to over half of Nagano Prefecture's Nationally Designated Important Intangible Folk Cultural Properties, the region is an unparalleled treasure trove of living cultural heritage, aptly described as a "microcosm of the history of Japanese performing arts."

The Turning Point: Why change was needed
The modern waves of depopulation and a declining, aging population have relentlessly swept over this region as well. In the past, there were strict hereditary and exclusive systems in which only specific lineages or local residents were allowed to serve in the festivals. Ironically, however, these closed succession rules became a factor that accelerated the shortage of successors. Particularly in marginalized villages where the number of children has drastically decreased, the region faced an irreversible crisis: "If no intervention is made, the centuries-old memories of the region and the bonds of the community will be completely severed, leading to both physical and spiritual extinction."

The Vision: What you set out to do
We have moved away from the approach of merely preserving our traditional performing arts exactly as they were in the past. Our goal was not to easily consume them as spectacles for tourists, turning the region into a theme park. Rather, we aimed to build a dynamically circulating system designed primarily to enhance the well-being of the local community.

The Journey: How change happened
To overcome this crisis, the region implemented a transformative process centered on "bottom-up collaboration," "opening its doors," and "strict tourism management."

Integration into Education (Nurturing the Next Generation): In Oshika Village, Oshika Kabuki was introduced into the regular curriculum during junior high school "Integrated Studies" classes. This created a structure where the younger generation can directly participate in passing down the tradition.

Breaking Away from Exclusivity (Inclusion of Outside Talent): In the Wago district of Anan Town, the community actively welcomed migrants from outside the region to help pass down the Wago no Nenbutsu Odori (Buddhist chanting dance). They built a symbiotic model where local residents directly teach these newcomers the necessary skills.

Tour Development and Visitor Limits (Tourism Governance): In collaboration with the local DMO (Destination Management Organization), special programs have been developed and offered, allowing visitors to deeply learn about and experience the history of these performing arts. However, unrestricted tourism leads to the commodification (consumption) of traditional culture and disrupts the daily lives of residents. Therefore, under the DMO's leadership, strict limits are placed on the number of visitors accepted for these tours.

The Breakthrough: What you achieved

The establishment of this tourism governance has realized a hybrid model that protects cultural authenticity while achieving economic independence. High value-added experiential tours, operated with limited capacity, thoroughly prevent the consumption of culture by mass tourism while bringing solid economic sustainability to the region. A portion of the revenue generated from tourism is directly reinvested into the repair of expensive festival implements and the maintenance of tools, creating an autonomous financial cycle. Furthermore, through collaboration with the education sector, a sustainable supply mechanism for human resources has been established, allowing the younger generation to take on core roles on stage.

Reflections: What you learned and what others can learn

The greatest lesson we have learned is that "to protect tradition, we must possess both the courage to change and the rules to safeguard it." Opening our doors to the outside world and developing tours carries the risk of diluting our culture. However, with proper management and visitor limits set by the DMO, this can be elevated into a process that breathes new vitality and funding into the community without compromising its authenticity. At the same time, our challenge is far from over. There is no "completion" in sustainability; the humble realization that it requires continuous, ongoing updates is precisely the vital message we can share with other regions.

The Ripple Effect: Lasting impact

Nurturing the next generation through collaboration with educational institutions has yielded results far beyond the mere transmission of skills; it has deeply rooted traditional culture as a core part of the youth's identity. For these young people who have internalized the local culture as a source of personal pride, the festivals are no longer just events, but have come to be recognized as a place to return to. This psychological bond serves as a catalyst, compelling those who have temporarily left the region for higher education or other reasons to move back or return regularly just "to dance in the local festival" or "to operate the puppets." Furthermore, Minami shinshu is currently moving beyond the protection of individual performing arts. The

region has established its own unique cultural property network, the "Minami shinshu Folk Performing Arts Transmission Promotion Council," which encompasses even small-scale folk arts lacking national or prefectural designation. Through this, a new initiative toward developing a sustainable, wider-area tourism destination has already begun.

Awards or Certifications

Major Cultural Awards

Oshika Kabuki (Oshika Village): Winner of the Suntory Prize (2020) and the Grand Prize for Local Traditional Performing Arts (1998). This 300-year-old grassroots Kabuki theater is a prime example of community-led preservation, sustained by the entire village as a symbol of local pride.

Toge no Kunitori Tsunahiki Gassen (The Border-Crossing Tug-of-War) (Iida City / Hamamatsu City): Suntory Prize (2014). A passionate, high-stakes tug-of-war competition over the regional border between Nagano and Shizuoka, uniting communities across administrative boundaries.

Iida Puppetry Festival (Iida City): Suntory Prize (1988). A world-class festival that honors the ancient roots of local puppet theater while blending it with citizen-led modern innovation.

National Treasures (Important Intangible Folk Cultural Properties)

Oshika Kabuki (Oshika Village / Designated 2017): Authentic rural Kabuki kept alive by the collective passion of the local villagers.

Toyama Shimotsuki Matsuri (Iida City / Designated 1979): An ancient, 800-year-old sacred Shinto festival featuring ritual dances around boiling cauldrons of water.

Tenryu Village's Shimotsuki Kagura (Tenryu Village / Designated 1978): A sacred boiling-water ritual traditionally preserved by designated family lineages.

Niino no Yuki Matsuri (Snow Festival) (Anan Town / Designated 1977): A mystical winter festival featuring ancient theatrical performances to pray for a bountiful harvest.

Niino no Bon Odori (Anan Town / Designated 1998): [UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage] A rare, ancient style of summer dance performed without any musical instruments, guided only by the rhythmic chants of human voices.

Wago no Nenbutsu Odori (Anan Town / Designated 2014): [UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage] A 300-year-old Buddhist chanting ritual dance focused on community harmony and spiritual devotion.

Nationally Selected & Documented Traditions

Ina Puppet Theater (Kuroda / Imada / Waseda Ningyo) (Selected 1975): Masterful three-person puppet theater (Ningyo Joruri) passed down since the Edo period.

Shimoina no Kake-odori (Selected 1999): Rhythmic, energetic folk dances rooted in medieval Buddhist chanting traditions.

Okachi no Shika-oi (Deer Chasing) (Selected 1984): A fascinating ritual reflecting ancient hunting cultures aimed at protecting local crops.

Inadani no Koto-yoka Rituals (Selected 2011): Seasonal community events dedicated to warding off bad luck and evil spirits.

Nagano Prefectural Treasures
Seinaji Handmade Fireworks (Achi Village / Designated 1992): Spectacular festival fireworks where the local residents themselves mix and formulate the gunpowder using secret traditional recipes.

Oshimayama Lion Dance (Takamori Town / Designated 2004): The birthplace of the unique "Float Lion" style of dance seen throughout the region.

Fukami no Gion Matsuri (Anan Town / Designated 2025): A vibrant ritual to ward off illness, featuring purification ceremonies performed on a floating river raft.

Web Articles
https://mg.minami.nagano.jp/
https://www.go-nagano.net/tradition-and-culture/id22634

Other Relevant Links
https://iida.keizai.biz/headline/571/
https://blog.nagano-ken.jp/shimoina/%e7%a7%bb%e4%bd%8f%e3%83%bb%e5%ae%9a%e4%bd%8f/45544.html

Quotes or Testimonials
"I felt that it's important for us to learn about this now to pass down our traditional culture. I'm so grateful that we could stand on stage, supported by the preservation society and our community."
(Voice of a local junior high school student who performed in Oshika Kabuki)
— October 2, 2023, Iida Keizai Shimbun

"Both the festivals and agriculture are life itself in this land. I was deeply drawn to a lifestyle where festivals are a natural part of daily life, which is why I decided to move here. I do not want this precious culture we have inherited to be easily consumed as a mere spectacle."
(Voice of a young man who was captivated by the Wago no Nenbutsu Odori, moved from Tokyo, and became a successor)
— December 17, 2025, Nagano Prefecture "Shiawase Shinshu"