

## **Fukuji Temple: A Study in Ancient Aesthetics**

### **Fukuji Odo Sanmon Gate: Protecting the Approach**

The entrance to Fukuji Temple, nestled in the corner of a small valley southeast of the city center, is a humble one. At the sides of the gate stand two stone carvings of *nio*, fearsome looking deities that were likely carved in the Edo period (1603–1867). These figures were carved from *tashibu-ishi*, a kind of soft stone that is indigenous to the area and is ideal for stonework. Like many gate guardians at shrines and temples, the one on the right has his mouth open representing the sound “*a*” while the one on the left has his closed, representing the sound “*un*.” Together, they form the phrase “*a-un*,” a Buddhist concept not unlike the Biblical “alpha” and “omega” that represents the beginning and end of all things. Under the two guardians’ feet are base stones featuring a lotus motif.

Despite being protected by the wooden roof of the gate, these *nio* are now worn and discolored, a foreshadowing of the overall aesthetic of the temple beyond.

### **Odo Amida Hall: Path to Paradise**

At the top of the steps two massive trees—nutmeg on the left, ginkgo on the right—tower protectively over a temple building of subdued beauty that holds a revered place in Kunisaki’s Buddhist heritage. The temple was constructed in the late Heian period (794–1185) as an Amida-do, a hall meant to host a statue of Amida Nyorai, the Buddhist deity who invites believers to paradise. Likely built under the direction of one of the chief priests of the nearby Usa Shrine, the building’s sweeping roof lines are meant to resemble a phoenix, one of the sacred animals of Buddhism.

Fukuji Temple is the oldest wooden structure still standing in Kyushu. It has been classified as a National Treasure and is considered one of the three best Amida-do in Japan. (The two others are in Chusonji Temple in northern Japan and Byodoin Temple near Kyoto.) The structure, along with the statue of Amida it houses, is made of wood from a nutmeg tree, one that legend says grew over 3,000 meters tall and kept its entire surroundings in shade. The folk tale also relates how the woodcutters struggled with felling the tree, as no matter how much they cut, the tree would return to its former shape every night. But they eventually prevailed, and the wood that remained after construction was hauled off on the back of an ox to the site of another local temple. Or so says the legend.

The temple building sits regally in its niche among the forest trees, reflecting the changes in the seasonal foliage.

### **The Hall's Interior: Remains of Splendor**

It's hard to imagine how different the antiquated appearance of the temple's interior today is from the way it looked at the time of construction. Befitting the paradise realm of Amida Buddha, everything was originally done in bright colors—reds, yellows, blues, and greens. Rich paintings covered most of the interior surface. The 86-centimeter-tall Amida statue was covered in gold leaf, and the reflected light must have dazzled in the subdued daylight, filtering in under the low eaves or in the flickering candlelight at night.

Only the plain grain of the nutmeg wood is now visible on the four columns around the statue, but these were once covered in vivid illustrations of Buddhist figures, and a heavenly landscape graced the wall behind the statue. Worshippers would make their way around the hallway, circling the central figure in a clockwise direction as they said their prayers. Looking down on them from the upper walls were countless paintings of heavenly figures. Though severely faded, they can still be seen, slowly emerging from obscurity as one's eyes adjust to the darkness.

Japanese aesthetics underwent a major change during the Muromachi period (1336–1573), when Zen and the tea ceremony aesthetic led to the appreciation of a more sober, refined style of art and architecture. Bright colors were shunned, the effects of aging celebrated, and buildings like this were left to show their years of wear. Luckily, the ravages of time (and the effects of a WWII bomb that dropped just behind the hall) have done little to harm the beauty and peaceful ambience of this remarkable temple.

\*An outstanding full-sized replica of the temple can be found in the Oita Prefectural Museum of History in nearby Usa, where you can experience the hall and its interior in its original, colorful glory.

### **The Temple Grounds: Ogres, Guardians, and Stupas**

To the right just inside the gate is the *bondo*, or main hall, where daily rituals are held—though its appeal to visitors is dwarfed by that of the Amida Hall just up the slope. Guests are welcome to step inside, and should visit the room to the left, where a display features two ancient masks used in the dance of the *oni* (ogres) that date from the times of mountain worship. *Oni* have been incorporated

into the mix that marks the unique religious heritage of this area, and are also featured in a raucous festival held yearly at the nearby Tennenji Temple.

On the grounds around the Amida Hall are a number of statues and carvings that showcase the peninsula's history of stone artistry. To the left of the building stands a rare collection: small but intricately carved images of Buddhism's Ten Judges of Hell, the body that decides the fate of those still in purgatory. Also standing in the temple's courtyard are stone stupas called *keasa toba*, whose tops are meant to resemble the woven hats worn by monks in training, and *gorinto*, the small pagodas used as memorials in the Esoteric Buddhism popular at the time. The five stone "rings" are meant to symbolize (from bottom to top) earth, water, fire, air (wind), and ether.

### **The Legend of the Nutmeg Tree**

Long, long ago, a huge nutmeg tree once grew in this quaint valley of butterbur in Tashibu. The tree was so large, it was said, that its shadow reached all the way to the river in the morning, and all the way to the rice fields in the evening.

One day, the legendary Buddhist monk Ninmon decided to consecrate this spot as sacred ground and ordered the building of a hall to enshrine an image of the Amida Buddha. But when it came time for the woodcutters to cut down the huge nutmeg tree for wood to build the temple, a very odd thing happened. No matter how much they cut, the next day they would return to find the tree in its previous state. Perplexed, the woodcutters didn't know what to do. Then one day, they were told by a local plant whose view of the sun was blocked by the tree, "At the end of every day, burn the sawdust that comes from your cutting, and the tree will eventually come down." Thanks to that advice, the woodcutters were finally able to fell the tree and continue construction. Following Ninmon's orders, a large temple was built and a Buddhist image carved, all from the one nutmeg tree. The remaining wood was loaded on the back of an ox and carried off. The ox stopped where the Maki Odo Temple is and refused to continue any further.

This is the legend of the National Treasure known as Fukiji Temple. Today, many people feel spiritually close to this holy place, and a large nutmeg tree once again grows on the grounds.