

A Culture Rooted in the Sea

When Okinawa was an independent kingdom from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries, the Kerama Islands served as a staging point for the tribute ships that plied their way between Okinawa and China. Because people who prospered always did so by means of the sea, whether the China trade or bonito fishing, traditional grand houses with their distinctive walls of massive coral were known as “captain’s houses.” One old house and several sets of massive coral walls survive, but intensive bombardment at the end of World War II destroyed much of the island’s historical heritage.

Festivals and Boat Races

Nonetheless, the traditional culture and customs of the Keramas continue to flourish. Each village still has its age-old *utaki* sacred sites and *uganju* prayer places, while the special relationship with the sea is celebrated with a series of festivals throughout the year. On Zamami Island, these include: the *bamauri* festival, held on the day in April with the greatest tidal range, with purification rituals to ensure the health and happiness of the island’s women; the *sabani* race in June when traditional Okinawan fishing boats (six-man dug-outs with a sail) are raced to placate the sea gods and pray for good catches and the safety of the island’s fishermen; and the *Umingan* in September when women wade into the sea to give thanks for the past year, to pray for safety at sea, and for bounteous catches of fish. Every village observes this ritual.