

Katsuren Sacred Sites within the Castle Walls

Utaki

In the traditional Ryukyu spiritual belief system, *utaki* are sacred places where gods are believed to reside or to visit. They are often associated with natural features such as rocks, caves, groves, or springs, and while their origins are shrouded in mystery, many have been used as sites of worship for centuries. Rituals are performed at *utaki* by hereditary priestesses called *noro*, and local residents leave offerings as well. There are several important *utaki* at Katsuren Castle, all of which are still used for worship. Please be respectful of these sites.

Tamanomiuji-Utaki Sacred Site

This sacred site in the uppermost ward of the castle is centered on a massive boulder that is believed to have spiritual powers. It may have once formed the foundation for a sacred structure built above it. According to legend, the cave opening on one side of the stone leads to the Ushinujigama cave in the Second Ward of the castle below and was used for emergency evacuation.

Hinukan

In the indigenous Ryukyuan religion, Hinukan is the god of fire. It is believed that in ancient times he gave a piece of fire to the priestess in every village to create a village hearth and stipulated that every family should receive fire to light their own hearths from it. Fire is believed to protect the house and its occupants, and many Okinawan homes to this day have a small shrine to Hinukan in their kitchens. This includes a container of water, a bowl of salt, *awamori* (Okinawan alcohol), an evergreen branch, and incense. Royal hearths, like the one at Katsuren, had special status and significance, and were believed to protect the ruling family and, through them, the entire kingdom. This sacred place continues to serve as a religious shrine.

Ushinujigama Cave

Natural caves, or *gama*, are found throughout the southern part of Okinawa island.

Ushinujigama means “a cave to hide and shelter in,” and like many caves it is considered a sacred site. According to legend, when Katsuren Castle was attacked by forces of the Ryukyu Kingdom in 1458, Lord Amawari escaped through this cave to the Tamanomiuji-Utaki in the First Ward above, and then to the district of Yomitanzanmagiri.

Kimutaka-no Utaki / Tunumutu

This *utaki* (sacred place) is the site of rituals held several times a year in which priestesses pray for bountiful harvests. Next to it is an L-shaped row of ten simple stone stools used as ceremonial seating for the priestesses. Oral accounts describe young people calling out a special phrase (*iyu konsori!*) to ask the gods to make it possible for them to sell a lot of fish. The ceremonies began in the fifteenth century and continue to this day.