

The Shrines of Togakushi

Of the five shrines of Togakushi, only Hinomikosha has stood as a shrine in the Shinto tradition throughout its history. Okusha, Kuzuryusha, Chusha and Hokosha were temples for a significant part of their history, serving as places of worship in the mixed-religion mountain asceticism of Shugendo.

Today these five stand as the separate but related shrines of Togakushi. Hokosha, Hinomikosha, and Chusha can be found along the main road running through Togakushi. The upper shrines of Okusha and Kuzuryusha can only be reached on foot, via a path that leads through sacred forest to the foot of the mountains integral to the establishment of Shugendo in Togakushi.

Okusha

The origin of Okusha, the “Inner Shrine” of Togakushi, dates from 210 BCE. This is when it is believed that Ame no Tajikarao, a god central to the creation of the Togakushi mountains according to Shinto legend, was enshrined here. In 849 the monk Gakumon further established the practice of Shugendo in Togakushi and built a temple in this spot called Togakushidera, later renamed Kenkoji, which possessed aspects of both Buddhism and Shinto.

With the separation of Shinto and Buddhism in 1868 at the beginning of the Meiji era, Kenkoji Okuin became a Shinto shrine and has since been known as Okusha. Today people come to this shrine to pray for good fortune and success in sports.

Kuzuryusha

Kuzuryusha, the oldest of the five shrines of Togakushi, was originally a simple shrine in a cave in the side of the Togakushi mountains. This cave was the home of Kuzuryu, whose name means “nine-headed dragon.” Kuzuryu is the Shinto god of rainfall and water, marriage, and also protects against tooth decay. It is not known exactly when Kuzuryusha was founded.

The Ancient Japanese Cedars of Togakushi

The approach to Okusha Shrine, called the *sando*, starts at the large wooden *torii* gate and runs for two kilometers through forest that has for centuries been considered sacred ground. Halfway along the path stands the Zuijinmon, a red gate covered by a thatch roof. Zuijinmon originally housed Nio, the twin guardian deities of Buddhist temples, but now houses the Zuijin, the Shinto warrior-guardians of the shrine. This gate dates from 1710 and is said to be the oldest extant structure associated with the Togakushi shrines.

Beyond the Zuijinmon, the path to Okusha is lined with over 300 Japanese cedars (*sugi*; *Cryptomeria japonica*), which were planted 400 years ago. Special significance is attached to the sun in traditional belief. The path to Okusha Shrine was laid out specifically to allow the morning sun to shine in a straight line along the path twice a year, on the first day of winter (*ritto*) and on the first day of spring (*risshun*). The forest surrounding this path has been designated a Natural Monument of Nagano Prefecture.