

## ***On (Utaki): Sacred Sites of the Ancient Gods***

Gods are everywhere on Taketomijima, even in unexpected places and forms. Visitors are asked to take special care not to enter the 28 sacred sites known as *on (utaki)* which dot the island. Please be aware that an open space covered in white sand could be hallowed ground known as a *mee*, and the only visible indicator of a place of worship could be a stone called an *ibi*.

Traditional beliefs and the *on* are bound together with everyday life, and many people maintain private sacred places in their houses or gardens. Those that are publicly identified are tied to *matsuri* (festivals). Sacred rituals are conducted there by *kantsukasa* (women priests), and men are not permitted to enter. The people worship deities of mountains, trees, rain, and other natural phenomena, and pray for good health, prosperity, safe voyages, abundant harvests, and other things.

On Taketomijima, songs and performances dedicated to the gods are known as *kankuuchi* (divine offerings). The island's biggest *matsuri* is *Tanadui*, celebrated from the ninth to the tenth month of the lunar calendar. In 1977 *Tanadui* was designated a National Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property; a great many musical and other performances are offered as *kankuuchi*.

Okinawan beliefs are sometimes described as a form of ancient nature worship akin to animism. In Taketomijima, sacred places are invariably simple, natural spaces, very unlike large Buddhist temples or Shinto shrines.

Many of the island's *on* are recognizable from the Shinto torii at their approaches. These have been erected recently, following the influence of Shinto from Japan. Nevertheless, they do serve to mark the boundary of the *on*, and should be treated as the point beyond which the space is sacred and visitors must not enter.

\* *On* are sacred sites. Do not enter. Please understand the meaning of “sacred”.

## ***Mainu On: The Legend of the Creation***

According to legend, Taketomijima was formed by the island creator god *Shinmin Ganashi*. *Shinmin Ganashi* then built the adjacent Ishigaki Island with the help of the mountain creator god *Omoto-gami*. After this, the two deities created the rest of the Yaeyama Islands together.

Both deities are worshipped at the sacred site of *Mainu On*, which is believed to be the first *on* created on the island. Ritual prayers for rain are made here, and it is also the site of the *Kitsugan matsuri* (festival) held early in the eighth month of the lunar calendar. At the *matsuri*, *kantsukasa* (priests) thank the deities and celebrate abundance, and traditional *kyogen* plays are performed as divine offerings.

The road from *Kuninaka On*, passing *Mainu On*, and continuing to *Nirai Kanai*, is called *Aramichi*.

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### ***Nishito On: The Man Who Became a God***

Nishito is deeply venerated by Taketomi islanders as a scholar, administrator, and master stonemason. Born on Taketomi and enshrined here as a deity after his death, Nishito came to the attention of the captain general of King Sho Shin’s army during a campaign to suppress the rebellion launched by Oyake Akahachi from Ishigaki Island in 1500. Though still a boy, Nishito so impressed the general with his capabilities that he was taken back to Shuri.

At Shuri, Nishito applied himself to his studies, excelling in both scholarship and stonemasonry. He is said to have helped rebuild the walls of Shuri Castle and constructed the stone gate at *Bengadake*. In 1519, he was also involved in constructing the limestone gate at *Sonohiyan Utaki* - now a World Cultural Heritage Site - where the king prayed for safe travels before each journey.

Having earned the deep trust of the king, Nishito was given the official rank of *Taketomi Oshuri Oyako*. Nishito returned to Taketomijima in 1524 to become chief administrator of the Yaeyama Islands. He constructed the Kuramoto building above *Kaiji Hama* (Kaiji beach) to use as his headquarters and governed from the island of his birth for two decades before his base of operations was moved to Ishigaki Island.

After Nishito’s death, grieving officials built a tomb for him on the site where he had lived as chief administrator on Taketomijima. This was then named *Nishito On* and made a sacred site, and Nishito was enshrined as a guardian deity of the island. *Nishito On* was designated as a historical site by Okinawa Prefecture.

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### ***Yuumuchi On: Site of the Major Event of the Year***

The sacred site of *Yuumuchi On* occupies the ground where the Taketomi *yakuba* (village office) stood from 1914 to 1938. This *on*, dedicated to the deities of fire and agriculture, is best known as the focus of the island's biggest event, the autumn *Tanadui matsuri* (festival). Recognized by the Japanese government as a National Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property, the *Tanadui matsuri* is an event to pray for good harvests, good health, and well-being. On the seventh and eighth days there are sacred rituals and prayers that last all night, as well as more than 70 performances of traditional songs, drumming, dance, and drama dedicated as offerings to the gods.

At the time of the *Tanadui matsuri*, the six gods from the six most important *on* travel the *Nabindo* (Gods' Road) to *Yuumuchi On*.

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### ***Agaripaizaashi On: The Place of Creation***

According to tradition, the sacred stone at *Agaripaizaashi On* was where the deity *Shinmin Ganashi* descended and stood while creating Taketomi Island. The island has 28 *on*, each of which has its own significance and meaning. The *matsuri* (festival) and observances at *Agaripaizaashi On* honor the deity who created and nurtured the island. *Agaripaizaashi On* is located at a fork in the road, on the south side of the elementary school road, making it easily accessible for people to visit on their everyday routes.

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### ***Mishashi On: Protecting the Traveler***

The deity of maritime peace and safety resides in this sacred site. This is where islanders traditionally offer a prayer before setting out on a journey, where they return to give thanks upon their homecoming, and where they give thanks for the bounty of the sea.

The remaining foundations of *Mishashi Pier*, which was used as a main port for official ships until 1932, lie beyond on the low bluff overlooking the sea.

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### ***Kumaara On, Hanakku On, Baiyaa On: The Origins***

*Kumaara On* (adjacent to this sign) and the two others, located a short walk up the road to the right, have a particular significance for islanders. They belong to the *muuyama*, the six most important *on* of Taketomijima, from which all villages of the island are believed to have originated. The other three *on* of the *muuyama* are *Uurya On*, *Saaji On*, and *Kontu On*.

#### *Kumaara On*

This *on* enshrines the deity *Kumaara Hatsukane*, who arrived on Taketomijima from the Okinawa main island and is worshiped as a god of trees and mountains. This *on* is a sacred place for prayers and performing the rituals of *yamairi-negai* and *yamaban-hajiri*. People who have recently had houses built on the island come here to offer thanks to the deity.

#### *Hanakku On*

This *on* enshrines *Takindun*, a sea deity said to have come from the main island of Okinawa. Traditionally *Takindun* is depicted as a figure of great experience and wisdom in numerous stories. His name is believed to be the source of the name “Taketomi”.

#### *Baiyaa On*

This *on* enshrines *Shuukadun*, a rain deity from Tokunoshima in the Amami Islands. *Shuukadun* is young and entirely free of greed.

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