

Fudaraku-tokai: Crossing the Sea to the Southern Pure Land

Fudaraku, from the Sanskrit *Potalaka*, is the name of a Pure Land located across the ocean to the south and presided over by Kannon, bodhisattva of compassion. Belief in Fudaraku was widespread in Japan from the medieval period. Some priests taught it was easier to reach than Amida Buddha's Pure Land in the west. Eventually, a practice called Fudaraku-tokai (Crossing the Sea to Fudaraku) emerged: devotees of Kannon intentionally drowned themselves at sea in the hopes of being transported to Fudaraku in their earthly bodies.

Though far from commonplace, Fudaraku-tokai was attempted from coastal areas around Japan until well into the Edo period (1603–1867). Fudarakusan-ji Temple was particularly well-known as a departure point. Head priests of the temple officiated over more than twenty such “crossings” between 868 and 1722, all of which are listed on a stone monument outside the temple.

The Rise and Fall of Fudaraku Crossing

The chronicle *Kumano Nendaiki* includes an entry for the year 868 naming the priest Keiryu as the first person to embark for Fudaraku from the temple. He was followed in 919 by a priest named Yuma, who took 13 other devotees with him. In the late medieval period, the pace began to quicken; nearly a dozen Fudaraku-tokai were performed in the sixteenth century alone. This was likely connected to heightening unrest and frequent wars as the daimyo struggled for dominance. Those who attempted the crossing not only sought to reach Fudaraku but also hoped that Kannon would come to the rescue of the long-suffering common folk they had left behind.

Eventually, the practice of Fudaraku-tokai at Fudarakusan-ji became formalized. Devotees came to the temple from across Japan, and the head priest (each of whom took the name “Tokai” upon their appointment) was duty-bound to perform the necessary preparatory rituals and lead them on their “crossing.” One particularly grim incident occurred in 1565, when a priest called Konkobo was forced to make the journey against his will. He is still listed among the ranks of those who performed Fudaraku-tokai, but was not posthumously granted the honorific “Shonin.”

Perhaps partly because of events like this, from the seventeenth century priests were put on the boat to Fudaraku only after their death. The last head priest of Fudarakusan-ji to posthumously set sail for the southern Pure Land was Yusho, in 1722.

Fudaraku Crossing Boats

Eventually, a standard type of Fudaraku-tokaisen (Fudaraku crossing boat) came into use at the temple. These boats were used solely by priests; lay devotees simply used regular craft. A Fudaraku crossing boat can be seen at the lower right of the 500-year-old painting called the Nachi Pilgrimage Mandala, and a scale model built in 1993 is on display outside the temple.

The most striking feature of the boat was the sealed cabin. Nailed shut from the outside with no windows or doors, the cabin contained a limited supply of food, water, and lamp fuel so the priest could continue reciting sutras and appeals to Kannon until the very end.

The cabin was surrounded by a 49-paling fence with four torii gates, all painted bright vermillion. Because torii are associated more with Shinto than Buddhism, this feature is another reminder of the syncretistic belief system of Kumano. The boat's design also evokes the funerary practices of Shugendo mountain asceticism, and Fudaraku-tokai may have been seen as similar to Shugendo austerities in its potential to bring great spiritual benefit both to the practitioner and the world at large.