

Omori Shrine and the Legend of the Catfish

Omori Shrine in the Saigo neighborhood of Fukutsu is distinguished by several statues of catfish, linking the shrine to a local fable. According to this story, Kawazu Okimitsu (dates unknown), a samurai who owned the lands around Saigo, was saved by a catfish. Kawazu was a vassal of the powerful Ouchi family, which controlled much of western Japan between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries. On the orders of the Ouchi family, he fought at the battle of Funaokayama in Kyoto in 1511 and was badly injured. As he lay on a shore, close to death, a giant catfish appeared and carried him across the water to the camp of his allies, where he could receive medical attention.

Kawazu Okimitsu believed the catfish who saved him was the manifestation of his ancestral deity (*ujigami*). Upon his return to Saigo, he forbade the local people from eating catfish. Catfish have become a symbol of the area, and catfish images are featured on local signage.

Catfish statues at the shrine

In front of the main torii gate is a large bronze catfish (*namazu*). In front of the main worship hall, two more catfish act as guardians, one with its mouth open and the other with it closed, in place of the *komainu* (lion or fox) guardian statues usually found at shrines. A painting inside the main hall of Omori Shrine depicts the legend, with Kawazu Okimitsu in full samurai armor, riding a giant black catfish across the water.

The shrine is set within lush gardens with a pond and a red bridge. A large park called Namazu no Sato (“home of the catfish”) is close to the shrine and contains a traditional garden with a pond filled with catfish.