

Fukuda Shrine and Yoshimori-dō

Fukuda Shrine and Yoshimori-dō are two locations for the Ōmiya Odori, a traditional dance performed as part of the summer Obon festival in Maniwa. The dance takes place across several days in July and August and at multiple venues, but these two sites are particularly historic.

Fukuda Shrine hosts the finale of the Ōmiya Odori every year on August 15. Locals call the shrine Ōmiya-sama, which is where the dance gets its name. Although the shrine's exact foundation date is unknown, its history can be traced back to at least the thirteenth century, when it was mentioned in several historical texts. The current wooden structure of the main hall and its connected worship space dates to 1916. There are three *kami* (deities) enshrined at Fukuda: Susanoo no Mikoto, the god of storms; Kushiinadahime, a goddess of rice; and Ōnamuchi no Mikoto, another name for Ōkuninushi, the god of nation-building and relationships.

Within Fukuda Shrine's main sanctuary, the worship area where the Ōmiya Odori takes place is covered by a copper roof, green with age, but its walls are open to the breeze. Spectators watch from three sides as the dancers circle slowly on the worn wooden floor, performing precise steps and gestures that mimic the movements of a fox. Above the perimeter of the dance floor hang a collection of *ōema*, large votive paintings on wood. Donated over the centuries to earn blessings and commemorate great achievements, they depict auspicious symbols and scenes from Japanese history. Today, these *ōema* serve to connect the modern performers to the lives of their ancestors as well as their cultural heritage.

Two massive ginkgo trees on the grounds are thought to be around 650 years old. Because these ginkgos are considered sacred, their leaves—which turn a beautiful golden yellow in autumn—are left unraked to carpet the ground. The scene is especially stunning in the early morning, when newly fallen leaves, as yet undisturbed by passing worshippers, gather in drifts around the lichen-covered stone lanterns and weathered statues of lion-like guardians called *komainu*.

The other historical venue where the Ōmiya Odori is performed, Yoshimori-dō, is a modest open-sided wooden pavilion located next to one of the oldest gravesites in Okayama Prefecture. The dance performed at this site honors the spirits of the unknown samurai buried there. Two large granite pagodas mark the main graves. Their inscriptions are no longer legible, but the style dates them to around 1300. Smaller gravestones, erected around 400 years ago, cluster around them. Despite being newer, these were made of less durable stone and thus have suffered greater wear. In the past, Yoshimori-dō and the graves were surrounded only by rice fields, but now this historic cultural site is nestled among modern warehouses and homes—a juxtaposition of ancient and modern typical of contemporary Japan.

Yoshimori-dō houses a 400-year-old wooden statue of Amida Buddha that is open to the public year-round. Amida is a savior figure who has vowed to bring salvation to all sentient beings by leading them after death to his Pure Land, a paradise where

enlightenment is assured. He is the central deity for Pure Land Buddhism, the most widely practiced form of Buddhism in Japan.