

Kanamine Jinja Shrine

Kanamine Jinja Shrine is the main shrine on Kuchinoerabujima and the only shrine on the island with a chief priest. Ruins from the Jomon period (10,000–300 BCE) have been found on the grounds, suggesting that people have been there since ancient times.

Founding

From around the late eleventh century, people known as the Hayato worshipped Mt. Kaimondake at the southern tip of Kyushu, part of the Japanese mainland. Mt. Kaimondake experienced major volcanic eruptions in the late ninth century and was considered a sacred mountain inhabited by the god of fire. It is said that the Hayato people solicited contributions for the construction of Kanamine Jinja on Kuchinoerabujima to protect the island from its volcanoes.

The shrine worships Kanayamahiko no Mikoto and Kanayamahime no Mikoto, male and female gods of the mountains who are believed to have the divine power to stop volcanic eruptions. They are also the guardian deities of mines and miners. They were the objects of prayer when sulfur mining flourished on Kuchinoerabujima from the 1860s to the early 1940s.

Festivals

Mt. Shindake erupted in 1841 on the third day of the fourth month and the fifteenth day of the sixth month of the lunar calendar. Festivals were held on these two days thereafter with the aim of calming the mountains and avoiding eruptions. For the spring festival, which is no longer held, islanders participated in sumo matches and performed dances as an offering to the deities. At the summer festival, which still takes place, islanders offer dances to the deities. In the *bo-odori* pole dance, men face each other holding half- or full-length poles. In the *hinomoto-odori*, women hold fans decorated with Japan's rising sun and, as a prayer for peace, dance to a song about the Battle of Ichinotani, one of the battles in which medieval Japan's ruling Heike family suffered a defeat.

Landscape and Design

Kanamine Jinja sits high on a hill overlooking mountains, sea, and village—an optimal location for protecting the mountains, ensuring safety at sea, and safeguarding the village, typifying the nature worship that is indigenous to Japan. The shrine sanctuary

has white beams featuring an elephant head and lotus flower design, which are believed to have Indian influences and were likely introduced by a mountain monk who trained at Kinpusenji Temple in Nara. In front of the steps is a statue of Zao Gongen, the protective deity of the syncretic Shugendo religion, which combines mountain worship and Buddhism. It is believed that the followers of Shugendo known as *yamabushi* brought these motifs to Kanamine Jinja.