

Sacred Sites on Tokashiki

Island of the Gods

Starting in 2018, the local authorities conducted a thorough survey of the roughly 100 sacred sites (*uganju* or *utaki* in the Okinawan language) on Tokashiki Island and the smaller islands around it. These sites take a variety of forms. Some of them are on hilltops, where the islanders used to pray for departing family members while watching them set off in boats bound for the Ryukyu Kingdom (modern-day Okinawa) or China. Some are places of natural beauty with a particularly splendid natural feature, such as an old tree or a large rock. Some are supposedly visited by the gods at specific times of year, while others are grave sites, including sites associated with the mass suicides at the end of World War II. Still others offer practical, real-world benefits: students, for example, visit the *uganju* at the Tokashiki Village seafront to ask for better grades at school.

Despite being numerous, the *uganju* and *utaki* on Tokashiki now play a somewhat less prominent role in the islanders' everyday lives than they once did. There are multiple reasons for this: the shock of World War II, the postwar population migration to other parts of Japan, the decline of *norō* culture, and now, the aging of the population. Even if fewer of the islanders now pray at these sacred sites, the local authorities plan to protect and maintain them as places of anthropological and historical interest. As part of efforts to raise awareness among locals and tourists, a guidebook published by the Tokashiki Village Board of Education offers information about many of the top local *uganju* and *utaki*, as well as other cultural assets.