

History and Mythology of Udo Shrine

Udo Shrine stands on a site that has been considered sacred since ancient times, when natural features, such as the cave that houses the shrine buildings, were believed to be abodes of the divine. The site first appears in recorded history in 782, when a priest named Kaikyu established a Buddhist temple to maintain the shrine. The shrine grew in stature during the Edo period (1603–1867), when it benefited from the patronage of the Ito family, daimyo lords of the Obi domain (the southern coastal region of present-day Miyazaki Prefecture). The lords of Obi took over responsibility for maintaining its buildings, and in 1711 constructed a new main sanctuary (*honden*), which is still in use today. The *honden* has Buddhist elements, including a window shaped like a temple bell and sculptures that depict creatures from Chinese and Indian mythology. The fusion of Shinto and Buddhist religious traditions and styles of decoration was long considered natural in Japan, and Buddhist and Shinto beliefs and practices were closely intertwined until the end of the Edo period.

Now an exclusively Shinto sanctuary, Udo Shrine is dedicated to the deity Ugayafukiaezu, who plays a key role in Japanese mythology as the father of Jimmu, the legendary first emperor. In the myth, Yamasachi-hiko, a masterful hunter, and Toyotama, daughter of the deity of the sea, are expecting a child. Yamasachi-hiko builds a hut for his wife to give birth in, but she goes into labor before the roof, made of cormorant feathers, can be completed. Toyotama enters the hut and implores Yamasachi-hiko not to look at her before the baby is born. Yamasachi-hiko, however, cannot resist the temptation, and sees Toyotama, the daughter of the sea, transformed into a giant shark. Her true form revealed, Toyotama returns to the sea in anguish, leaving her newborn baby behind. The child receives the unfortunate name of Ugayafukiaezu, or “the one for whom the cormorant-feather roof was not finished in time.” According to local beliefs, the birth took place in the cave in which Udo Shrine now stands.