**The Bounty of the Sea: Fishing Culture in Fukue**

Craggy lava rock along the islands’ coastlines provides welcoming nooks and crannies for corals, sponges, and forests of marine plants, which in turn attract fish and reef-dwelling species. The biodiversity of the shallows increases in summer and autumn when tropical species like butterfly fish travel north to the islands on the Tsushima Current for the warmer months.

Closer to continental Asia, deeper areas and colder waters from Eurasia’s watershed create a more welcoming habitat for species like amberjack, sardines, and dolphins. The open ocean lies to the west of Fukue, as well as the deep waters of the Okinawa Trough. This stretch of sea supports much larger cold-loving species, including Pacific bluefin tuna and sperm whales.

Rich marine life surrounds Fukue, and local communities have long relied on fishing as an essential food source. Residents have even developed fishing methods thought to be unique to the area.

*Fishing Weirs* (Sukean)

The communities of Fukue use a type of fishing weir called a *sukean* that is constructed from lava stones*.* The use of such weirs dates to about 2,500 years ago. To catch fish, islanders build a low stone wall across a narrow inlet. At high tide, the wall is completely submerged, allowing fish and other marine life to pass over it. The water recedes at low tide, sinking below the level of the wall and creating an artificial tidepool from which the fish can be easily pulled by net or by hand. The practice died out in the 1940s, as fewer and fewer fish came over the weirs, possibly due to overfishing or warming seawaters. A volunteer association recently rebuilt a *sukean* on the Miiraku Peninsula to demonstrate this traditional fishing method.

*Fish Spotters* (Uomi)

Another traditional fishing method on Fukue is called *uomi*, literally “fish spotting.” In this method, nets are lowered across the entrance to an inlet, and a sharp-eyed spotter is sent to sit on a cliff high above the bay. When the spotter sees that a shoal of fish has entered the inlet, they signal with a flag for the nets to be raised, which traps the fish where they can easily be caught. The spotter can also signal boats to throw stones overboard to drive nearby shoals into the bay. *Uomi* was mostly practiced in the Takasaki area of Miiraku, known for its catches of dark large-scale blackfish. The last fishery practicing this method ceased operations in 2014, though there are local efforts to revive the method as part of the area’s cultural heritage.

*Whaling*

Although no longer practiced, whaling was a booming industry in Fukue during the Edo period (1603–1867) and influenced the island’s social and cultural development. The famed ukiyo-e artist Hokusai (1760–1849) even depicted Goto Islands whaling in his series of woodblock prints titled “Oceans of Wisdom.”

Traditionally, whaling was done near the shore. A spotter at a high vantage point would locate a whale and send out groups of small wooden boats, whose crews used hand-thrown harpoons and nets to drag the whale in to shore. It was then processed, with nearly every part being used. The blubber and skin were rendered for their valuable oil (used in lamps and soap), while teeth and bones were turned into combs and hairpins. Even baleen found a use as strings in bunraku puppets. Whale meat was a common food and remains a local specialty, although it is no longer locally sourced. In 1899, Norwegian-style industrialized whaling came to Japan. Whalers began using steamships and harpoon guns, drastically increasing the number of whales caught until 1982, when international concerns over population numbers led to a moratorium on large-scale commercial whaling. During the four centuries it was practiced, whaling provided food, household items, and income that sustained many of Fukue’s villages.