**Mountain Mythology**

The mountains of Yakushima’s inner Okudake range have long been worshipped as sanctuaries of the gods, or kami. Okudake was seen as a fearful place inhabited by spirits who needed to be appeased. The following are some local myths that illustrate the traditional association of kami with natural events like thunder, as well as the amalgamation of Shinto and Buddhism observed throughout the island.

*The Drums of Heaven*

Peculiar sounds echoed in the mountains of Okudake on the 1st and 15th day of each month. They were heard at different times—evening, the middle of the night, and at dawn. The sounds always traveled from one summit to another. Villagers believed a mountain deity was behind it and called the sounds the “drums of heaven.” Flutes and drums were also heard each night from the harvest moon through the ninth month of the lunar calendar, and people thought the sounds were those of the deities enjoying themselves.

*Heavenly Rock*

A monolithic granite rock known as the Heavenly Rock (*Tenchuseki*), 60 meters in circumference and 40 meters high, stands on the peak of Mt. Tachudake beyond Anbo village. In Anbo, it was believed that the large hole in the monolithic granite rock at the peak of the mountain makes a noise like the blowing of a conch shell. When this sound is heard, a strong wind will blow within three days. Locals worshipped this rock as a stone *gongen*, a Buddhist deity incarnated as a Shinto kami to guide people to salvation. Anbo is located at the mouth of Anbo River, and has a boat dock; it was likely visited by many people, including Buddhist priests.

After Buddhism was introduced to Japan from China in the mid-sixth century, attempts were made to fuse indigenous Shinto beliefs with Buddhist beliefs. As part of the broader movement to syncretize Shinto and Buddhism known as *shinbutsu-shugo*, it was common for Buddhist deities to appear as kami.

However, Funayuki, a village northeast of Anbo, may have been less susceptible to Buddhist influences. According to the village myth, a gap in the rock structure near the altar at the base of the Heavenly Rock is shaped like the hole of a rock flute. Every time the westerly wind blew, the hole makes a ghostly sound similar to a flute. As westerly wind is the harbinger of a storm, the sound alerts fishermen to exercise caution. The people of Funayuki considered Mt. Tachudake the abode of kami deities, not an incarnation of buddha.

Heavenly Rock is visible from the parking lot of Yakusugi Land; the hike there via the Tachudake Trail takes eight to nine hours.

*The Mountain Princess*

The mountain princess is a tree sprite—a beautiful woman with shiny, flowing hair, who is said to smile at anyone she sees. People fear that if they meet her and do not smile before she does, she will suck the blood from their neck. She descends from the mountain to collect seawater on the days of the mountain god festivals in the new year, and in May and September. On those days, people are warned not to go into the mountains. In one tale, a young man encountered the mountain princess but survived by brandishing a branch of the *sakaki* tree (*Cleyera japonica*) to ward off evil.