

Creation According to Shinto Mythology

(Overview)

A Shinto interpretation of creation is that the world and its inhabitants are not “made” but “born,” and the divine couple Izanagi no Mikoto and Izanami no Mikoto play a central role in this narrative. The couple marry and give birth to the islands of Japan, as well as to several important natural deities that give the islands shape. This myth of Izanagi and Izanami introduces significant concepts, such as male and female roles, marriage, copulation and birth, death and the afterlife, and the birth and death cycle.

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Beginnings of “Kami”

In the beginning the world split into the heavens and the earth, and three *kami* deities of the heavenly realm came into being. Then the first reeds took root and sprouted, and two more *kami* deities came to be. These first five *kami* deities were formless and had no partners. Thereafter, however, pairs of “partner” *kami* deities were born in succession. The seventh and final generation was the male Izanagi no Mikoto and the female Izanami no Mikoto.

At this time, the land was yet unformed and floated aimlessly like oil upon water. So, the older deities charged the pair Izanagi and Izanami with the task of bringing order to the world and granted them a sacred spear with which to do so. Standing on a bridge, the two first looked down upon the primordial mire and decided to try mixing it. They stuck the spear in, turned it about, and when they drew it back out, a drop fell from its tip. This drop settled and became the first island, Onokoro Shima. It was here that the two descended to live.

Birth of the Islands of Japan

After descending to the island, Izanagi and Izanami became aware of the differences in their bodies and decided to join together to give birth to the country. And so, they married by circling a sacred post three times and taking their vows. Izanami spoke her vows first but their attempts to have children ended poorly so the two redid the marriage ceremony, this time with Izanagi speaking his vows first. This time, they successfully gave birth to the islands of Japan and a host of other *kami* deities to give them shape. This included deity of the seas, the wind, the mountains, and all manner of natural phenomena.

Land of Death

Unfortunately, Izanami was gravely injured giving birth to the fire *kami* deity, and soon died. Izanagi mourned and missed her terribly, and before long decided to travel to the land of the dead to get her back.

By the time Izanagi arrived and found Izanami, she had already eaten food of the underworld. This meant she was thus unable to return. Izanagi pleaded with Izanami anyway until she agreed to ask the deities of the land of the dead if she might leave to go back to the country they were still in the process of making. Before she went to ask, Izanami made one request: she bid Izanagi not to follow her, and to wait outside until she returned. Izanagi agreed.

A long time passed in Izanami's absence, and Izanagi grew impatient. At last, he decided to disregard Izanami's request and went to look for her. To his horror, he discovered her as a frightful, decaying corpse. Izanami was furious at being seen, and Izanagi fled in terror. He quickly exited the land of the dead. Izanami chased after him, but she soon found her way blocked by a large boulder and could follow Izanagi no further. Izanagi had placed the boulder, and so trapped Izanami in the land of the dead.

Izanagi's "Misogi"

After escaping, Izanagi declared the land of the dead an ugly and defiled place and decided to purify himself by cleansing. This act is today considered the origin of "misogi," a ritual cleansing done at Shinto shrines and ceremonies where one bathes or immerses oneself in water.

As Izanagi washed his face, three significant deities were born: the sun *kami* Amaterasu Omikami from his left eye, the moon *kami* Tsukuyomi no Mikoto from his right eye, and the *kami* of the seas Susanoo no Mikoto from his nose. Izanagi gave these three children the duties of ruling, respectively, the heavenly realm, the night realm, and the seas.

Takachiho and the "Creation"

While it is difficult to determine from ancient documents exactly where these events would have taken place, Takachiho local belief considers the island in the center of Onokoro Pond near Takachiho Gorge to be Onokoro Shima, the place where Izanami and Izanagi married, lived, and gave birth to the islands of Japan. In this belief, Takachiho is where the Japanese archipelago, both its natural formations and its inhabitants, was born.