

Mythological Tale: Opening Amano Iwato, The Heavenly Stone Cave

(The myth of luring the sun *kami*, Amaterasu Omikami, out of hiding)

(Overview)

In a famous Japanese mythical tale, the sun *kami* deity Amaterasu Omikami hid away in a cave and plunged the world into darkness. To lure her back out, myriads of *kami* deities enacted an elaborate ruse: they staged a festival with song and dance outside the cave's entrance. Amaterasu, perplexed by the revelry outside, cracked open the stone door of the cave to peek out, and the deities used the opportunity to pry open the door and fling it away. Thus, a festival helped restore light to the world.

Amaterasu is enshrined at Takachiho's Amano Iwato Shrine. It is here that Amano Iwato (the cave in which Amaterasu hid) and Amano Yasukawara (the area where the *kami* gathered to discuss their strategy to lure her out) are said to be located.

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The Ruler of the Sea, Susanoo

Three *kami* deities were born of Izanagi when he returned from the underworld: the sun *kami* deity Amaterasu Omikami, ruler of the heavenly realm; the moon *kami* deity Tsukuyomi no Mikoto, ruler of the night realm; and the *kami* deity of the sea Susanoo no Mikoto, ruler of the seas.

Among the three sibling deities, Susanoo alone shirked his responsibilities, and so Izanagi banished him from the heavens. Before Susanoo left, he decided to speak to his older sister, Amaterasu, and made his way to her realm. The commotion of his coming made Amaterasu suspicious of her mischievous brother's intentions, and they argued. Susanoo decided to retaliate with cruel pranks. First, he destroyed Amaterasu's rice fields and defiled her sacred hall, then he tossed a skinned horse into her sacred weaving hall. One of Amaterasu's weavers saw the horse and died of shock, causing Amaterasu terrible grief. Infuriated, she hid herself in a cave. As she is the *kami* deity that sits as the sun in the heavens, this plunged all into darkness and chaos.

Tales of Amano Iwato

The great multitudes of deities of the heavens were terribly distressed and gathered near the riverside at Amano Yasukawara to discuss how to lure Amaterasu the sun deity out again. First, they gathered up cockerels that crow at the break of dawn and set them to crowing. Next, they placed a large, holy *sakaki* tree outside the cave, and decorated it with strings of sacred *magatama* jewels, fine clothes, and

an elegant mirror forged from materials of the heavenly mine. Then, the *kami* deity named Ame no Koyane no Mikoto recited a prayer, and the *kami* deity named Ame no Uzume no Mikoto began to perform a dance. This dance so pleased the assembled gods that they filled the air with laughter.

Bringing the Light Back to the World

Amaterasu grew perplexed by the festive noise outside and cracked open the stone door of the cave to peek out. She asked, “Since I am in here, should not all be in darkness? Why are you all dancing and laughing?” To this, the dancing deity Ame no Uzume answered, “We are merry for there is one more glorious than you out here among us.” This trick to draw Amaterasu worked. Curious, Amaterasu opened the stone door wider to catch a glimpse of the “glorious *kami* deity.” Instead, she was distracted by her own reflection in the mirror. A *kami* deity of incredible strength named Tajikarao no Mikoto waited at the entrance, and quickly grabbed hold of the door and flung it away. Thus, Amaterasu was lured out from hiding and light was restored to the world.

Amaterasu the sun deity is revered at Amano Iwato Shrine. From the West Sanctuary of the shrine, there is a view of the believed location of Amano Iwato cave, where Amaterasu hid. A short trail from the West Sanctuary leads to the entrance of the riverside cave said to be Amano Yasukawara, where the multitudes of *kami* gathered to discuss luring the sun deity from hiding. Visitors today often stack stones here to make wishes, which has led to tall piles of stones crowding the cave floor.