

Daishoin: Sanki Daigongen

Sanki Daigongen (“Three Great Oni Gongen”) are a group of deities sometimes called “the Awesome Forest Deities of Mt. Misen.” An *oni* is an ogre-like being regarded as having divine qualities, while a *gongen* is a Buddha manifested as a Shinto deity. The trio consists of Tsuicho Kishin, an *oni* version of Dainichi, the supreme Buddha of the cosmos; Jibi Kishin, a manifestation of the bodhisattva Kokuzo; and Mara Kishin, the *oni* form of Fudo Myo-o, one of the Five Wisdom Kings of Buddhism. Unique to Miyajima, these deities contain elements of three belief traditions: ancient mountain asceticism, in which Mt. Misen itself and various features on it were worshiped as deities, esoteric Shingon Buddhism, and Shinto conceptions of divinity. As such, Sanki Daigongen are a reminder of how ancient folk beliefs, Shinto, and Buddhism, now thought of as separate, were indivisibly linked in Japan for more than a thousand years.

For centuries, the three deities were enshrined together at a sanctuary along the path to the summit of Mt. Misen. The fusion of Shinto and Buddhism practiced at this site, however, officially came to an abrupt end in 1868, when the new government of Emperor Meiji (1852–1912) ordered the separation of the two traditions. The Sanki Daigongen sanctuary was renamed Miyama Shrine and was dedicated anew to the three Shinto goddesses worshiped at Itsukushima Shrine, while the Awesome Forest Deities were moved to a separate, smaller building closer to the peak. Called Sankido Hall, this structure remains well maintained and visited, demonstrating the enduring popularity of Miyajima’s Shinto-Buddhist ogre gods.