

## **Namahage Museum: The Story of the Ascetics**

The two main peaks of the Oga Peninsula, Mt. Honzan and Mt. Shinzan, were once popular destinations for ascetic monks who worshiped the mountains as deities, a particularly common practice in Japan's medieval period. These devotees would stay at high altitudes for extended periods of time to instill themselves with spiritual discipline, and often let their hair and beards grow wild. From there, it is not too great a leap to imagine that the monks' rugged appearance influenced the local people's conception of the Namahage. Villagers may also have offered food to these ascetics on the rare occasions when they came down from the mountains. Perhaps this custom became the basis for the Namahage tradition in which each family sets out meals for the incarnate deities when they visit on New Year's Eve.