

### **Akina Ikusato Village**

Akina Ikusato embodies the traditions, spiritual beliefs, and ways of living in harmony with nature that characterize many of the seaside settlements in the Amami Islands.

### **Spirit Road**

Japan's animistic folk spirituality is based on the belief that spirits reside in all elements of nature. This deep reverence for the natural world is still strong across the Ryukyu Islands. One of the most iconic symbols of local spiritual beliefs is the *kami-michi*, or "spirit road," a preserved route through the village that allows the spirits of the mountains to journey down to the sea.

### **Living with Nature**

The spiritual beliefs of the villagers are reflected in their attitude toward the environment and how they live according to nature's rhythm. Akina Ikusato is one of the few places on the island where people cultivate large rice fields, and great numbers of migrating birds stop to rest and feed in the paddies. The local diet includes fish, shrimp, octopus, and shellfish, as well as wild boar from the nearby mountain forests. Villagers offer thanks to the spirits when receiving this bounty and hold rituals throughout the seasons to ask for ample harvests.

### **Maintaining Ancient Traditions**

As in many rural areas in the Ryukyu Islands, village traditions are observed according to the Japanese calendar. The Hirase Mankai Festival is held on the Arasetsu, or first fire day of the eighth lunar month.

During the festival, men and children from the village take part in the Shochogama ritual, in which they stand on a thatched platform and shake it from side to side until it collapses. The direction it falls in is said to predict whether the area will be blessed with a rich harvest or not. In the evening, five white-robed priestesses (*noro*) assemble on a large rock on the shoreline and sing prayers to the protective deities, which are thought to reside in a faraway kingdom known as *neria*. The festival dates back at least 450 years and is designated an Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property.