

### Asato Kuyama's *Haka* (Grave)

One of these seaside graves stands out from the others, both for its appearance and its legendary history. The Okinawan-style heaped-stone burial mound is the resting place of Asato Kuyama (1722-1799). Her story, 300 years later, still intrigues the islanders; it remains extraordinary, and is not fully understood.

She is renowned more for her courage, cleverness and independence than for her beauty. Despite being a peasant woman at a time when defying authorities could lead to death, she refused to become the *makanaijo* (local wife) of a Ryukyu kingdom bureaucrat sent to Yaeyama for a two- to three-year period. Such a role meant she would have been required to give support as a local wife, acting as one in all respects. There were few legal benefits, but she would have received a reduction in *nintozei* (poll tax) for her family and she would have been allowed to own land. The story of this rejection captivated the islanders at a time when direct celebration of a seeming act of defiance or impertinence would have been extremely dangerous. After her death, she was immortalized in the song "Asatoya Yunta," which has become one of Japan's best-loved folk tunes. There are three songs from the Yaeyama Islands with the same name; the Taketomi version from that time celebrates a woman's courage, her survival, cleverness, and consummate skill with social relationships in a small community, but by singing of the rejected official's success finding a *makanaijo* from another village. "Shin [new] Asatoya Yunta," a more recent song from nearly 90 years ago, has become popular not just in Japan, but on a global scale. "Shin Asatoya Yunta" is more a love song, possibly less grounded in the reality of her time.

Her courage and cleverness are demonstrated by her subsequent life: she accepted a local leader of lower rank from Yaeyama and lived out a full life. Residents can still point out the land that she held.