

Lava Caves, Tree Molds, and *Tainai*

Lava flows from Mt. Fuji sometimes formed lava caves and lava tree molds. Lava caves are tunnels in the lava flow. A channel of hot lava can develop a hard crust as the material around it cools more quickly. When the eruption ends, the lava continues to flow through this crust, leaving it behind a hollow tube. Lava tree molds, on the other hand, form around tree trunks when lava flows through a forest. The tree burns away, but a rough likeness of its shape remains as a hole in the rock when it cools. Some lava tree molds are the remains of multiple trees caught in the lava together, making them larger and more complex in shape. The interiors of both lava caves and lava tree molds can have long folds that look like ribs in the rock, depending on how the lava cooled.

Fuji-ko pilgrims called these tree molds *tainai ana*, meaning holes (*ana*) that were like the inside of a human body (*tainai*). They were seen as mystical places where one could enter the body of Mt. Fuji to be reborn again. An ukiyo-e print by Gountei Sadahide (1807–1879) called *Passing Through a Tainai at Mt. Fuji* shows pilgrims crawling through the narrow, ribbed Funatsu Tainai, drinking water that dripped from breast-like rock formations, and was therefore likened to milk, and worshiping at statues of Buddhist deities placed inside the tunnels.

Rebirth and Fertility

The belief in crawling through *tainai* as a means of spiritual rebirth was so strong that pilgrims found ways to bring that power home. Some took sand from the cavern floor in carefully wrapped paper packets, while others soaked pieces of paper or fabric in the “milk” that dripped from the rock formations above. Back in Edo, these items were turned into amulets and stomach wraps for pregnant women in the hope of ensuring a safe delivery.