

## **The Spiritual Life: *Kamimichi***

One of the village *norō*'s greatest responsibilities was to facilitate the annual visit of the deities (*kami*) and ensure their enjoyment while prayers were made for a good harvest. Most of Amami Oshima's villages face the sea, their backs to the mountains. The deities protecting the village are said to reside in the heavens over the nearby *kamiyama*, or "god mountain," while the gods of fertility live in the land of Neriya Kanaya, far across the sea. Many villages have a *tachigami*, a nearby rock or small island that the *kami* can use as a signpost to find their way to the community. Another feature found throughout the island is the *kamimichi*, or "path of the gods," a route through each village that the gods use on their visits. The route meanders along small roads and narrow alleys to the *myaa*, a village square. No matter how narrow the path may be—sometimes barely more than shoulder-width—the route is kept scrupulously clean and free of obstructions all year round.

### *Visits from the Gods*

On festival days, the deities come to the village from the sea and mountain via the *kamimichi*, and are welcomed and entertained. This was traditionally the task of the *norō*, and prominent local women still play the main role, with support from villagers. The *myaa* is an important site for many rituals, including a respectful visit from a parade of men, both young and old. Later, they will participate in the highly anticipated sumo matches held at the local *dohyo*, the earthen-floored ring that is every community's pride. At the end of the day, the villagers bid farewell to the deities, who return to their homes, hopefully entertained and pleased with their visit.