

Boma Petroglyphs

The Boma Petroglyphs are a series of four mysterious rock carvings that dot the eastern slope of 645-meter Mt. Inokawa, the island's tallest mountain. The images on the highest of the rocks, though faint, are the most detailed, with recognizable shapes resembling an arrow and possibly a ship. The second stone, further down the slope, has barely visible engravings; the third is carved in altar-like steps; and the fourth stone has a fairly complex design that is as baffling as the rest.

Local historians think the area was once the property of a *noro*, one of the priestesses of the indigenous religion. Their beliefs included *kami michi*, sacred "paths of the gods" leading from mountain peaks down to the sea. The area around these rocks was said to be a sacred site where the *noro* prayed for good harvests. *Noro* are sometimes equated with shamans, though they were expected to protect and pray for the community rather than for individuals.

The Legend of Mu

There is another, perhaps more ancient, story that may be linked to the petroglyphs. According to legend, an enormous *habu*, the poisonous snake feared throughout the Ryukyu Islands, once made the mountain its home and devoured hapless islanders. Villagers who scoured the forest for firewood had to maintain total silence, as the slightest noise could attract the snake's attention. The mountain was then called Mu (nothingness), perhaps as a warning to avoid making any sound. This myth may inspire viewers to interpret the carvings on the third stone as a coiled snake, rather than steps.