

Aoshima and Mythology

In Japanese mythology, the creation myth is followed by the legend of how the sun goddess Amaterasu sends her grandson Ninigi down from heaven to govern the world. In this series of stories, which establishes the divine lineage of the emperors, Ninigi marries the princess Konohanasakuya, who gives birth to three children. Among them are the brothers Yamasachi-hiko, who grows up to be a master hunter, and Umisachi-hiko, who becomes an expert fisherman. One day, Yamasachi-hiko proposes that the two exchange tools for a while to get to know each other's trades. Yamasachi-hiko sets out to fish with his brother's hook, while Umisachi-hiko tries his hand at hunting. But Yamasachi-hiko loses the hook he has borrowed and cannot find it, no matter how hard he tries. He is visited by an old man named Shiotsuchi, who tells the despondent Yamasachi-hiko to search at the palace of Wadatsumi, god of the sea.

Yamasachi-hiko does as he is told, and at Wadatsumi's palace encounters the sea god's daughter, Princess Toyotama. The two fall in love, and their marriage comes to symbolize the union of land and sea. After three years spent in Wadatsumi's realm, however, Yamasachi-hiko chooses to return home to bring back his brother's fishing hook, which he has finally found. He rides a shark to shore and eventually settles the fraternal conflict that made him leave in the first place. Yamasachi-hiko and Toyotama have a son, who later becomes the father of Jimmu, the mythical first emperor of Japan.

Aoshima Shrine enshrines Yamasachi-hiko, Toyotama, and Shiotsuchi as Shinto deities. The shrine's annual winter festival, held on the second Monday of January, reenacts the scene of Yamasachi-hiko's return from the sea god's palace, when the shark-riding deity is said to have been welcomed ashore by a delighted crowd. Participants wearing only loincloths rush into the cold waves to undertake a ritual purification. In local tradition, Aoshima is also believed to be the place where Yamasachi-hiko and Toyotama first laid eyes on each other, as a local version of the myth describes the site of their meeting as one "where ducks come to spend the winter." This is the origin of one of the old names for Aoshima Shrine: Kamotsukumiya, or "the shrine where ducks rest."