

## Aoshima Shrine

### *History*

Since ancient times the sacred island of Aoshima has been worshiped as the abode of the divine. Religious structures were first built on the island during the Heian period (794–1185). The shrine grounds assumed their current form during the Edo period (1603–1867) when the daimyo lords of the Obi domain (the southern coastal region of present-day Miyazaki Prefecture) assumed responsibility for maintaining and expanding the shrine. In 1737, they lifted a ban that until then had prevented everyone except the shrine's priests and high-ranking officials from setting foot on the island's sacred shores.

### *Deities*

Aoshima Shrine enshrines the three deities Yamasachi-hiko, Toyotama, and Shiotsuchi. The love story of Yamasachi-hiko and Princess Toyotama is recounted in the *Kojiki*, the eighth-century chronicle of Japanese myths and history. Yamasachi-hiko, a masterful hunter, and Toyotama, daughter of the deity of the sea, were the grandparents of Jimmu, the legendary first emperor. In the story Shiotsuchi helps the two lovers find each other.

### *Festivals*

Festivals are held at Aoshima Shrine throughout the year. Those in spring and autumn are small in scale, but the summer and winter festivals both attract considerable crowds. The summer festival is held on the seventeenth and eighteenth days of the sixth month according to the traditional lunar calendar, which now fall anywhere between mid-July and early August, and features a parade of boats that circle the island. A *mikoshi* (portable shrine) is loaded onto the first boat. At the end of the festival the *mikoshi* is carried back to shore by a group of young and energetic participants. This festival is held to pray for an abundant catch and harvest.

The winter festival reenacts a scene from the myth of Yamasachi-hiko, who meets Princess Toyotama at the palace of her father, the god of the sea. The lovers live together at the palace for three years, but eventually Yamasachi-hiko returns to his home on dry land by hitching a ride on the back of a shark. Upon arrival, he is welcomed by a delighted crowd. In the festival, held on the second Monday of January, participants wearing only loincloths rush into the cold waves and undertake a ritual purification in a symbolic greeting of the deity.

### *The island*

The island of Aoshima is about 1.5 kilometers in circumference and almost entirely covered with jungle-like forest. Of the 226 species of plants on the island, 27 are tropical or subtropical. The

most common of these is the *biro* or fountain palm (*Livistona chinensis*), which has been closely associated with the island for centuries. Aoshima is surrounded by unusually shaped expanses of rock that are known locally as the “ogre’s washboard,” because they are thought to resemble a giant washboard when seen from afar. These rocks emerged from the sea millions of years ago as a result of tectonic activity and land uplift, and eventually assumed their current ridged shape due to wave erosion.