

Aoshima Shrine: The Museum of Hyuga Myths

In Japanese mythology, the creation myth is followed by the legend of the sun goddess Amaterasu sending her grandson down from heaven to govern the world. The Museum of Hyuga Myths at Aoshima Shrine tells this series of stories, which chronicles the divine lineage of Japan's emperors, in the form of 12 scenes featuring wax sculptures.

The tales are set in the province of Hyuga (present-day Miyazaki Prefecture). When scholars in the eighth century first wrote down the myths in Nara, the capital at the time, they likely chose Hyuga as the setting because it was located far away facing the southeast and was therefore considered to be the place closest to the rising sun—and, by extension, to the realm of the gods. This association with the sun is also seen in the name of the region: Hyuga was the only province in premodern Japan to include the character for “sun” in its name.

Scene 1

High up in the heavens, the sun goddess Amaterasu, the greatest of all the deities in the Shinto pantheon, stands before her grandson Ninigi. She orders him to descend to earth to rule over its people, and hands him an ear of rice—the staple grain of Japan and a symbol of prosperity. Three seated deities present Ninigi with three sacred treasures: a sword, a mirror, and a jewel. These items signify divine rule and have, according to legend, been passed down from one emperor to the next, and are the current Imperial Regalia.

Scene 2

After his descent from heaven, Ninigi meets the princess Konohanasakuya, daughter of the mountain god Oyamatsumi, and asks for her hand in marriage. Oyamatsumi agrees, but on one condition: Ninigi must marry both Konohanasakuya and her elder sister, Iwanaga. Ninigi, however, takes only Konohanasakuya, rejecting the less beautiful Iwanaga. Oyamatsumi reveals that marrying both of his daughters would have assured Ninigi eternal happiness, but his refusal of Iwanaga means that he has forfeited his immortality. Ninigi's fateful choice explains why the emperors of Japan, who were considered living deities, had to die like ordinary mortals.

Konohanasakuya soon becomes pregnant with triplets, but Ninigi refuses to believe that the children are his. To prove her point, Konohanasakuya locks herself in a hut and sets fire to it, confident that the children of a deity would be born unharmed no matter what. This story refers to the tradition of lighting fires around a structure used for childbirth, which was practiced throughout ancient maritime Asia and was thought to both purify the site and improve the soon-to-be mother's circulation.

Scene 3

The three children of Konohanasakuya and Ninigi are all boys. Among them are 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. However, Yamasachi-hiko loses the hook he has borrowed and cannot find it, no matter how hard he tries. He breaks up his sword and makes many new hooks, but Umisachi-hiko refuses to accept them.

Scene 4

The despairing Yamasachi-hiko is visited by an old man named Shiotsuchi, who tells him to board a boat and search for his brother's hook at the palace of Wadatsumi, god of the sea.

Scene 5

Yamasachi-hiko arrives at the sea god Wadatsumi's palace and climbs a tree by a well. A servant of princess Toyotama, Wadatsumi's daughter, comes to draw water from the well. She notices Yamasachi-hiko, introduces him to Toyotama, and the two fall in love. Wadatsumi approves of their relationship because of Yamasachi-hiko's divine lineage.

In the myth, the tree Yamasachi-hiko climbed is described as "fragrant," which is a reference to trees such as agarwood and sandalwood that in ancient Asia were highly valued for their aromatic and medicinal qualities. Furthermore, the water jug carried by Toyotama's servant is of a jeweled type that was used at the court of the emperor of China, who in the eyes of the eighth-century Japanese was the most powerful person in the world. Details such as these were intended to convey the splendor of the world of the gods.

Scene 6

Yamasachi-hiko is invited to a grand feast at the palace of Wadatsumi. He eventually marries Toyotama, who is seen here sitting behind the dancers entertaining the couple, and the two live together happily.

Scene 7

After three years at Wadatsumi's palace, Yamasachi-hiko appears to grow worried. He has remembered the reason he set out to sea in the first place: to recover his brother's lost fishing hook. Toyotama asks her father to help with the search.

Scene 8

The sea god Wadatsumi orders all the fish in the sea to assemble at his palace so that the fishing hook Yamasachi-hiko is looking for can be found. The fish all come, except for the sea bream, which is said to have hurt its mouth. Wadatsumi calls for the sea bream, whose pain is found to be caused by a stuck fishing hook.

Scene 9

Having recovered his brother's lost hook, Yamasachi-hiko decides to ride a shark back to shore. Before he leaves, Toyotama tells him that their child will be born soon and that Yamasachi-hiko should build a hut for her where she can give birth. As a parting gift, Wadatsumi gives Yamasachi-hiko a pair of orbs with which to control the tides.

Scene 10

Yamasachi-hiko attempts to return the fishing hook to Umisachi-hiko, who refuses to accept it and threatens his brother. Yamasachi-hiko uses the orbs given to him by the god of the sea and calls in the tide, almost drowning Umisachi-hiko, who finally yields.

Scene 11

Yamasachi-hiko starts building a hut for his wife, but she goes into labor before the structure can be completed. Toyotama enters the hut and implores Yamasachi-hiko not to look at her before the baby is born. Yamasachi-hiko, however, cannot resist the temptation, and sees Toyotama, the daughter of the sea, transformed into a giant shark. Her true form revealed, Toyotama returns to the sea in anguish, leaving her newborn baby behind. The child, Ugayafukiaezu, is brought up by Toyotama's sister Tamayori, whom he later marries.

In this scene, Toyotama is depicted saying goodbye to her child. The black feathers on the ground were used by Yamasachi-hiko to build the roof of the hut that was not finished in time. These are cormorant feathers, which were considered auspicious for childbirth. Cormorant fishing, which was used in ancient Japan, involves training cormorants to catch fish in their throat and then regurgitate the fish for the fisherman. The rapid way in which the birds regurgitated the fish was equated with a smooth birth, and women would keep a cormorant feather nearby during labor. The fact that the entire roof of Toyotama's hut was to be built from these feathers symbolizes divine splendor.

Scene 12

Ugayafukiaezu and his wife Tamayori have four sons. When they grow up, the youngest son takes his brothers on a quest to conquer all of Japan, as depicted in this scene. They head eastward from Hyuga, battling and defeating many enemies, until they reach the area that is

present-day Nara Prefecture. There the youngest son establishes a government and declares himself Emperor Jimmu, the first ruler of Japan by divine right.