

The Myths of Japan: Into the Underworld

Izanagi is unable to bear the death of his beloved Izanami, and decides to bring her back from the land of Yomi, the underworld. He journeys into Yomi and locates Izanami, pleading for her to return to the realm of the living so that they can complete the creation of the world together. But Izanami replies that she cannot go back, because she has already eaten food prepared in the land of the dead. Relentless, Izanagi urges Izanami to negotiate with the deities of the underworld. She agrees, but forbids Izanagi from laying eyes on her while he waits. The impatient Izanagi, however, looks in Izanami's direction during the negotiation, and sees her in a horribly decomposed state.

Furious, Izanami calls on the hags of hell. These demons pursue the fleeing Izanagi, who throws seeds behind him as he runs. These seeds grow into grape trees and other plants as soon as they hit the ground, distracting the hags. To shake off his pursuers, Izanagi also tosses peaches, which in ancient Japan were thought to possess a mystical power. Izanagi escapes through the gates of Yomi and seals the passage with a giant boulder before Izanami can reach him. Speaking through the rock, Izanami curses her husband, promising to kill a thousand souls every day until the end of time. Izanagi counters by pledging to have 1,500 newborns enter the world every day. This exchange may have been based on the assumed pace of population growth in ancient Japan.