Volcano Worship (*Kazan Shinko*)

The two buildings in front of you are Saigandenji Temple (on the left) and Asosanjo Jinja, the upper shrine of Aso Shrine (behind and to the right). Despite their small size and modernity – the temple building dates from 2022 and the shrine from 1958 – their origins extend far back in time. The shrine was supposedly founded in 281 BCE in the reign of Korei, Japan's legendary seventh emperor, while the temple was founded in 726 CE. At both places, the focus of worship is the crater of Mt. Aso. Originally a part of Japanese folk belief, volcano worship was absorbed into both Shinto and Buddhism. For many centuries, mountain ascetics lived and prayed in this area, and pilgrims visited in large numbers.

The primary goal of the shrine's Shinto priests and the temple's Buddhist monks was the same: to pray to Takeiwatatsu no Mikoto, the volcano deity, keep him in a good mood, and stop him and his fellow volcano-dwelling deities from erupting. This was not merely to prevent physical damage to nearby crops, livestock, and dwellings, but also to avoid the calamity to the country that the eruption of Mt. Aso was believed to portend.

Even today, the chief priest ascends daily from the main branch of Saigandenji at the base of Mt. Aso to chant sutras and pray for the volcano to remain dormant. Meanwhile, the priests from the lower Aso Shrine come up every June to conduct a "crater-calming ceremony" in which they flatter and pray to the volcano deities, flinging wooden wands decorated with white zigzag paper streamers into the crater as offerings.