

22. A Walk Between Worlds

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As the rickety bus clammers up from the valley town of Kisofukushima, I sip a hot can of Boss coffee and watch the patchwork hills of bamboo and *sugi* pine lurch by. We are ascending through a narrow ravine towards Ontake-san, on the border of Nagano and Gifu Prefectures, right in the middle of Honshu, Japan's main island. The lumbering bulk of the mountain looms, shrouded in early morning mist. My natural inclination when climbing is to want to see where I am heading, but at times like this I can only suspend the inquisitive faculty and plunge into the fog with faith that boots and the power of breakfast will carry me through. This particular mountain could well have her own designs though. Ontake is even today considered a god.

The Japanese have always thought of their rugged islands as alive. Oddly placed boulders, ancient ragged trees, ridge lines, glades, hilltops and bodies of water are all the domain of *kami*, powers that humans can relate to for boons and blessings ... or neglect at their own risk. Some of these objects are themselves deities, others inhabited by one, or more gods. The boundary between these is rarely sharply defined, the sacred and profane in Japan always a matter of emphasis rather than a line in the sand. Of course the features that dominate the natural landscape are also paid homage.

You can hardly take a step in Japan without walking into a mountain. They soar and dive virtually the entire length of the country and are commonly represented in place and family names: Yamada (山田、mountain rice field), Yamaoka (山岡、mountains and hills), and Takayama (高山、high

mountain) are just a few of thousands. Like many peoples, the ancient Japanese revered alpine realms as the meeting points of heaven and earth. Certain peaks, however, were considered particularly numinous. The mountain cults that developed in relation to them have always been important repositories of local Shinto and later esoteric Buddhist practice.

There are dozens of these sacred peaks all over the country but Ontake is in a realm of her own. For millennia the mountain's spirit has been welcomed to the rice fields in spring and returned to the heights in autumn with great celebration. As watershed source she is the giver of life, as well as the great womb to which believers return when they die. She is for many a gateway, an underworld realm, and a *kami* of multiple aspects all in one. As if there was any doubt about the mountain's relation to the beyond, along the road snaking up to the trailhead, rough stone stelae rise scattered across the hillsides, weather-worn and mossy, like headstones growing wild. At last I step off the bus into clear woodland air, a balm after an hour of diesel roar. A quick look at the map, then I start up through the woods, the rocky trail winding shady through pine, cedar, mossy birch and a rolling understory of knee-high bamboo. It's cooler than down in the valley. After just a short climb the fog begins to give way. The ascent is appropriately slow. Traditionally, you don't go charging up a mountain. You can't because you have to keep stopping along the way to show obeisance to the sacred. Shortly I arrive at a shrine hanging precariously from the cliff face, its pure white banners streaming out over the valley. As is typical of Japanese deities, Ontake is not the jealous type. She certainly doesn't mind sharing some space with the rest of the homegrown Shinto crowd; shrines and gods of stone and brass cover her rugged body like scattered jewels. The languid pace and frequent pauses have the further benefit of providing settled moments to reflect on what's before you, rather than letting your mind swirl about the peaks. Personally I feel rushing anywhere only guarantees you'll reach your *ultimate* destination a little sooner. Racing up a mountain so closely associated with death seems particularly bad form.

A little further along I catch the quiet murmur of voices above the rustling bamboo. Before long a group of hikers descends in a dissonant cackle