

At a Country Shrine

Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley

Mr. Oyama carefully places the wooden stand before him. On it is a scroll; its paper is rich and thick. It moves a little, answering the wisps of breeze that bring the cool of the morning and the earthy perfume of the sacred grove that surrounds this shrine. Alongside the stand is a *gohei*, a wooden staff with two specially-cut stairstep-shaped white-paper banners suspended from its apex. Several meters in front of where Mr. Oyama has now seated himself, a circular bronze mirror shines in its stand before the shrine's inner sanctum. Around it is an array of traditional symbolic offerings—fruit, saké, sprays of leaves from the sacred *sakaki* tree—placed in vessels of gleaming white. Mr. Oyama's son takes his place behind and to the left of his father. He holds a *shaku*—a thin, flat scepter of wood that resembles the profile of a closed fan—vertically in front of his chest. His eyes, though fixed straight ahead, betray a nervousness and a glint of curiosity about the big foreigner who is so close by.

Kannushi is the term for a Shinto priest; the word is written with two ideographs that literally mean "god master." Mr. Oyama is the chief *kannushi* for this shrine in the town of Tanagura, which is tucked among the wrinkled and forest-clad ridges of central Fukushima Prefecture, well to the north of Tokyo.

Mr. Oyama bows deeply and silently, and claps his hands twice. The sharp sounds cut through the chill morning air, a two-note anacrusis that accents the depth of the following silence. He bows again, and then lifts the *gohei*, moving it in front of him to the left and to the right. Its angular paper banners swirl and rustle. It is the sound of the wind in the leaves.

After returning the *gohei* to its place, Mr. Oyama picks up the paper scroll, unrolling it and holding it at arm's length. He begins to read the text. I

catch only a few words; the language used here before the shrine's god is not everyday Japanese. Each syllable finds its place in the air and floats there before fading away. I am lost in the sound and light. Closing my eyes, I am carried away to other times—times that are of legend. How has this kind of simple ritual changed since the times of mythical emperors and heroes? Did the same words greet ancient shrines' *ujigami*—tutelary duties—each morning? My imagination roams across centuries, urged on by the quiet and the cool and the very spirit of this place.

Later, I sit with Mr. Oyama and his son in what might be called the shrine's outer sanctuary. Mrs. Oyama and another woman serve us tea and Japanese sweets. The plain wooden building is unheated; thin columns of steam rise from the peridot-green tea in our cups and the breath of each of us is rhythmically betrayed by little clouds of exhalation. We talk about the shrine and its history and how generations swing to and fro in their values and traditions. Despite the fact that his son will inherit the responsibility for this shrine, Mr. Oyama worries about the future of the long and deep Shinto tradition. "It is not a matter of religion," he tells me, "but a sense of place in nature, among fellow living things, and among mysteries beyond what we can understand."

The sun is higher now, as I make my way down the long flight of stone steps that lead up from the entrance to the shrine grounds. A few birds flit through the cedars that tower overhead. I stop and watch them until they disappear in the dark green shadows, the way birds always seem to do. ■

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