

## Eternal Change at the Grand Shrine of Ise

By Florian Coulmas  
Japan Quarterly  
January-March 1994

**I**t was raining. A fine drizzle continued to fall as I crossed the Uji Bridge spanning the Isuzu River. A huge wooden torii on either side of the gently arched wooden bridge marked the sacred gateway to Ise Jingû, or the Grand Shrine of Ise, the largest and spiritually most important of all Shinto shrines in Japan. I was accompanied by Yano Ken'ichi, a high-ranking priest of Ise Jingû, who was willing to show me around. Clad in white traditional dress, tabi, and geta and carrying a white paper umbrella, he did not seem to mind the rain. "Ise," he said, "is beautiful every day, rain or shine. The gods reside here." I had to agree, for the luxuriant grove of trees along the bank of the river is one of the most delicate and delightful sceneries of Japan.

The bridge we had just crossed smelled of fresh timber. It was brand-new, every plank and beam cut of unfinished wood. The metal caps on the pillars still glittered, untainted by the corrosion that would soon turn them green. The bridge was new because 1993 was the year of the periodic renewal at Ise Jingû. Every 20 years, a cycle of ceremonies is performed there to celebrate the removal of the sanctuaries of the shrine and the transfer of the deities to their new residences. In the process, all major structures on the precincts of Ise Jingû are rebuilt, including the bridge. This regular shrine renewal, or *shikinen sengû*, took place for the 61st time last year. The ceremony of moving the divine symbols to their new abodes, the climax of the renewal program, was performed in early October. The tradition of *shikinen sengû* has been observed almost without interruption for some 2,200 years and is an object of pride and reverence to many Japanese.

## I

The cost of shikinen sengû is formidable. Of course, not everything can be measured in terms of money, not even in modern Japan, but the expense of this operation can tell us something. At least it should make us wary of portrayals of Japan as a non-religious nation. The construction cost alone for furnishing the deities with a new home was about Y32.7 billion, of which Y20.0 billion was provided by Ise Jingû. The remainder was covered by private donations from all parts of the country. Government subsidies were nil. The old buildings, which were erected at a similar cost, have had their day. After the deities were removed to the newly built sanctuaries, the old structures were demolished. Millions of pilgrims will visit the new shrine to acknowledge their bond with the age-old custom. It is they who keep this tradition alive, by traveling to Ise and by footing the bill for the shrine renewal.

Would a newly erected place of worship instill awe in Occidental pilgrims? Would they, indeed, could they, show reverence for such a place and solemnly approach it in order to reflect on their spiritual roots? Could it cause the spine-shivering thrill that history-conscious Europeans experience when faced with ancient cathedrals and historical monuments? Hardly, I think.

Europe's collective memories are hewn in stone. Pericles himself must have seen the Parthenon in Athens, the remains of which we can still admire today. The upper five layers of the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem date from Herod's time. In the cathedral of Aix-la-Chapelle, we can shake hands across the centuries with Charlemagne. He breathed within its very walls. Immovable and seemingly immune to time, the hefty stone walls make history seem real to us. By their sheer presence, these stones give testament to those who preceded us; the stones that we can touch with our own hands are the minutes of history. Hands-on history. Being old, they link us with olden times.

And when old things are renovated, we do not always welcome it. After years of painstaking work, the Sistine Chapel shines in fresh colors. This, the restorers assure us, is how Michelangelo, Botticelli, and Pinturicchio painted the frescos that adorn the

chapel's interior. All hues are now delicately set off from each other; every detail is clearly discernible, no longer blurred by time. But does this unfaded beauty impress us as a centuries-old work of art? Beautiful, perhaps, but where is the original, the genuine? We don't find it easy to associate the idea of antiquity and authenticity with fresh paint or new polish. A reconstruction does not command our respect and veneration as would the genuine object.

The keepers of Ise Jingû do not think like this, nor do the many pilgrims who gather there. The shrine is considered Japan's spiritual home by its priests and many other Japanese. Its history predates the Asuka period (592-710), even though the sanctuaries the visitor actually sees are never older than two decades. Ise is Japan's most traditional place of pilgrimage, but the tradition that it represents does not rely on authentic material objects linking the shrine with the past. The sense of continuity and historical reality engendered in the concept of this very beam, this sacred relic, this genuine piece of the holy shroud is quite alien to the spirit of Ise. Material constancy is not what the spirit needs to manifest itself, for the attempt to arrest the inevitable decay of matter is eventually in vain and hence nothing but a gross self-deception.

Like the lives of their creators, all objects are transitory. This awareness of the fleeting world is characteristic of the Japanese outlook on life. Things are admired for their beauty not because they last forever, but because they fade away so quickly. Stability and permanence are to be found not in substance, but in form. Ise Jingû's shikinen sengû celebrates this idea of perpetual renewal which ensures continuity through reproduction rather than conservation.

Stone can withstand the elements quite well, giving rise to the idea that immortalization in the form of material artifacts is possible: but wooden structures show signs of dilapidation quickly. That Japan never had any stone-based architecture to speak of surely contributed to the realization that human-built structures are merely transitory. The Egyptian pyramids, the rock inscriptions of Behistun, St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome—these and other monuments are meant to last forever and in this sense go against nature. By contrast, the simple wooden structures of

Shinto shrines are built in harmony with nature as they offer little resistance to decay.

## II

Ise Jingû is a complex of branch and auxiliary shrines consisting of 125 individual shrines scattered about a wide area between the cities of Ise, Matsusaka, and Toba. The two main sanctuaries, located in Ise, are known as Kôtaijingû, or Naikû (Inner Shrine) for short, and Toyouke Daijingû, or Gekû (Outer Shrine). Both are surrounded by what is the greatest aesthetic attraction of the two sites—a forest of majestic cedar trees that commands the visitor's admiration in every season. As Yano and I, now some distance from the bridge, walked through the rain amidst these trees along a high wooden fence shielding the main sanctuary of Naikû from the intruder's eye, I was struck again with Ise Jingû's beauty. The setting surrounding us—moss-covered boulders between the high cedar stems shiny from the rainwater, a little creek bridged by a turtle-shaped rock, and an infinite variety of green—was most delicate, even in the rain. Indeed, the natural scenery is considered sacred and an important composite element of the shrine. Ise is the supreme model of the transformation of natural surroundings into a place of worship so typical of the Shinto cult. In Ise, nature itself is turned into a temple.

Naikû enshrines Amaterasu Ômikami, the sun goddess and ancestral goddess of Japan's imperial house, while Gekû is dedicated to Toyouke no Ômikami, the tutelary deity of those occupations responsible for providing food, clothing, and shelter. Toyouke is also the divine provider of food to Amaterasu Ômikami, making Toyouke subservient to Amaterasu. Moreover, the attested history of Naikû is older than that of Gekû. Thus, there is a hierarchy and a sense of rivalry between the two shrines, Naikû being home to the more important deity. In the 13th century, Gekû made an attempt to bolster its own stature by providing Toyouke with a new identity equal in prestige to Amaterasu, claiming that Toyouke was the first deity of the cosmogony. These differences aside, however, the two principal shrines of Ise are united in viewing themselves as the chief guardians of the Japanese race, as well as the center of Japan's traditional spiritual culture. This

claim rests on Ise's special significance for Shinto, Japan's ethnic religion.

Shinto, unlike many other Japanese cultural and religious systems, is largely homegrown. In a wide sense, Shinto can be defined as encompassing those elements of Japan's cultural tradition extraneous to Buddhism and other imported systems of belief and ritual. The word *shintô* is a Sino-Japanese compound written with two Chinese characters meaning "divinity" and "way." Not being a book-based religion, Shinto has no unified doctrine, but the various customs and rituals are centered on worshiping the deities of heaven and earth, combining reverence for nature and ancestors. There are some 80,000 Shinto shrines located throughout the Japanese archipelago, each with its own founding history and worshiped *kami* (deities). Since 1946, the year after government control over Shinto shrines was outlawed by the Occupation forces, the shrines have been united in the Association of Shinto Shrines, an umbrella organization with Ise Jingû as the principal shrine.

Since ancient times, Shinto has been a public affair. That is, the rituals performed at Shinto shrines are social in character rather than being expressions of the faith of individuals. Ise Jingû occupies a special position in this regard because of its relationship with the imperial court. From an early period, it has been, and continues to be, the shrine where emissaries of the emperor worship and where rites are performed relating to the institution of the emperor. Although the emperor is no longer directly involved in the rituals of Ise Jingû because the Constitution mandates the separation of religion and state, private imperial envoys attend some rites and the emperor also makes a private donation on the occasion of *shikinen sengû*. Soon after Emperor Akihito's enthronement ceremony on November 12, 1990, the emperor and empress traveled to Ise to stay for three days and worship Amaterasu Ômikami. Likewise, Crown Prince Naruhito's first trip outside Tokyo after his wedding on June 9, 1993, was to Ise, again as a private pilgrim, but the significance of the visit clearly goes beyond the crown prince's private concern.

The deities enshrined in the many sanctuaries throughout the land are numerous and varied, constantly increasing in number. In spite of these many deities, the shrines are linked with each other as a common expression of local culture and provide a

place of communal peace within natural surroundings revered as sacred. This is why shrines are always ringed by at least a few trees.

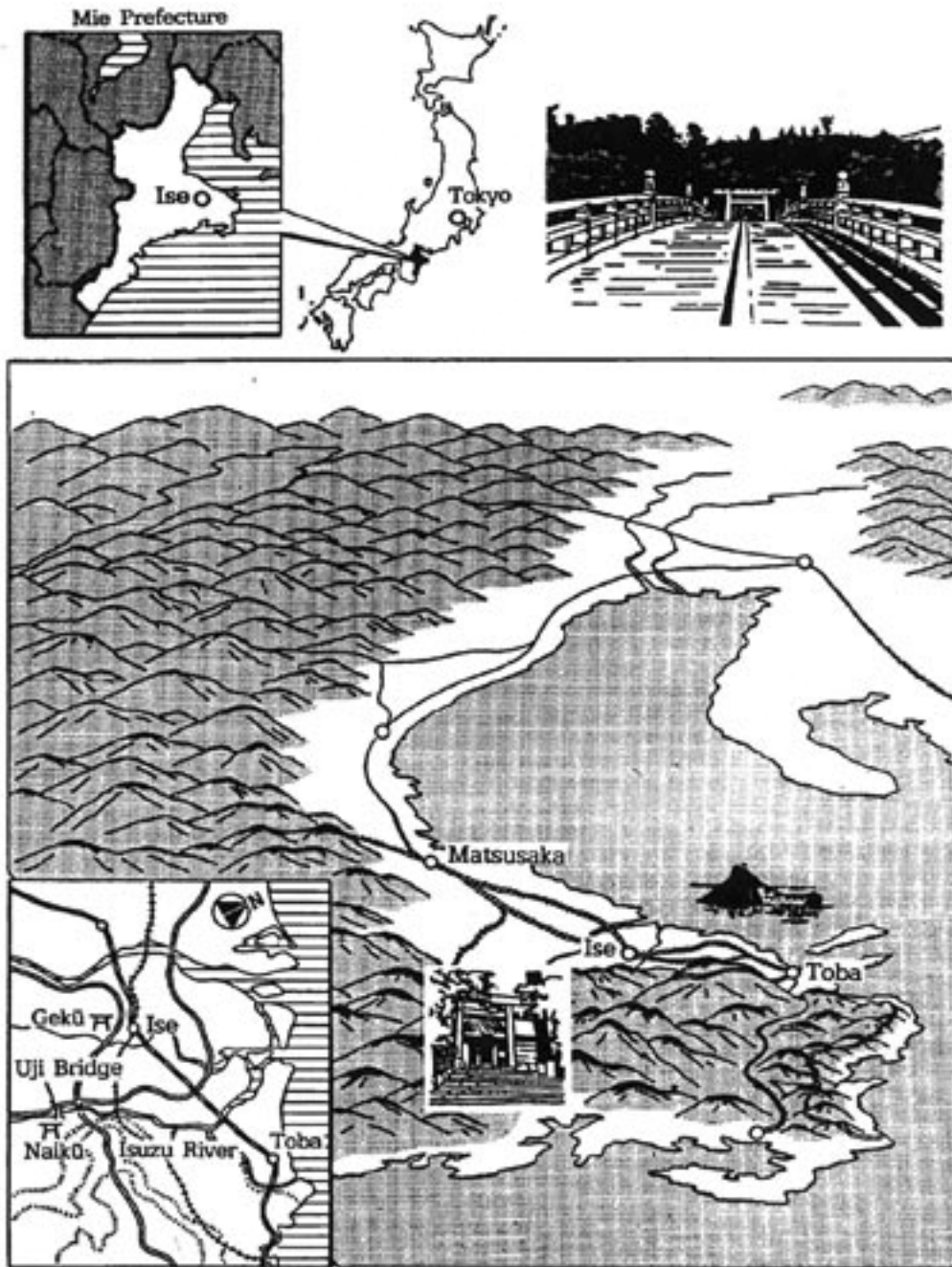
Any being or object that possesses extraordinary virtue can be deified, including divine spirits, ancestors, and plants, animals, rivers, and rocks. But deities do not repose in these objects unless they are worshiped. The human dead, too, become deities by being worshiped. Even manufactured devices can be conceived of as repositories of spiritual power. The deities of Shintoism, then, are spiritual forces that dwell in pure and virtuous things and living beings or nature. They bear little resemblance with the gods of monotheistic cults. Since nature plays such a focal role, it is understandable that the festivals offered to the deities throughout the year are intimately linked to the natural rhythm of the changing seasons.

At Ise Jingû, too, rituals relating to the natural and agricultural seasons are performed throughout the year. These rituals, daily rites, and occasional festivals are the very core of Shintoism. Whatever theological significance may be attached to them, whatever they symbolize is less important than the actual enactment. This can also be said of the shikinen sengû. Since Ise Jingû is central to both the religious and social aspects of Shintoism, the periodic transfer of its deities to newly reconstructed sanctuaries must be regarded the grandest and most important event in the cycle of Shinto rituals.

### III

Naikû and Gekû are located about five kilometers apart, but in structure and appearance they share many features. The architectural style in which they are built is known as *yui-itsu shimmeizukuri*, or unique deity construction. The simple rectangular shape of the main buildings derives from the design of granaries and treasure houses of ancient times. Raised above the ground by pillars, the shrines are somewhat reminiscent of Polynesian structures. The buildings are made of Japanese cypress. and the roof of the main building is thatched. Large rounded logs are mounted at right angles to the ridge on top of the roof, which is further adorned by metal-tipped poles protruding from the upper part of the gable at either end of the building. The general

appearance of the shrines is one of refined simplicity and harmony.



Naikū and Gekū each consist of two sacred sites, one that contains the main sanctuary surrounded by four rows of fences, and one located right next to it that will serve as the site of the next sanctuary. This alternate site is usually empty except for a tiny structure not much bigger than a beehive, placed in the

center. it is only during the time of the construction of the new sanctuaries on the alternate sites that both sites are in use. The 61st rebuilding of the sanctuaries in 1993 was on the east sites, which had remained vacant for the past 20 years.

The regular rebuilding always uses the existing shrine structures—which are themselves duplicates of their predecessors—as models to be copied in minute detail. Materials, designs, and dimensions must be matched exactly. And, more important, the construction technology must not be modernized or altered in any way. The buildings are constructed by artisans trained in the ancient techniques of pillar raising, wood carving, carpentry, and thatching.

The main sanctuaries of Naikû and Gekû hold a great many items offered to the deities. On the occasion of the shikinen sengû, these objects, too, must be renewed. The items, 1,600 in all, are referred to as "divine apparel" and "divine treasures." The former are decorations and accoutrements, including precious silks, combs, and other accessories for the beautification of the deities and various ritual tools used during the rites associated with the periodic shrine renewal. The deity is offered a silk sash woven in such a fine pattern that the artisan's day's work is no more than one centimeter. The divine treasures include implements offered for the use of the deities, such as equestrian accessories, musical instruments, writing utensils, and a jewel-studded sword with a pink handle that is covered with the feathers of a rare bird. During the Heian period (794-1192), it was decreed that these implements should continue to be supplied in their ancient styles.

Only the best artisans and craftspeople in the fields of goldsmithing, sword-making, laquerware, and textiles possess the highly specialized artistic skills to produce the divine apparel and treasures. Their work is not meant for eternity. For these artifacts will be entrusted to flames or buried in the ground after just 20 years, during which time they were stored in the sanctuaries for no one but the deities to see. The object itself is not essential and does not need to be kept forever, because however refined the techniques used in its creation, it is bound to wear away as do all material goods. What deserves to be preserved and handed down to the next generation is rather the



ideal concept of the object and the skill without which it could not exist.

The same holds true for the rites accompanying shikinen sengû. Continuity is perpetuated in the repetition of the performance. The form is everything. Rather than symbolizing some content, the form is the content of the rites. From the ceremony that marks trees for use as sacred pillars of the new shrine buildings (*konomoto-sai*) to the ground-breaking ceremony for the sites of the new sanctuaries of Naikû and Gekû (*chinchî-sai*), the offering of new shrine implements (*okazari*), and the actual shrine renewal in the grand nocturnal procession of white-robed priests transferring the Great Deities from the old to the new buildings (*sengyo*), dozens of rites are performed spanning a cycle of almost 10 years. There is nothing "behind" these rites. but each one follows and hence renews the stipulations of the ancient form, a prime example of sustaining a tradition for its own sake. For the content expressed by the form lacks any transcendental significance. Made explicit, it appears rather simple, even trivial, in comparison with the intricate theological edifices of exegetic world religions such as Buddhism or Christianity: The sun as the revered source of all life and its deity as the forebear of the imperial house. However, content is not really what matters. Instead, the cycle of renewal rites is a single triumph of form over content, thus exposing a cardinal aspect of Japanese culture. The form must be kept up, even in renewal. More than that, the ultimate purpose of change and renewal is to preserve the form. Lacking any transcendental content, the ceremonies of the Shrine renewal are part of a cultural event that, more than anything else, celebrates itself by paying homage to the land established by Amaterasu Ômikami.

The shrine renewal of Ise Jingû is a colossal exercise in futility, a waste of resources and human labor on a truly grand scale. However, the purpose of spiritual renewal, which is glorified in 20-year intervals, justifies the material means. Ise Jingû maintains its original beauty and periodically shines in new splendor. The buildings, divine treasures, and daily food offerings cannot but testify to the transitoriness of material goods, but the way they are built, manufactured, or performed adheres to the ideal form. The form is respected by the observant in the certitude that by striving to approximate it with every

renewal they safeguard the most precious legacy of their ancestors, lending it continuity through never-ending regeneration.

According to Sakurai Katsunoshin, a respected advisor to the Association of Shinto Shrines and noted Shinto scholar, the periodic renewal of Ise Jingû is at the same time a spiritual homecoming and rejuvenation of Japan. In former times, periodic shrine renewal was a common practice throughout the land. It still takes place at a number of other shrines, such as the Grand Shrine of Sumiyoshi in Osaka. But with its elaborate ceremonies, Ise Jingû stands alone. Many Japanese have never been to Ise Jingû and have little interest in its cultural significance. However, even they are affected indirectly by the idea of periodic renewal, since many renovate or rebuild their homes about every 20 years. And no new house is completed without a variety of ceremonies accompanying the construction. In this way, the fleetingness of the material world is conquered by the permanence of spiritual form even in everyday life.