



The sun rises over the summit of sacred Mt. Miwa. The *otorii* in the foreground is the gateway to Omiwa Jinja in Sakurai City, Nara Prefecture, one of the oldest extant Shinto shrines. (PHOTO: Courtesy of Omiwa Jinja)

## Q&A The Origins of Shinto Shrines

Okada Shoji, Professor, Kokugakuin University with editorial staff, *Geijutsu Shincho*

***Geijutsu Shincho***: How and when did the history of Shinto shrines begin?

**Okada Shoji**: Apart from the clay figures used during rituals in the Jomon period and the bronze bells used in rituals during the Yayoi period, the first definite evidence we have for rituals (*kami* worship) linked to present day Shrine Shinto is from the latter half of the fourth century, i.e. from the mid Kofun period on. Although we have found various traces of rituals, essentially there is nothing like a sacred building (shrine building). It is thought that there was a long period during which the *kami* were worshipped at *iwakura* (sacred rocks) and *himorogi* (branches set up temporarily to receive the *kami*).

The location for these rituals was the boundary between mountain and village, which was also the boundary between the world of *kami* and the world of men. People brought the best food they had to these places as offerings to the *kami*. Even today offerings of food (*shinsen*) to the *kami* are the core of Shinto rituals, and this is the origin. However, we know very little about the exact process by which this developed into our modern image of a shrine.



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For example, according to the *Nihon shoki*, Amaterasu Omikami was enshrined at the site of the current Ise Jingu in the twenty-fifth year of the reign of the emperor Suinin. If we mechanically convert this to the Western calendar it becomes 5 BCE, but of course this has not been confirmed through archaeology. On the other hand, the first Ise Jingu Shikinen Sengu (the vicennial rebuilding of the shrine and transfer of the kami from the old shrine to the new) took place during the fourth year of Empress Jito's reign (690). (This was the inner shrine only; the first rebuilding of the outer shrine took place two years later.) At one point I believed that this first Shikinen Sengu referred to the original construction of the shrine buildings themselves, but it is now thought that the shrine's original construction may go back around forty years further to the reign of the emperor Kotoku. In any case, it is almost impossible to talk about the appearance of Ise Jingu prior to the first Shikinen Sengu.

### **Were shrines other than Ise Jingu the same?**

Of the traces of rituals linked to present-day shrines, the most detailed investigations have been of Munakata Taisha and Omiwa Jinja.

On the island of Okinoshima, where the Munakata Taisha's Okitsugu shrine is located, a three-stage investigation has confirmed remains of rituals dating from the mid Kofun period (latter half of the fourth century) to the early Heian period (beginning of the tenth century), and a huge number of artifacts have been collected. Located far out in the Genkai sea about 60 kilometers from the Kyushu mainland, Okinoshima is a solitary island measuring one kilometer from east to west and five hundred meters from north to south. Rituals continued for five hundred years on this small island, and over time the location and contents of the rituals changed little by little: from *ganjo* rituals (offerings placed on the top of huge boulders), to *iwakage* (offerings placed on the ground beside the boulder and in its shadow), to half rock shadow and half open air, and finally to open-air rituals (offerings placed on the open ground).

At Omiwa Jinja many traces of rituals from the fifth to seventh centuries remain. They are located within the tabooed land (*kinsokuchi*) beyond the present-day Hall of Worship (*haiden*), and also all along the western foot of Mount Miwa, which is itself considered to be the deity of the shrine. Nowadays, worshippers can pray to the divine Mount Miwa from the Hall of Worship, but in earlier ages, rituals took place on the mountain, or by sacred rocks at the mountain's foot.

### **The deities of the Munakata Taisha and Omiwa Jinja are famous kami that appear in the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*, aren't they? Like the rituals, do these legends date right back to the Kofun period?**

The *Kiki* (*Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*) were compiled in the early eighth century. The things we would most like to know are: when did the legends they transmit come into existence? how did people receive the idea that the Emperor would rule the various lands where the kami that appear in the books were worshipped? and how were shrines connected to that? But it is hard to find any solid evidence.

For example, one clue is the characters inscribed on iron swords excavated from burial mounds at Mount Etafuna in Kumamoto Prefecture and Mount Inari in Saitama Prefecture. Both inscriptions record that the great king Wakatakeru (Emperor Yuryaku) "reigned over the world," from which we can understand that by the second half of the fifth century a wide area from Kyushu to Kanto had been subjugated by the Yamato line, and that a concept of "the world" (which means the whole country the Japanese great king reigned over) had already arisen. If this is true, an early version of the *Kiki* legends' central section, that descendants of the kami had descended from Takama no Hara (the heavenly realm) to reign over the world below, probably already existed.

## **Why were permanent shrines created, rather than continuing the previous rituals involving sacred rocks and branches?**

In recent years there have been a series of important discoveries at the ruins of Makimuku, not far from the Omiwa Jinja. Some researchers suggest that this could be the first capital of the Yamato court, or the royal capital of Yamataikoku. Here, there is a possibility that rituals took place within the buildings of the royal palace.

Looking at written records too: according to the *Gishiwajinden* (Chinese historical record), the shamaness Himiko often performed *kido* (worship and divination), and once she became queen hid herself in the palace, away from people. From this we can deduce that rituals took place inside the palace. Also, according to the *Nihon shoki*, Emperor Sujin enshrined Amaterasu omikami and Yamato okunitama no kami together in the palace, but fearing the majesty of the two kami, it became difficult to live with them. The emperor had no choice but to entrust the rituals for the kami to his two princess daughters, and they were worshipped separately outside the palace.

We can conjecture that when rituals in the royal palace to worship the kings' ancestral kami (ancestral kami of the lineage) and guardian kami fused with *iwakura* rituals for locally worshipped kami, the result was the creation of palaces for the kami, namely shrines (sacred shrine buildings).

## **In the case of Ise Jingu, that occurred during the seventh century, did it not?**

Not just Ise Jingu, but for the construction of shrine buildings in general, the seventh century was a critical time. "On the night of the fourteenth day of the tenth month, a great earthquake occurred. All over the country people screamed and fled in bewilderment. Countless government buildings were destroyed in provinces across the land, together with homes and storehouses of the ordinary people, temples, and shrines." This is the record of a great earthquake in a passage of the *Nihon shoki* referring to the thirteenth year of Emperor Tenmu (684). A massive earthquake occurred along the Nankai trough, causing damage across a wide area from Shikoku to the Kii Peninsula and Izu Oshima. From this description we can deduce that there was already a certain amount of shrine construction at this time.

An earlier record is from the *Nihon shoki* referring to the fifth year of Empress Saimei's reign (659). It states that "Izumo no Kuni no miyatsuko [a politico-religious leader in charge of rites at Izumo Taisha] was ordered to build a palace for the kami." Needless to say, this "palace for the kami" refers to the shrine Izumo Taisha. Also, in the *Hitachi no kuni fudoki* it is recorded that in the era of the Omi court of Emperor Tenji (667 to 671) "For the first time a representative was dispatched and a palace for the kami was built." This surely alludes to the construction of the shrine buildings at Kashima Jingu.

## **Empress Saimei, Emperor Tenji, Emperor Tenmu, Empress Jito: were shrines created in parallel with the Japanese nation under the Ritsuryo codes?**

You could probably say that the establishment of the Ritsuryo codes (penal and civil codes modeled on Chinese precedents) equates to the setting up of the ancient shrine system. During the reign of Emperor Kotoku, the predecessor of Empress Saimei, something happened that points to that; namely, the setting up of a *shingun* (provincial administrative unit) as part of the Taika reforms. In the Ritsuryo system the nation was divided into sixty-six provinces (a number that varied over time), within which there were *kori* (districts) that served as administrative units. The most important shrines, however, had their own *kori* which created an income base.

The aim of the Ritsuryo code was to set up a system of centralized power through which the emperor and government could rule the entire nation. The various rituals to kami across Japan were also placed under central control and given a place within an organized set of legends. It is thought that the famous shrines of today were the ones expected to play a central role in this system. The kami that play important roles in the Kiki legends are evenly distributed over the Japanese archipelago.

### **So the Emperor or Empress themselves conducted these rituals?**

No, that is not what happened. The following episode is from the *Nihon shoki* passage on the reign of Emperor Sujin we looked at before.

“In the seventh year of the reign of Sujin a pestilence continued. When divinations were performed in order to know which kami had been angered, the kami took possession of Princess Yamato to tobimomoso-hime no Mikoto and spoke words through her, saying: ‘If you revere and worship me it is sure that peace will come.’ The name of the kami was Oomononushi no Kami. Accordingly, the Emperor purified the interior of the palace and prayed fervently, saying: ‘I revere you with my whole body and soul, so why do you not accept this?’ That night Oomononushi no Kami appeared in a dream to him and said, ‘If my son Ootataneko is made to worship me peace will come at once and other regions will submit to you too.’ And so, Ootataneko was sought out, and when he was made to worship Oomononushi no Kami the pestilence came to an end and the land finally became peaceful.” As this passage suggests, it was a general rule that ancient kami would be worshipped by the descendants and the people of their land.

This story transmits the origin of Omiwa Jinja, and an Ootataneko Jinja exists there as a *sessha* (auxiliary shrine) of the main shrine.

### **Is it true that the kami would not necessarily be pleased when worshipped by an emperor or empress?**

As a rule, emperors and empresses would only worship Amaterasu Omikami, who was the ancestral kami of the imperial line. Rituals to other kami were entrusted to the *shizoku* (tribal groups of similar ancestry) who had originally worshipped those kami, and to the people living on those lands. The aim of the Ritsuryo administration was to support those rituals and to exert indirect control via *houhei* (providing offerings such as woven textiles) through the Jingikan (a central office responsible for rituals) and *kokushi* (provincial authorities). Moreover, the explanation given in the *Nihon shoki* states that emperors and empresses even enshrined Amaterasu Omikami in the palace, but that the might of the kami was too strong and she was moved to a separate location outside the palace. Even though emperors and empresses worshipped Amaterasu Omikami in their palaces, only a mirror representing the kami was actual enshrined in the palaces, and Amaterasu Omikami herself was enshrined at Ise Jingu. For ceremonies at Ise Jingu, the emperor or empress only sent representatives and did not travel there themselves. The first time that an emperor himself paid homage at Ise Jingu was in the third month of the second year of Meiji (1869) when the Meiji emperor visited the shrine on his way from Kyoto to Tokyo.

### **Was the reason to do with distance? Even when emperors and empresses abdicated and retired some visited Kumano tens of times or more.**

The emperors and empresses of the Heian and Kamakura periods often made imperial excursions to important shrines near the capital, such as the Kamo Jinja, Iwashimizu Hachimangu and Hie Jinja (now the Hiyoshi Taisha). But even on those occasions they could not enter the area of the shrine itself. They

confined themselves within a temporary structure outside the shrine, sent a noble as their representative to pay homage before the kami, and waited there for the many hours until the ceremonies were finished.

### **Why did they keep a polite distance?**

For the people of ancient and medieval times the kami were fearsome beings. Of course modern people have lost this sense, and even by early modern times those in the imperial court had too. Imperial visits to shrines ceased at the end of the Namboku-cho era (c. 1336–1392), then were revived five hundred years later during the crisis at the end of the Tokugawa shogunate. Emperor Komei travelled to the Kamo Shrine and Iwashimizu Hachimangu to pray for victory in battle against foreign countries. But rather than not approaching the shrine buildings, he penetrated deep into the interior to pay homage in the same place where the Shinto priests offer their ritual prayers.

### **That change in the way people felt was a precondition for the Meiji Emperor visiting Ise Jingu, wasn't it?**

Present day Shinto only refers to the blessings of the kami. And this is the character of early-modern and later "pure Shinto." Yet before that, and especially during ancient times, the kami were beings who brought the blessings of bountiful sea catches and harvests, but at the same time also caused torments in the form of natural disasters and other untoward events. The thing that the ancients feared most was irregular weather such as droughts and long spells of rain. Of course, that was because such natural events would interfere with the rice harvest. In the towns and cities, there was a big threat from epidemic disease, in particular smallpox. Fires were also considered a natural calamity. In the legends, these natural menaces are symbolically represented by the kami Susanoo no Mikoto who so grieved and moaned over the death of his mother Izanami no Mikoto that "his crying withered the green mountains and dried the rivers and seas," and "sent many of the people to an early death."

When a natural disaster or epidemic occurred it was an important duty of the imperial court to conduct divinations to find out which kami had inflicted the torment, and to calm their anger. For example, if Mount Fuji (the kami Asama no Ookami) erupted, that district's officials (the Suruga and Kai lords for Mount Fuji) and priests would be held responsible, as the rituals may have been insufficient.

Even the person at the very top of the administrative system, namely the emperor or empress, was often personally punished by the kami. It is said that when Empress Saimei was on her way to subjugate the Korean kingdom of Silla, she encountered the wrath of the local kami in northern Kyushu. Those accompanying her died in droves, and finally the Empress herself died. There was an extremely tense relationship between the emperor or empress and the kami. Among these, the one-on-one relationship with Amaterasu Omikami ensured the legitimacy of rule, but at the same time the kami was an extremely fearsome presence.

### **The ancients would have considered even such events as the recent Kyushu earthquake as punishments from the kami, wouldn't they?**

It is not possible to understand ancient Shinto without also understanding this terror of natural disasters, and since the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011 I have begun to think it necessary to future Shinto too. Thanks for blessings and fear of natural disasters or punishment: it was from these two that were born the attitudes of awe and moderation that acted as a base for the formation of Shinto.

During lessons with students too I ask, "Why has Shinto survived up to the present day without dying

out?” Personally I think the following three things are important: (1) Local rituals; (2) Rituals performed by the Emperor or Empress; (3) Handing down of ancient documents (records of the ancient nation and shrines).

1) It was shrines that were responsible for local rituals as Japan’s agricultural society was built. As the four seasons progressed smoothly they held *yoshuku* (celebrations in advance of the harvest), then gave thanks. And on the other hand of course, the prevalence of natural disasters was a reason why shrines and Shinto were necessary. The holding of shrine ceremonies helped communities get back on their feet and was a symbol of the ability to recover. In fact, there are a number of examples of this from the present-day process of reconstruction in north-east Japan. We must not forget the point that Shinto almost never considers the after-life. The world after death is left to Buddhism while Shinto is directed towards being positive and living on in this world.

2) The continuity of the rituals performed by the Emperor or Empress is the reason for their importance. These are: the annual Niiname-sai (in November when the Emperor performs a harvest thanksgiving ceremony); the Jinkonjiki (in June and December when the Emperor conducts a ceremonial meal with Amaterasu Omikami); and the Daijosai (a large-scale ceremonial observance by a newly enthroned Emperor in which he offers newly harvested rice to the deities—this is observed only once in an emperor’s reign). The continuation of these ceremonies in the imperial palace has preserved the Shikinen Sengu at Ise Jingu and the form of present-day Shrine Shinto. Conversely, if a supreme ruler like Oda Nobunaga had managed to supplant the Emperor, the rituals performed by the Emperor would have ceased. There is a strong possibility Shinto would have merged with folk beliefs, i.e. the manners and customs that make up the everyday lives of Japanese people.

3) The continuity of ancient documents, such as the *Kojiki*, *Nihon shoki* and *Engi shiki* refers to the preservation and study of records of the nation and shrines. During medieval times, this was undertaken by Buddhist priests or the Urabe clan of government officials of Jingikan or the priests of Ise Jingu. In the early modern period, the study of ancient Japanese literature and culture has moved research into the documents forward and made new progress. Prayers must be recited at Shinto rituals, and it is thanks to the continuity of these ancient documents that present-day priests can both compose and read prayers in the ancient style of Japanese language.

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