Ise Jingu (long version)

Ise Jingu is the most important *jinja* (Shinto shrine) complexes in Japan. Japan’s indigenous Shinto faith is based around paying respects to *kami,* deities that reside in the natural world, in every being and every person. Ise Jingu, officially known as “Jingu,” is composed of 125 *jinja*, centered around the Naiku and Geku. These are dedicated to Amaterasu-Omikami (the sun deity) and Toyo’uke-no-Omikami (the deities of food, clothing, and shelter) respectively.

According to legend, Ise Jingu, was established approximately 2,000 years ago by Yamatohime-no-Mikoto, the daughter of Emperor Suinin. Prior to that, Amaterasu-Omikami was worshipped in the imperial palace located in the ancient capital of Nara. When an epidemic spread through Nara, it was decided that Amaterasu-Omikami’s sacred mirror (one of the three imperial regalias of Japan) should be moved to a more appropriate location to placate the deities. Princess Yamatohime-no-Mikoto was sent on a mission to find a place where the sun deity could be enshrined. After searching for over twenty years, she arrived in Ise. She is said to have received a revelation besides the Isuzugawa River and decided that this was the perfect place. The Naiku was then constructed.

Every twenty years, both the Naiku and Geku, as well as fourteen affiliated *jinja* called *betsugu*, are rebuilt. This process is called *Shikinen Sengu* and is the most important ritual at Ise Jingu. It is an ancient tradition dating back to 690 when Emperor Tenmu decreed that the Naiku should be rebuilt. Each *jinja* is rebuilt next to the old one, which is why the *jinja* in Ise Jingu appear to be located to the left or right of their plot. After construction is completed, a ceremony is held to move the deities from the old *jinja* to the new. Only then is the old *jinja* carefully disassembled piece by piece. This process is carried out to make sure that the wooden buildings of Ise Jingu remain both eternal and fresh. It also helps make sure that many ancient techniques of *jinja* building continue to be handed on from generation to generation.

The 62nd Shikinen Sengu was conducted in 2013. The Ujibashi Bridge on the way to Ise Jingu was also rebuilt. Its walkways and railings are made from Hinoki cypress and the piers from water-resistant Japanese zelkova. All the *jinja* are constructed using new cypress wood. However, parts of Ise Jingu’s old *jinja* are often reused. The large *torii* gate that is seen before Ujibashi Bridge is constructed from reclaimed cypress. Some of the wood from deconstructed Ise Jingu is also sent to other *jinja* buildings around Japan.

Around ninety years ago, a 200-year cypress-planting project was started by the Ise Jingu Secretariat with the aim of providing all the wood for the rebuilding from Ise Jingu’s own forests. These efforts meant that a quarter of the wood used for the most recent Shikinen Sengu in 2013 could be sourced from Ise’s forest. The rest was obtained from Kiso in Nagano and Gifu Prefecture. Ise-Shima National Park was founded in 1946 to protect Ise Jingu and its forest following World War II.

Since the early times, residents have thanked the Ise Jingu deities for nature’s blessings through ceremonies. One of the most important of these ceremonies is Kanname-sai. Rice is a staple food in Japan. According to legend, the first rice was given to the people by Amaterasu-Omikami’s grandson. Every year, Ise Jingu’s Shinto priests make an offering of the first rice grown at Ise Jingu to Amaterasu-Omikami. This rice is grown in a special field irrigated by the waters of the Isuzugawa River which runs through the forests of Ise Jingu. This is such an important tradition that rice farmers from all over Japan also make offerings at Ise Jingu.