**Onda (Sacred Rice Paddy)**

Rice and religion are closely connected in Japan. The growing season begins and ends with Shinto rituals—rice seedlings are planted in a ceremony to pray for a good harvest, and festivals are held to thank the gods for the bounty. This ancient rice paddy just south of Sumiyoshi Taisha’s main shrines is used to grow the sacred rice used in offerings to the shrine’s deities.

According to traditional accounts, the Onda paddy dates to the shrine’s establishment in 211. Sumiyoshi Taisha’s founder, the legendary empress-regent Jingū, is said to have invited specially trained “planting maidens,” or *ueme*, from western Honshu to tend the shrine’s rice paddies.

On most days, the paddy is a quiet spot—a rare outpost of agricultural Japan amid the metropolitan sprawl of Osaka. Historically, Sumiyoshi Taisha controlled many rice fields, but with the modernization of the city, only Onda remains. Researchers have found a diverse mix of plants in the paddy, including *hamahiegaeri* (*Polypogon fugax*), a grass that only grows in salty soil—a reminder that Osaka Bay once extended to the shrine’s doorstep.

**Otaue Shinji Ceremony**

Every year on June 14, the festive Otaue Shinji rice-planting ceremony is held at the normally serene Onda. Among Japan’s best-known rice planting rites, the Otaue Shinji ceremony faithfully preserves the original form of the ritual dating back to Sumiyoshi Taisha’s earliest days—down to tilling the field with oxen and planting rice seedlings by hand.

The Otaue Shinji begins with a purification ritual for the rice seedlings and the participants*.* The paddy is then tilled by decorated oxen pulling wooden plows and purified with water. As women dressed as *ueme* plant the sacred rice, dancers and musicians in colorful costumes perform at the edges of the paddy. The liveliness and energy of the festival is said to imbue the seedlings with strength and vigor.