

Culture (long version)

For thousands of years, the sun deity Amaterasu-Omikami has been worshipped in Japan as a symbol of the sun, one of nature's blessings essential to life. As Japan's most sacred *jinja* (Shinto shrine) complex, Ise Jingu in Ise-Shima lies at the center of this belief.

Today, Ise-Shima's culture is still characterized by ancient rituals and festivals giving thanks for harvests and catches. These festivals are held in and around Ise Jingu. One of them, Ise Jingu's Kanname-sai festival, celebrates the offering of the first rice grown every October. Fishermen and female divers known as *ama* visit shrines and temples to pray for safety at sea. Ise Jingu's associated shrine, Izawa-no-miya, is just one of the places of worship where fishing and agricultural communities can receive this blessing. Lively festivals celebrate people's health and the harvests.

In addition to Ise Jingu, Ise-Shima is home to many shrines and temples that remain closely interwoven with people's lives today. Mt. Aonome's Shofukuji Temple has long been a destination for local fishermen, *ama* divers, and merchants to pray for safety at sea. In January, the temple's Mifune Festival sees the offering of colorful flags, which celebrate abundant catches, from all over the country.

The Waraji Festival is held in Daio Town in mid-September. According to legend, a one-eyed monster called Dandarabotchi came to the town bringing strong winds and waves. To scare it away, a giant straw *waraji* (sandal) was made. The monster, upon seeing the sandal, thought that there was someone bigger than him locally and was scared away. Today, people make a three-meter-long straw sandal and float it out to sea from the beach at Suba. Daio Town is very close to the ocean, and historically these festivals were thought to have been held to ward off natural disasters.

Toshijima Island, in particular, is home to many unique and long-standing traditions. One of these is the *marubachi* mark. This symbol is made up of the character for the number eight (written 八) surrounded by a circle. This character is pronounced "hachi" as in Hachiman, the name of the deity worshipped by the island's fishing community. This mark is thought to protect residents from dangers at sea and bring good catches. The marks are repainted in the same spot every January as part of the Hachiman Festival.

Ama divers have their own symbols for warding off misfortune, called *seiman* and *doman*. *Seiman* is a star shape drawn in one stroke that is thought to repel sea demons. *Doman* is a lattice shape which represents eyes keeping watch on evil spirits. Tomokazuki, a demon in the form of an *ama* who beckons, is just one manifestation of the dangers of the sea in *ama* legends.

Above home and shop entrances in Ise-Shima, one often finds *shimenawa*. These traditional, sacred ropes are also believed to ward off evil spirits. They are primarily made from rice straw, representing gratitude for the rice harvest. Poisonous Japanese Andromeda, or thorned holly, are also added to the rope to repel evil spirits.

Traditional forms of entertainment, including Anori Bunraku, a type of Japanese puppet theater, still flourish in Ise-Shima. Bunraku combines narration, *shamisen* music (a traditional three-stringed instrument), and puppetry, to portray a story. The puppets themselves are sophisticated and extraordinarily lifelike, with movable features including eyebrows that make them expressive. Bunraku is thought to have already been performed in the seventeenth century and developed with the support of local merchants in the eighteenth century as the area flourished as a port between Edo (now Tokyo) and Osaka. The art form is still handed on from generation to generation today. Bunraku is performed every year on September 15th and 16th in the Anori Shrine grounds.