

【Mitsumine Jinja Shrine】

High in the scenic southern mountains of Chichibu, Mitsumine Jinja Shrine is one of the region's three preeminent sites of Shinto worship. Located in Chichibu Tama Kai National Park beside the trailhead for Mt. Kumotori, the shrine is a popular destination for both worshippers and hikers. Many travelers to Mitsumine Jinja stay at Kōunkaku, a hot-spring inn with a long tradition of accommodating weary pilgrims.

Like Hodosan Jinja Shrine in northern Chichibu, Mitsumine Jinja Shrine is said to have been founded around the first century by Prince Yamato Takeru no Mikoto, a son of Keikō, the legendary twelfth emperor of Japan. During a journey to subdue the eastern clans, the prince climbed a ridge to look out across the land. Struck by its beauty, he dedicated the site as a shrine to Izanami and Izanagi, the divine couple from Shinto mythology who created the Japanese islands. Afterward, Emperor Keikō named the shrine “Mitsumine,” meaning “three peaks”—a reference to the summits of Myōhō (1,332 m), Shiraiwa (1,921 m), and Kumotori (2,017 m), which form a distinctive outline to the east of the shrine.

The first formal worship at Mitsumine Jinja began during the late seventh century, when En no Gyōja (634–701), the founder of Shugendō, arrived on the mountain. Shugendō combines elements of Shinto, Daoism, Buddhism, and mountain asceticism. Many Shugendō deities are *gongen*, Shinto kami that are viewed as manifestations of Buddhist deities. Roughly a century later, the revered Buddhist monk Kūkai (774–835) carved a statue of the Eleven-Headed Kannon that was installed in a newly built Buddhist main hall beside the shrine.

From the Kamakura period (1185–1333), mountain ascetics (*yamabushi*) spread the fame and influence of Mitsumine Jinja, and powerful samurai patrons such as Hatakeyama Shigetada (1164–1205) and Nitta Yoshioki (1331–1358) donated land to the shrine. Mitsumine Jinja prospered until 1352, when it sheltered Yoshioki during his family's uprising against the Ashikaga military government. The victorious Ashikaga lords punished the shrine by seizing its lands and abolishing its priesthood.

Mitsumine Jinja Shrine was in decline until 1502, when the Shugendō priest Gekkan Dōman (dates unknown) set out on a 27-year pilgrimage to raise funds to rebuild it. His goal was finally achieved in 1533, when Emperor Go-Nara (1495–1557) designated Mitsumine Jinja Shrine a new regional head temple for the Tendai sect of Shugendō.

In 1720, the priest Nikkō Hōin (dates unknown) was meditating on the mountaintop when a number of wolves appeared. Interpreting them as an omen sent by

the mountain's deity, Hōin began to distribute wolf amulets as protection against fire, robbery, and crop destruction. Through these amulets, Mitsumine Jinja Shrine's fame was spread throughout the Kantō region. Today, in place of the *komainu* (lion-dog guardian figures) at most shrines, statues of wolves guard the entry to Mitsumine Jinja Shrine instead.

In 1868, the newly established Meiji government instituted a nationwide separation of Buddhist and Shinto institutions. Buddhist statues and trappings were removed from Mitsumine Jinja Shrine, and the entire complex was designated a purely Shinto site.

In the latter twentieth century, the shrine underwent renovations. In 1964, the Shinto worship hall and main sanctuary were renovated; in 1976, the Mt. Mitsumine Museum was completed; in 1983, the Kōunkaku lodge was added; and in 1991, a café was built in the former Buddhist main hall. In 2002, to commemorate the passage of 1,900 years since the shrine's founding and 500 years since Gekkan Dōman's arrival, the worship hall, main sanctuary, and main gate were relacquered, and their magnificent carvings were repainted.