

Fuji Faith in Western Japan

A Farming Village Festival in Ise

At Kiri-hara, Minami-ise, the Sengen Taisai is a mountain-opening festival for Mt. Sengen in neighboring Gokashoura. Among the mountainous coastal regions along the Kumano Sea, Kiri-hara is relatively rich in arable land.

The men who march to Mt. Sengen for the festival perform ablutions called *mizugori* for two weeks beforehand in the river that runs through the village. With cries of “*Yo, yo,*” they submerge themselves to the neck to remove their bodily impurities.

Villagers spend all night before the festival pounding mochi rice cakes together, keeping time with songs once sung by pilgrims to Mt. Fuji (*dochu-uta*). Communal making of rice cakes, known as *mochitsuki*, is common in farming villages, and shows that the Sengen Taisai festival is strongly linked to Kiri-hara’s tradition of rice cultivation.

On the day of the festival, the men continue to sing *dochu-uta* as they carry four pillars made of bamboo up Mt. Sengen. There are two “greater sacred pillars” (*ohei*) and two “lesser sacred pillars” (*kohei*), and all have white paper *shide* streamers tied to them. The villagers erect the two *kohei* halfway up the mountain, then remove their sandals and carry the two *ohei* to the summit. There they erect the *ohei* and recite sutras and mantras to formally welcome the deity Sengen-shin to the mountain and pray for an abundant harvest and peace in the village.