

Tōka Shinji

The Tōka Shinji is an ancient New Year's ritual with roots in China. It was performed at the imperial court during the Nara (710–794) and Heian (794–1185) periods and has been preserved in different forms at some Shinto shrines, notably Sumiyoshi Taisha and Atsuta Jingū in Nagoya.

The central rite is performed by two priests. One carries a plum branch and represents Ebisu, a god of wealth and patron of fishermen, while the other carries a bag of rice cakes and represents Daikokuten, another prosperity god who is seen as a patron of farmers. The priests begin by facing each other a short distance apart in front of Daiichi Hongū. They exchange greetings—a series of short call-and-response phrases—and take three steps forward each time until they have swapped places. (The word *tōka* combines the Chinese characters for “step” and “sing.”) The Daikokuten priest then presents his rice cakes to the Sumiyoshi Taisha deities.

In medieval times, a version of this stylized call-and-response ritual was taken up at secular celebrations, where it became known as *senzu manzai*. Regional variations developed, and *manzai* became a form of entertainment. Today, *manzai* refers to stand-up routines performed by pairs of comedians—a staple of Japanese show business, especially in Osaka.