

Otaue Shinji (Sacred Rice Planting)

Rice and religion are closely connected in Japan. In most places, the growing season starts and ends with Shinto rituals—ceremonial plantings to pray to the gods for the growth of rice seedlings and harvest festivals to thank the gods for the results. Sumiyoshi Taisha's rice-planting rite, the Otaue Shinji, is among Japan's best known. It has been faithfully preserved since ancient times.

The Otaue Shinji rite is said to date back to 211 when Sumiyoshi Taisha's founder, the legendary empress-regent Jingū, ordered a new rice paddy to be created and dedicated to the shrine's gods. She invited specially trained "planting maidens," or *ueme*, from western Honshu to tend the field. The same paddy, just southwest of the main shrine area, is still used for the rite today.

The Otaue Shinji begins with a ritual for purifying the rice seedlings and the participants in the rite. The sacred paddy is tilled by oxen pulling a wooden plow, then sprinkled with consecrated water. As the *ueme* plant the rice, dancers and musicians in colorful costumes perform at the edges of the paddy. Their energy is said to imbue the seedlings with health and vigor.

During the Edo period (1603–1867), women from the travelers' inns of nearby Sakai served as *ueme*. Many of these women, who were called *yūjo*, were skilled dancers and musicians, and the most accomplished were celebrities. In addition to planting rice, the *yūjo* would perform in the Otaue Shinji, receiving ritual purification through this display of their artistic talents. (Today, the role of *ueme* is taken by women in the performing arts from the Osaka area.)

The Otaue Shinji takes place every year on June 14. The government has designated it an Important Intangible Cultural Folk Asset.