

Ancient and Ever Renewed: The Spirit of Sustainability Passed Down at Ise Grand Shrine

Author

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[Brief background]

Born in Mie Prefecture, writer. Part-time lecturer at Kogakkan University. After serving as editor-in-chief of the Mie-based regional magazine *Ise-Shima*, she transitioned to a career in writing. She contributed the serialized column "Ise, the Eternal Sacred Place" to the monthly Shinkansen magazine, *Hitotoki*, for eight years. She covered the *Shikinen Sengu* ceremonies of 1993 and 2013 and has given lectures and written extensively on Ise Grand Shrine. Her publications include *Ise Jingu Shikinen Sengu Sanpai Guide* (A Visitor's Guide to the *Shikinen Sengu* of Ise Grand Shrine), *Ise Saigoku Sanjusan-sho Kannon Junrei: Mou Hitotsu no Oise Mairi* (The Ise Saigoku Thirty-Three Kannon Pilgrimage: Another Ise Journey), and *Megami no Seichi, Ise Jingu* (Ise Grand Shrine, the Sacred Land of the Goddess), which was selected by the National School Library Association of Japan. She has also served as a commentator for Mie Television and as a member of the Mie Prefecture Tourism Council.



In the "Biotechnology in Japan" series, we share contributions on Japanese culture and traditions. In this seventh installment, we feature an article by writer Kiyomi Chikusa, who has spent more than 30 years covering Ise Grand Shrine, exploring the history and significance of the *Shikinen Sengu* and the insights it offers for a sustainable society.

Sustainability has become a key concept of our time and is now regarded as an important consideration in many fields. The combination of Ise Grand Shrine, where deities are enshrined, and modern sustainability may seem unexpected. However, the shrine's largest ritual is called *Shikinen Sengu*. Held every 20 years, it involves rebuilding the shrine buildings and transferring the deities to newly constructed structures. This practice was first carried out 1,300 years ago. Despite interruptions that lasted more than 100 years and changes to the times and shifting values, the ritual has remained.

The first *Shikinen Sengu* was held in 690, over 1,300 years ago. Amid the influx of systems and cultures from China, including Buddhism, Empress Jito made a major shift by replacing the custom of relocating the palace with each imperial reign with the establishment of Fujiwara-kyo in present-day Nara, a permanent capital modeled after Tang China, while at the same time preserving a distinctly native Japanese Shinto tradition conceived by Emperor Tenmu of rebuilding Ise Grand Shrine every 20 years.

With this, two sacred sites were designated for rebuilding the shrine. There are two sites to the east

and west, and the shrine is moved from east to west and from west to east every 20 years. Through this repeated rebuilding, Ise is home to shrine buildings that are new yet take an ancient form. In other words, by renewing the buildings, the traditional, original form of the shrine has been preserved.

I covered the *Shikinen Sengu* in both 1993 and 2013. In particular, for the 62nd ceremony in 2013, I was able to continue reporting for nine years, covering 33 rituals and events associated with the *Sengu*, known as *Sengu-shosai*, as well as the rebuilding of auxiliary shrines.

Each *Sengu* brought with it a new key concept. In 1993 it was "kinari" culture, and in 2013 it was "tokowaka." Kinari refers to the concept of an "undecorated state in its natural form" and originates from unbleached cloth or thread. Indeed, the shrine buildings at Ise Grand Shrine are not painted vermilion or other colors as is so common in Japan, but are left as bare wood, showcasing the beautiful grain of the cypress. The elevated buildings in the Shinmei-zukuri style also feature almost no ornamentation aside from metal fittings. It is this extreme simplicity that defines the buildings. This use of plain, simple materials is said

to make rebuilding every 20 years possible and also allows materials to be reused more easily.

Tokowaka, written with the characters meaning "eternally young," expresses the belief that the revered deities should always reside in new, well-maintained shrines. I first heard this term from a Shinto priest at Ise Grand Shrine. Here, "young" does not refer to age, but to a sense of newness. This can also be seen as connected to Shinto's emphasis on purity. I believe this is one reason why the buildings are renewed even though they are not broken. This concept gained widespread support and was even used in the name of the Mie Tokowaka National Sports Festival*.

In recent years, Ise Grand Shrine has increasingly been discussed in connection with ideas such as sustainability and recycling. Essential to the *Shikinen Sengu* is the sacred cypress timber used for construction. The Yamaguchi Festival, the first of the *Sengu*-related rituals, prays to the mountain deities for safety when felling this timber. The

* It was canceled in 2021, but will be renewed as the National Sports Festival in 2035.

Sengu begins with the cutting of sacred timber from the mountains. Today, the timber is sourced from national forests in Nagano and Gifu prefectures. Rather than leaving mountain forests untouched, they are managed through planned logging and use, which helps ensure their long-term sustainability.

Last November, a tree planting festival was held on Mount Kamiji near the Inner Shrine by shrine staff. Led by the chief priest, shrine priests and shrine maidens clung to the mountain slopes and hand planted 700 three-year-old saplings grown from seeds taken from cypress trees on Mount Kamiji. I was surprised to learn that this tree planting festival began in 1950. It started the year after the 1949 *Shikinen Sengu* was postponed following the end of World War II. The saplings are planted with prayers that, 200 years from now, they will become the sacred pillars of the shrine buildings. I cannot help but feel that the shrine's approach to sustainability exists precisely because of the goal of being able to continue carrying out the *Shikinen Sengu*.



Tree planting festival held on November 18, 2025, in the Hanatsukidani area of Mount Kamiji. The aim of this festival is to cultivate cypress trees for use in the *Shikinen Sengu*.