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# On Shikinen Sengu, the Shinto Construction Ritual and the Environmental Psyche[1]

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## Introduction

Shinto, often described as the indigenous religion of Japan, stands as a unique spiritual tradition deeply intertwined with the natural world. Unlike many other major world religions, Shinto lacks a single founder, sacred texts, or a set of doctrines, although two scriptures about it are well-known, namely the Kojiki and the Nihon-Shoki, which were created much later in eighth century C.E. While not having a well-developed scripture or doctrines it nevertheless over a period of ten thousand years developed a sophisticated practices for harmonizing the psyche with nature.[2] In the Standford encyclopedia, it states:

> *Proto-Shintō* lacked philosophical reflection and even self-conscious articulation but is so named because today's Shintō has often claimed (sometimes disingenuously) a resonance with its main values, ritual forms, and world view. Dating back to preliterate times, proto-Shintō was more an amalgam of beliefs and practices lending cohesion to early Japanese communities. As such it largely resembled religions in ancient animistic and shamanistic cultures found elsewhere in the world.[3]

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[2] Thomas Kasulis, "Japanese Philosophy," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* eds. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (Spring 2025 Edition), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2025/entries/japanese-philosophy/.

[3] Helen Hardacre, *Shinto: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 13-15.

But it is my intention to consider Shinto not as an animistic religion but as an eco-centric religion. While *Kami* (神) is often translated as "gods" or "spirits," for our purposes, it can be more accurately understood as sacred essences that permeate all aspects of existence. As Yamakage Motohisa explains, *Kami* are the spirits that abide in and are worshipped at the shrines. But they are also spiritual essences that reside in the natural world, people, and Japanese nationhood."[4] It is often difficult for those in the Western monotheistic traditions to grasp the concept of *Kami*. They tend to translate *Kami* to the idea of God or gods, which is misleading. On one hand, it seems sufficient to translate *Kami* into the idea of a god because some people do worship natural objects as gods such as big rocks or trees while some go to structures and pray regularly like Christians do in church, where a god is dwelling. But many do not pray at these structures. They will instead visit such places to experience the awe of *Kami*. This is because the shrine and the spirit are one and the same.

For instance, *ki* (木) is a tree. And when a tree is cut down and fashioned into a shrine, *ki* (木=tree) becomes *Ki* (気=divine spirit). The tree as a natural entity and a tree as the wood in the shrine possess the same spirit. For the human psyche, nature becomes experienced in the process of the labor and technique involved in divine building. This subtle effects on the psyche allow human beings can perceive themselves as a cycle within nature. This will be discussed in connection with the Shikinen Sengu ritual.

## Historical Background of Shinto and its Development

The origins of Shinto, as found in its earliest forms, likely emerged from the animistic beliefs and practices of ancient Japanese agricultural communities. The term "Shinto" itself, composed of the Chinese characters for *Kami* (神) and "way" (道), which pronounced as Shinto in Japanese language, only came into use in the 6th century CE as a means of distinguishing indigenous Japanese practices from the newly introduced Buddhism.[3] This paper avoids debates concerning the relation between Buddhism and Shinto due to their complexity. However, the emergence of Buddhism in Japan influenced Shinto, giving it a more Buddhist character and has sometimes sidelined the older Shinto practices.

Archaeological evidence suggests that as early as the Jōmon period (14,000-300 BCE), the inhabitants of mainland Japan engaged in rituals and practices that would later be incorporated into Shinto. These included the worship of natural features such as mountains, trees, and rocks, as well as the veneration of ancestors and agricultural deities.[5] From Nara period and onwards, the syncretic practice of Shinbutsu-shūgō

[4] Motohisa Yamakage, *The Essence of Shinto: Japan's Spiritual Heart* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 2006), 130.

[5] Junko Habu, *Ancient Jomon of Japan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 142-145.

(神仏習合) emerged, blending Shinto and Buddhist elements in a uniquely Japanese religious synthesis.[6] However, the author will focus only on Shinto in this paper.

Several key concepts form the foundation of Shinto's worldview and its relationship with nature. *Kami* (神): Central to Shinto is the concept of *Kami*, often translated as "gods" or "spirits" but encompassing a much broader range of meanings. *Kami* can be natural phenomena (mountains, rivers, trees), legendary figures, ancestral spirits, or even abstract concepts like growth or harmony. Importantly, *Kami* are not seen as separate from the natural world but as immanent within it.[7]

We must be careful about the usage of Shintoism and Shinto. Shintoism tends to be more conceptual and rational, while Shinto suffices as a definition of religion and as a practical domain of living within nature. In other words, Shintoism is a smaller domain than Shinto, which includes not only the aspects of Shintoism but also the ineffable aspects of Shinto. Since the understanding of nature is fundamentally different from many Western religious and philosophical traditions, the author avoids using the term Shintoism as a religion, and instead uses Shinto as a religion and as a way of being in unison with the divine entity and being in unison with nature as a derivative of the divine entity. This is the main reason that Shinto cannot be separated from nature, though the main discussion focuses on Shinto within nature. Additionally, Shinto sees humans as an integral part of the natural world, intimately connected to and dependent upon it. Simply put, Shinto encompasses human existence within nature. This worldview shapes not only religious practices but also Japanese cultural attitudes toward the environment, including among those who are not as religious as followers of monotheistic religions.

In Shinto, the concept of *Kami* is intrinsically linked to natural phenomena. While *Kami* can include ancestral spirits and legendary figures, many of the most revered *Kami* are associated with natural features and forces. Mountains, rivers, trees, rocks, and even animals can be considered *Kami* or the dwelling places of *Kami*. This belief system effectively sacralizes the natural world, permeating it with spiritual significance.

For example, Mount Fuji, Japan's highest and most iconic mountain, is not just a geological feature but a powerful *Kami*. The mountain has its own shrines and is the focus of pilgrimage and ritual practices. Similarly, the sun is venerated as Amaterasu Ōmikami, the central deity in the Shinto pantheon and the mythological ancestor of the Japanese imperial line.

This intimate connection between *Kami* and nature fosters profound respect for the natural world. Destroying a forest or polluting a river is not merely an ecological crime but a spiritual transgression, potentially angering or disrupting the *Kami* that dwell there. As a result, conservation efforts in Japan often have a spiritual dimension alongside scientific and economic considerations.

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[6] Helen Hardacre, *Shinto: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 78-80.

[7] Sokyo Ono, *Shinto: The Kami Way* (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1962), 7-9.

The Japanese concept of *ki* (気) is multifaceted and central to understanding Shinto's view of nature. *Ki* can be translated variously as "energy," "spirit," or "life force," but it also means "tree" when written with a different character (木). This linguistic connection between energy or spirit and trees is not coincidental but reflects a deep-seated belief in the spiritual essence of nature.

In Shinto thought, *ki* permeates all of existence, animating both living and non-living entities. The importance of trees in Shinto is evident in the common practice of surrounding shrines with sacred forests.

The concept of *ki* also extends to human interactions with nature. Practices such as *shinrin-yoku* (森林浴, "forest bathing"), the act of immersing oneself in the atmosphere of a forest for health benefits, draw on this idea of *ki* as a vital energy that can be absorbed from nature. This practice, while not explicitly religious, has roots in the Shinto understanding of the restorative and purifying power of nature. In other words, trees have, in essence, spirit and energy that Japanese people appreciate, and in some instances, they hug trees, feeling that they are energized by embracing them.

## The Ise Jingu as a Shrine to our Unity with Nature

Ise Jingu, also known as the Grand Shrine of Ise, serves as a prime example of Shinto's profound connection with nature. As one of the most sacred sites in Shinto, Ise Jingu embodies many of the key principles that we have discussed thus far, particularly in its relationship with nature, the surrounding forest, and its unique rebuilding ritual. This section will explore how Ise Jingu exemplifies Shinto's nature-centric philosophy and will serve as the centerpiece of the main argument about the Shinto mindset of being human beings within nature.

First, Ise Jingu is not a single structure but a complex of over 100 shrines centered around two main sanctuaries: the Naiku (Inner Shrine), dedicated to Amaterasu Ōmi Kami, the sun goddess, and the Geku (Outer Shrine), enshrining Toyouke Ōmi Kami, the goddess of agriculture and industry. Located in Mie Prefecture, the shrine complex is surrounded by forests that are considered sacred and have been carefully preserved for centuries.[8]

Second, the origins of Ise Jingu are said to date back to the 3rd century CE. Its location was allegedly chosen by Yamatohime-no-mikoto, daughter of Emperor Suinin, after she spent years searching for a suitable site to enshrine Amaterasu Ōmi Kami. The site's selection was based on its natural beauty and spiritual power, reflecting the Shinto belief in the sacredness of certain natural locations.[9]

The forested environment of Ise Jingu is integral to its spiritual significance. The shrine areas are home to ancient cypress trees, some of which are over a thousand years

[8] Hiroko Yoshino, "A Continued Study of the Ise Shrine; Its Festivals and Constellation: In Relation to Ritual and Constellation," *Japanese Journal of Ethnology* 40, no. 1 (1975): 1-2.

[9] David Kidner, *Nature and Psyche* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), 236.

old. These trees, known as *shin-boku* (神木, "divine trees"), are considered sacred and are believed to be dwelling places of *Kami*.

The architecture of Ise Jingu itself speaks volumes about the Japanese understanding of humanity's place within nature. The shrine buildings, constructed entirely of wood without the use of nails, seem to grow organically from the forest floor. This construction method, known as *yuitsu-shinmei-zukuri*, is more than an architectural style; it is a philosophy that acknowledges the impermanence of human creations in the face of nature's eternal cycles. The use of natural, unfinished materials allows the structures to age and weather alongside the surrounding trees, blurring the line between the man-made and the natural.

To truly understand the profound connection between Shinto and nature, one must experience the journey through the sacred grounds of Ise Jingu. As one approaches this grand shrine complex, the most sacred site in Shinto, one is immediately welcomed by the dense, ancient forest that surrounds it. Especially in the morning, the air becomes noticeably fresher, filled with the crisp scent of cypress, as if the very atmosphere is purifying one's body and soul. Additionally, one can immediately experience a sense of spirituality without words or any conceptualizations. With each step deeper into the shrine precincts, the noisy sounds of the modern world fade away, replaced by the gentle rustle of leaves and the soft crunch of gravel underfoot.

Ise Jingu is not merely a collection of buildings, but a living embodiment of Shinto's relationship with the utmost important nature. The shrine complex is seamlessly integrated into its natural surroundings. Here, the Japanese concept of 畏れ (*osore*), which encompasses both fear and respect, becomes noticeable. As one walks among towering cypress trees, one can't help but feel a sense of awe at the immense presence within the vast forest. These ancient sentinels, *shin-boku* or "divine trees," are not just silent observers but active participants in the spiritual landscape, believed to be dwelling places of *Kami*.

As one stands before these sacred buildings, one comes to a profound realization: the shrines, despite their great spiritual significance, are fundamentally composed of the same material as the forest around them. This symbiosis between the built and natural environment is a vivid illustration of the Shinto belief that humans are not separate from nature, but an integral part of it. It's a stark contrast to the Western notion of conquering or subduing nature for the sake of wealth. Instead, it emphasizes coexistence and harmony.

As one leaves the inner precincts of the shrine, one carries with oneself a renewed sense of one's place within the natural world. The experience encapsulates the essence of Shinto within nature—a complex interplay of reverence and caution, gratitude and humility.

This perspective is a worldview that sees Shinto not as an "-ism" or a set of beliefs imposed upon nature, but as a way of being that exists within nature. The lesson of Ise Jingu is clear: we are not stewards of nature, but participants in it. Our actions, our structures, our very lives are part of nature's cycles, and our role is to harmonize with these cycles rather than attempt to control them.

## Shikinen Sengu, the Construction Ritual

The most striking demonstration of Ise Jingu's connection to nature and the concept of renewal is the religious ritual of Shikinen Sengu. Every 20 years, the main sanctuary structures are completely rebuilt on adjacent plots. This practice has been carried out for over 1,300 years, with the most recent renewal completed in 2013 (the 62nd iteration) and the next scheduled for 2033.[10]

The Shikinen Sengu process, a profound embodiment of Shinto principles, unfolds through a series of meticulously crafted stages that seamlessly blend ritual, craftsmanship, and ecological awareness. This process begins with the careful selection and harvesting of cypress trees from dedicated forests in Ise Shrine—a task imbued with spiritual significance. The choice of each tree is not just a practical consideration but a sacred act, recognizing the tree's role in bridging the human and divine realms.

Following this, skilled artisans—heirs to techniques passed down through generations—begin the construction of new shrine buildings adjacent to the existing structures. This phase is not simply a matter of architectural replication but a living transmission of cultural knowledge and spiritual practice. The construction itself becomes a form of worship, each precise cut and join a testament to the craftsmen's devotion and the enduring connection between human skill and divine inspiration.

The culmination of this process is marked by a solemn ceremony in which the sacred mirror is transferred from the old sanctuary to the new. The illustration below shows the new site built adjacent to the old one. After twenty years, a new shrine will be built on the old site, and this process will be repeated every twenty years.

Ise Jingu, also known as the Grand Shrine of Ise[11]

[10] Nina Konovalov, *The Constant Renovation of Ise Shrine* (Project Bikal, 2025), 38.

[11] See Goo Blog. https://blog.goo.ne.jp/ganbaro433/e/eab504c3b4e42353ad48f3e3dec2e0d4

This process of renewal and transfer embodies the Shinto concept of renewal without loss of essence. The material of the shrines—trees with natural spiritual energy (*ki*)—contains spiritual energy (*ki*) within the shrines themselves. It becomes oneness, and there is no loss of nature because there is an abundance of trees that will continue to grow for over a thousand years. It is a process whereby, at a certain time, spiritual trees become a spiritual shrine.

This cyclical rebuilding serves as a significant expression of this eco-centric religion. At its core, it symbolizes the renewal of the *Kami's* power and the purification of sacred space, mirroring the regenerative cycles observed in the natural world. For those who may wonder whether this ritual of cutting down trees every twenty years is sustainable or not—it is sustainable. The data shows the whole consumption of trees per cubic meters is 33,000 cubic meters for each ritual, while the ceremony has been conducted more than eleven times.[12] The size of the shrines is dwarfed by the forest surrounding them. Therefore, this ritual is proven to be sustainable. Additionally, the process ensures the preservation of traditional natural resources and building techniques, maintaining a living link with ancient practices and knowledge during the ritual.

## Psychological Construction

This aspect of Shikinen Sengu serves not only an architectural purpose but also a psychological and cultural one, representing the Japanese concept of "living heritage," where skills and knowledge are preserved through active practices rather than passive conservation of the building and land. The twenty-year building cycle reflects both the longevity of the divine house and the generational cycle of human beings, as one generation passes their culture and techniques to the next. Human beings who participate in this ritual can ultimately feel how new trees are integrated into the shrine as a new spirit being born from nature. It is a psychological renewal of tradition, making it something living.

Secondly, by witnessing the ritual, human beings' solidarity within nature increases. For example, when the ritual occurs every 20 years, children, parents, and grandparents (and sometimes one older generation) can experience the sacred moment together. Also, when the children become grandparents, they can witness the ritual with their grandchildren, remembering the time they experienced with their grandparents as well. These generational activities make human beings humble toward nature. The activities also provide humans with the perspective that all food is obtained by harvesting, and all materials for making tools come from nature. This consequently results in a human psyche that recognizes all machinery and infrastructure made by those tools ultimately come from nature.

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[12] T. Nakajima and N. Shiraishi, "Application of Local Yield Table Construction System to a Timber Self-Supply Production Strategy in Ise Shrine Forest with Special Focus on the Shikinen Sengu Ceremony," *Journal of the Japanese Forest Society* 89, no. 1 (2007): 24.

As David Kidner critically observes in his book *Nature and Psyche*, contemporary theoretical approaches often fail to recognize the complex interplay between individual, social, and natural orders. He argues against reductive, socially deterministic perspectives that systematically deny the intricate construction of individuality through the interweaving of cultural and natural factors.[13]

Kidner's subsequent reflection offers a transformative conceptual framework. He advocates for an understanding that recognizes an intrinsic, dynamic relationship between internal psychological landscapes and external natural environments.[14] As he eloquently articulates, what is required is a conceptual approach that maintains its autonomy from social determination while acknowledging the fundamental relation-seeking property inherent in human nature—a perspective that perceives the internal natural self as perpetually reaching toward integration with the external natural world, with such integration being crucial to holistic human development.[15]

This philosophical stance resonates profoundly with the ritual's deeper purpose: to reconstruct the severed connection between human consciousness and ecological systems. The ceremonial practice becomes a mechanism for restoring what Kidner conceptualizes as an essential integrative process—bridging the artificial divide between internal psychological experience and external natural reality.

Drawing from Joel Kovel's insights, Kidner emphasizes the necessity of retaining an instinct-like concept that cannot be divorced from the realm of nature or transhistorical experience.[16] This perspective aligns closely with the ritual's profound function of reconnecting humans with their ecological context, challenging the anthropocentric worldview that has increasingly alienated individuals from fundamental natural systems.

The ritual serves as a phenomenological reminder of the complex processes through which humans transform natural materials into technological artifacts. Consider, for instance, the metallurgical processes of iron extraction and manipulation. Iron ore is extracted, subjected to thermal transformation, repeatedly forged through percussive techniques, and strategically cooled to enhance structural integrity. The phenomenological reminder refers to the actualization of a wooden shrine solely built from trees with spirit. It may be difficult for an anthropocentric psyche to perceive that trees contain spirit, but a nature-centric psyche can recognize that spiritual trees become man-made shrines which dwell spirituality within them. Human labor to make the shrine is also a spiritual act not detached from nature; that is, human labor is also an activity within nature because human consciousness is within nature in this process.

For example, it is probably difficult for an anthropocentric psyche to understand that trees and concrete contain spirit and that they can be transformed into a church. However, a nature-centric psyche can perceive that material from nature is the church

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[13] David Kidner, *Nature and Psyche*, 237.

[14] Kidner, 237.

[15] Kidner, 236.

[16] Motohisa Yamakage, *The Essence of Shinto: Japan's Spiritual Heart* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 2006), 156-158.

itself, where spirituality was transferred and remains, even if the materials no longer maintain their original shape and have changed into a totally different structure.

Finally, this rebuilding has another effect as well. The recurring need for high-quality wood has fostered sustainable forestry practices, contributing significantly to the preservation of Japan's forests. This demonstrates how spiritual practices can have tangible, positive impacts on the environment as well as human consciousness, offering a model of how cultural traditions can align with environmental problems.

Ultimately, the ritual reminds us of fundamental ecological principles. Natural systems are characterized by regenerative capacities and sustainable longevity. If human interventions are calibrated to respect reproductive cycles—harvesting resources only to the extent that natural regeneration can occur—ecological equilibrium can be maintained. In an era of unprecedented environmental crisis, this understanding of human-nature relationships becomes significant. By counterbalancing anthropocentric ideologies that prioritize economic incentive models, such cultural practices can potentially reorient human civilization toward more symbiotic modes of ecological engagement—precisely the vision Kidner expressed in his profound reconfiguration of human-nature interconnectedness.

The Shikinen Sengu practice thus stands as a powerful embodiment of the Shinto principle of constant renewal and the intimate and reciprocal relationship between human beings and nature—or rather, the relationship of human beings within nature. It offers significant insights into alternative paradigms of natural resources around us, challenging conventional Western notions of preservation and sustainability; i.e., the anthropocentric idea that we, human beings, have authority to control natural resources and that whoever found them first can have rights to own them as their properties—an idea often seen after the Industrial Revolution and economic expansionism.

The long-lived Shinto view of nature is dualistic, recognizing both its benevolent and destructive aspects. This duality is fundamental to understanding the Japanese relationship with the natural world. Even today, many Japanese maintain small household shrines (*kamidana*, 神棚) where they make daily offerings of rice, water, and sake to the *Kami*, acknowledging their dependence on nature's gifts.[17]

Simultaneously, Shinto recognizes the destructive power of nature. Japan's geographical location makes it prone to earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, and typhoons. In Shinto belief, these natural disasters are often associated with the wrath of certain *Kami* or viewed as a disruption in the balance of humans within nature.

## Conclusion

Shinto's relationship with nature, or Shinto within nature, is multifaceted and profound, permeating Japanese spiritual practices, cultural expressions, and everyday life. From the sacred forests of Ise Jingu to the seasonal rituals marking the agricultural

[17] Michael Ashkenazi, *Matsuri: Festivals of a Japanese Town* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993), 45-47.

calendar, from the aesthetic principles guiding garden design to contemporary environmental conservation efforts, the influence of Shinto's nature-centric worldview is pervasive.

This intimate connection with nature fosters a unique perspective that recognizes both the nurturing and destructive aspects of the natural world. It encourages an attitude of respect, gratitude, and cautious coexistence with nature, rather than an attempt to conquer or exploit it. While anthropocentric religions tend to perceive nature as distinct from human civilization, Shinto, as a nature-centric religion, perceives human beings as a part of nature or within nature. Nature is not distinct from human activity. Therefore, for human beings to reverse the environmental crisis, we should recognize that human activity *is* nature, and that the decline of nature through the environmental crisis is the decline of human beings. It also recognizes that the natural environment most likely possesses the ability to recover its balance by itself. The Shinto mindset considers the fragile human condition and the psychic necessity of *osore* (respect and fear) towards nature as a condition of harmony.

As global environmental concerns become increasingly pressing, this paper illustrates that Shinto's approach to nature offers valuable insights. Its emphasis on living in harmony with natural cycles, its recognition of the spiritual value of natural phenomena, and its model of conservation through sacred spaces all provide alternative frameworks for considering human-nature relationships.

However, the research also explained that Shinto, like any religion, has its complexities and contradictions. Its principles don't always translate directly into environmental action, and Japanese big cities face challenges in maintaining connections with nature in an age of global capitalism, which includes mass production, mass consumption, mass waste, and so forth. Having said that, some of Shinto's spirit still exists in many Japanese people who reside in urban cities. That is why Shinto has attracted many pilgrims to Ise Jingu in recent years.

Therefore, the enduring influence of Shinto's nature-centric philosophy in Japanese culture demonstrates the potential for spiritual and cultural values to shape environmental attitudes and practices globally. As the world seeks sustainable ways of living in the face of ecological crises, the Shinto perspective on nature offers a compelling alternative to dominant anthropocentric paradigms of environmental management.

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