

Nagoshi-no-Oharai: A Traditional Ritual

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Hersom is a second-year student at Starr King School for the Ministry. Recipient of the 2004 Tsubaki Grand Shrine Scholarship, *Hersom* traveled to Japan to live in this Shinto community that dates back to 3 B.C.E.

Shinto is the national religion of Japan. In his book, *The Way of the Kami*, the Rev. Dr. Yukitaka Yamamoto, 96th chief priest of the Tsubaki Grand Shrine, wrote that “Shinto is as old as the mountains. . . the way in which the natural spirituality of the Japanese people finds expression. . . It is the way of expressing the flow of life.” During my trip to the Tsubaki Grand Shrine in the summer of 2004, I experienced firsthand the Shinto’s natural spirituality and flow of life.

While living at the shrine for 42 days, I participated in ritual prayers called *Oharahi-no-Kotba*, which have been chanted every day for over 2,000 years. On June 30, I also took part in the *Nagoshi-no-Oharai*, a *Nen-chu-Gyo-ji* or year-round discipline ritual that’s part of an annual activity cycle occupying the life of priests at Shinto shrines. In Japan this cycle gives life its seasonal context. Because the *Nagoshi-no-Oharai* falls between rice sowing and harvest, this ritual is a time of relaxation and community celebration.

There are many other rituals and festivals at Shinto shrines. Some, like the *Nagoshi-no-Oharai*, are celebrated at every shrine. However, each shrine also has its own special rituals and observances created over centuries.

Ron Hersom, in traditional Japanese dress, stands in front of a rice field.



The key to all rituals performed in Shinto is the harmony between heaven and earth. The rituals create the space and process whereby you can return to the fullness of the inborn *Kami* — the divine in each person. In Shinto, the *Kami* is the object of reverence. A word that cannot be translated adequately into English, its most common translation is “God.” However, Stuart D. B. Picken writes in his “Historical Dictionary of Shinto” that “Divinity, the divine, or the mysterious are better candidates because they are less specific in the imagery they generate.”

During the *Nagoshi-no-Oharai*, the *Torii* pathway leading to the Tsubaki Grand Shrine is transformed with hundreds of people attending this ritual. The *Torii* gateways are a distinctive symbol of Shinto and represent a gateway between heaven and earth. Although stylized over the centuries, the original gateway was most likely a simple rope hung between the trees or posts to mark an area considered sacred. At the Tsubaki Grand Shrine, there are a succession of *Torii* leading up to the *Honden*, (the main worship hall), where the rituals are conducted. This *Honden* holds about 75 people and is built in the classical style of plain, unpainted Japanese cypress, with a stylized roof distinguished by ridge posts.



The chi-no-wa, a sacred circle of rope through which Shinto priests and worshippers pass.

Along the sides of the gravel *Torii* pathway hang ropes tied with white paper streamers, called *gohei*, signifying the boundary of sacred space. The *gohei* are made in different sizes by the Shinto priests and are also considered sacred.

Nagoshi-no-Oharai is a purification ritual that includes walking through a circle of rope. A large sacred ring, called *chi-no-wa*, made of loosely twisted miscanthus reeds, is constructed in front of the *Honden*. There are numerous purification rituals as people wait for the start of the *Nagoshi-no-Oharai*. When they complete their daily *Oharahi-no-Kotba*, the worshippers line the *Torii* pathway in anticipation of the afternoon ritual service. While the main purification service for the *Nagoshi-no-Oharai* was

taking place this particular day, we could hear thunder rumbling in distant skies. All the worshippers lining the *Torii* pathway continued to wait patiently.

The *Nagoshi-no-Oharai* ritual begins in the main worship hall with the traditional *Oharai* prayers and purification. This day, speakers were set up outside to accommodate the nearly 1,000 people

who lined the Torri pathway. During the purification ritual, the Shinto priests cascade *kirinusa* (small cut pieces of sacred rope and cloth) onto all the worshippers in the *Honden*. Some priests then run out of the *Honden* and through the crowd lining the pathway, tossing *kirinusa* on them.

Following the *Ohara-no-Kotobai*, the 97th chief priest (*Guji*), the Rev. Yukiyasu Yamamoto, leads all the other priests, who carry crates of paper dolls, three times through the *chi-no-wa* in a figure eight pattern. Worshippers follow behind a reed boat (*kaya-fune*) carried by a senior priest. They know their routine in the ritual, a yearly tradition that passes from generation to generation, and wait patiently in silence for their opportunity to walk through the circle of reeds. This gentle, respectful procession reflects the learned knowledge of all participants. Passing through the *chi-no-wa*, although complex, is executed smoothly and is an amazing to watch.

The paper dolls in the crates come from all those who have visited the Tsubaki Grand Shrine in the previous six months with special prayers, impurities, pollution, uncleanness, concerns or indulgences called *tsumi*. Each paper doll includes the name of the person, his or her birthday and a personal stamp. The Japanese use stamps in their daily lives to identify paperwork and bills. When you receive or pay for something, you get the stamp of the person who processed it, confirming that you have seen the document. These paper dolls are symbolic of a person's *tsumi* and have been purified at the Tsubaki Grand Shrine before they're carried by the Shinto priest through the circle of reeds and then to the riverbank.

After completing the walk through the circle of reeds, the priests go to a location on the river close to the shrine. Over the days leading up to the ritual, the priests have created a sacred space along the riverbank by hanging rope with *gohei* across the river. Along the far shoreline, a priest also places a large pole with hanging *gohei*.

The Rev. Yamamoto leads the *Nagoshi-no-Oharai* at the river.

The Shinto chief priest flings salt into the river.



Tsubaki Grand Shrine was established over 2,000 years ago and has been the site of the same daily Shinto purification rituals since, including the *Nagoshi-no-Oharai*.

In all Shinto purification rituals, sake and salt are used. The chief priest (*Guji*) sprays these into the sacred river water while reciting prayers. During a Shinto purification ritual called *misogi*, individuals stand under a waterfall. Then the priests drink sake and salt from a cup and spray it into the waterfall. The *Guji* also make an offering to the *Kami* by presenting a Japanese evergreen – *sakaki* – the same offering presented at all Shinto shrines.

After the river purification is completed, the priests fling the paper dolls into the air like hundreds of white petals and let them float to the sea, signifying the release of impurities. This day the *kayafune*, the reed boat, got stuck in the river rocks and had to be dislodged. Even in rituals performed many times over the centuries, not everything goes perfectly.

The *Nagoshi-no-Oharai* ritual represents the continuous process of renewal that occurs throughout our lives. For the Japanese, this ritual can be done everyday and has been for over 2,000 years.