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God's Home Gets Rehab, and Japan Sneaks Peek

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IZUMO, [Japan](#) — With the longtime occupant safely moved out of the main building and ensconced in temporary housing, long-needed renovations could begin here at Izumo Taisha, one of Japan's oldest and most famous Shinto shrines.

But not before a once-in-a-lifetime open house of sorts was held. For the first time in six decades, Izumo's main shrine — the house of a Shinto god who, wrapped in a piece of cloth, was moved to a temporary shrine in April — was opened to the general public.

Since then, hundreds of thousands of people have journeyed to this remote corner of western Japan to peek into the main shrine, as well as into the inner workings of a religion that, despite its ties to Japan's founding myths, remains a mystery to many Japanese.

The cost of the renovations — in particular the roof, made of the bark of Japanese cypress, which needed to be rethatched — will exceed \$73 million, with about a third to be borne by taxpayers. Repairs to the shrine, classified a national treasure, will start soon and take five years, during which it will remain closed to visitors.

“Then the god will return here, so it won't be possible for human beings to come inside in a carefree manner and sully the place,” said Kunimaro Senge, 34, the son of Izumo's chief priest and his expected successor.

The main shrine will be closed, again, to all but Shinto priests and members of the imperial family until the next renovations. “People will have to wait another 60 years,” Mr. Senge added.

One recent day, visitors to the shrine seemed lulled by the fierce summer heat, their voices barely audible above the drone of the cicadas and the squeaks of songbirds in the trees outside the shrine's moss-covered walls. The day before, one visitor had fainted from the heat.

The midday sun's harsh light emphasized the main shrine's wan, wooden facade and the balding patches on its high-pitched roof. Fifteen steep stairs lead up to the structure, which rests on nine pillars made of tree trunks. Inside, seven clouds are painted on the shrine's ceiling, a bright contrast to the exterior's austerity. And an inner wall facing the entrance hides the exact spot where the god had rested.

Like most visitors interviewed, Satoshi Kadowaki, 20, who saw the main shrine with his parents, said that he had not felt moved spiritually but that he had more than satisfied his curiosity.

“I'd never thought I could see the inside of this place,” Mr. Kadowaki said. “So in my high school yearbook, I wrote down that my dream was to enter the main shrine.”

According to Japanese myth, the shrine's main god, Okuninushi no Mikoto, ruled over this world but yielded it to the divine ancestors of the imperial family. No one knows the shrine's exact age, though pillars dating from the 13th century were discovered underground a few years ago.

The main shrine, rebuilt in its present form in 1744, was first formally opened to the general public during renovations six decades ago, though back then the general public was limited to men.

Normally, priests are allowed inside the main shrine to clean only a few times a year before certain festivals. The chief priest gives an offering of rice or sake before the shrine every day.

Like other Shinto shrines, Izumo also kept its rituals — and, above all, its object of worship — a secret. In keeping with Shinto's polytheist and animist traditions, each shrine venerates a different god embodied by a sacred object of worship. Here, priests were not allowed to look at the object, and it was not clear whether the chief priest himself was. "There are many theories — that it's a mirror, a sword, or a wooden idol," Mr. Senge, the chief priest's son, said. "But when people ask me what the object is, I can only reply that it is too awesome to put into words."

He added, "Basically, it's not that we're not showing the god, but it's much more about the fact that human beings should be filled with such awe and dread that we shouldn't dare look at the god."

And so, when the god was transferred out of the main shrine in an evening ceremony in April, he was carried inside a portable shrine wrapped in a white cloth. When the god passed before them, the people gathered here lowered their eyes.

"Every human being has an inquiring mind, but I believe there are things that human beings should not inquire into," Mr. Senge said.

Though designated since birth as a future chief priest, because he was the family's oldest son, Mr. Senge said there were rituals that his father had yet to teach him.

"It's not that I don't know certain things yet, but that I shouldn't know them yet," he said.

For example, each morning, his father performs rituals inside a room in the family residence.

"I was told since early childhood that I was never to enter that room, so there's a room in my own home that I've never entered once since birth," Mr. Senge said, as the midday heat gave way to clouds and evening showers.

For centuries, the oldest sons of two families, including Mr. Senge's, had alternated as the shrine's chief priests. Because the Senges had exclusively taken over the role in the 19th century, Mr. Senge grew up watching his grandfather and then his father pray each morning for the nation, the imperial family and the world.

"In general, people may have some doubts about the road to choose in life," he said, "but I naturally took this road, and considered myself lucky."

Yet some visitors here, even after being allowed in to see the main shrine, left with unanswered questions.

Kazuko Morikawa, 53, who had come with her husband, said the shrine might lose its value if it were opened to the public more often. But displaying the god, she said, would not be a bad idea.

“Even if they went, ‘Here, we’ll just show you a photograph,’ it’d be O.K.,” she said. “I’m not sure, but is that asking too much?”

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