

# EXPLAINING ISE

## THE SHIKINEN SENGŪ

### IN JAPANESE–ENGLISH PUBLIC MEDIA



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*This essay draws on intercultural communication and translation studies to examine how Japanese–English outreach materials explain the shikinen sengū of Ise Jingū to audiences with no prior knowledge of it. Across three case studies, translation overlaps with editorial intervention through selection, restructuring, simplification, visual design, and adaptation to different media. The essay borrows the term “transediting” from translation studies to name that combined labor and to keep attention on the finished materials rather than on the presumed intentions of translators the sources do not identify. It shows that outreach materials consistently foreground themes that provide portable frames for explaining the sengū in public settings, while ritual efficacy, institutional authority, and other shrine-specific dimensions receive comparatively less explanatory weight. The paired Japanese materials show a second direction of mediation, preparing domestic intermediaries to explain Shinto in English, so that the audience for this work includes Japanese readers as well. These materials do not so much translate the sengū as produce a public form of it, shaped by medium, genre, and institutional priority.*

A VISIT TO a Shinto shrine quickly reveals that much of what matters remains unstated. Shrine etiquette (when to bow or where to perform ablutions) is only one part of it. More difficult to put into words are how the space should feel, how one should move through it, and why particular actions matter. These things are learned gradually, through observation, repetition, and participation rather than explicit instruction. The problem becomes even more pronounced in the case of the *shikinen sengū* 式年遷宮, commonly glossed as the periodic rebuilding of the Ise Jingū shrine complex, which is not one single ritual but a complex sequence of events extending over nearly eight years, involving the rebuilding of sanctuary buildings, the refashioning of ritual objects, and the ceremonial transfer of the deities. Its significance depends upon ritual practices, institutional authority, embodied participation, and assumptions

that must, to some extent, be explained anew even to Japanese audiences each time the *sengū* occurs. Explaining such an event across languages and media is therefore more than a matter of translation. It requires institutions to decide what to explain, what to simplify, what to leave untranslated, and what kinds of stories can carry an intricate religious event to audiences who do not already share its assumptions.

Because the *sengū* unfolds over nearly eight years and draws together architecture, ritual, craftsmanship, pilgrimage, and community participation, it resists concise explanation.<sup>1</sup> One outreach text solves that problem by handing it to Dorae-mon, the manga character, who explains that people build “a new Jingu every 20 years so the gods will always have a nice, new place to live!”<sup>2</sup> When the *sengū* is presented this way, what is brought forward as its essential story, and what recedes as too particular, too complex, or too difficult to communicate? To explore that question, this essay examines three case studies that carry institutional authority: the English-language website of the Jingū Administration Office (Jingūshichō 神宮司庁), the Association of Shinto Shrines’ (Jinja Honchō 神社本庁) booklet *Soul of Japan: An Introduction to Shinto and Ise Jingū* together with its companion teaching guide, and the Japan Pavilion display at Expo 2025, where the *sengū* was presented as a model of cyclical renewal.

This essay examines how Japanese-English outreach materials explain the *sengū* to audiences with little prior knowledge of Shinto. The biggest problem may be the nature of the event itself. Its significance depends on ritual practice and institutional knowledge that participants may possess or enact, but do not always put into words. Once those assumptions can no longer be taken for granted, explanation becomes an editorial task as much as a linguistic one. Across the three case studies, translation repeatedly merges with restructuring and adaptation to a new medium. These materials make the *sengū* easier to follow, but they also shape what comes forward as its meaning and what remains less visible.

The analysis that follows treats these materials as institutional acts of explanation. Its concern is less with whether a particular translation is correct than with how religious institutions present a highly situated event to audiences who do not share the background needed to interpret it. Considering these materials as a mix of translation and editing provides a way of describing that work because it directs attention to the editorial decisions that accompany translation: deciding

1. For a *longue-durée* backdrop of this essay’s focus on recent bilingual explanations of Ise Jingū and its *shikinen sengū*, Teeuwen’s research provides a provocative explanation of how the term “Shinto” (treated in the sources within this essay as a reified, stable idea) emerged as a historically contingent concept, showing how efforts were made to systematize and make kami practices intelligible through naming, conceptual framing, and doctrinal synthesis. See Mark Teeuwen, “From Jindō to Shinto: A Concept Takes Shape,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 29 (2002): 233–63.

2. Japan Pavilion, Expo 2025 Osaka, Kansai, “Shikinen Sengu” display, observed by the author, October 2025.

what needs explanation, what can remain implicit, which Japanese terms should be retained, and how an explanation changes when it becomes a website, a handbook, a manga, or an exhibition panel. Those decisions are never incidental. They determine the form in which the *sengū* becomes publicly intelligible. “Intelligibility,” as the term is used here, does not mean complete understanding or transparent access to the event. It refers to the editorial work through which institutions make the *sengū* recognizable and interpretable to audiences who cannot be assumed to share the ritual knowledge on which its significance depends.

Intercultural communication studies provide a useful way of thinking about this process. Shrine practice depends heavily on knowledge acquired through participation, making dictionary definitions only a small part of explanation. The materials examined here occupy what intercultural communication theorists describe as a contact zone, where a high-context ritual environment encounters readers who cannot be assumed to share the same background knowledge. Shrines and religious organizations speak with institutional authority, yet they do so through genres that reward brevity. English introduces another layer of expectation because it remains the principal language through which these materials circulate internationally. The resulting explanations emerge from the interaction of institutional priorities, genre conventions, and linguistic expectations. They are products of negotiation as much as translation.

That negotiation can be seen in small editorial choices as well as larger interpretive ones. Key terms are sometimes defined, sometimes left in Japanese, and sometimes explained through analogy. Narrative sequences are reordered and certain themes become more prominent than others. Heritage, craftsmanship, visitor experience, and, more recently, sustainability provide familiar points of entry for readers encountering the *sengū* for the first time. References to sustainability often draw upon concepts articulated in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—the UN’s framework of seventeen goals addressing environmental, economic, and social development.<sup>3</sup> The language of the SDGs, particularly about environmental issues, gives the *sengū* an immediate contemporary relevance,

3. While the SDGs articulate an integrated policy agenda in which “sustainable development” is foundational, “circularity” (especially as developed in circular-economy discourse) is better understood as an SDG-adjacent framework that is often invoked to advance progress across multiple goals, rather than as a formal SDG tenet in itself. See United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “The 17 Goals,” *Sustainable Development Goals*, <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>. See also Patrick Schröder and Jack Barrie, “Can the circular economy revive the SDGs?,” SDG Action, 13 November 2024. At first glance, the *sengū* might appear to run counter to SDG logics because it involves repeated rebuilding; however, both the *Soul of Japan* booklet and the Expo display anticipate this concern by foregrounding the managed reuse of materials as an account of continuity. Explicit SDG branding was comparatively muted in Expo guide materials, but SDG-adjacent idioms and event framing were nevertheless evident in Expo programming and in the Expo’s closing declaration: Japan Association for the 2025 World Exposition, “Expo 2025 Osaka, Kansai Declaration Announced,” 13 October 2025, [www.expo2025.or.jp/en/news/news-20251013-01/](http://www.expo2025.or.jp/en/news/news-20251013-01/).

particularly in public and international settings. At the same time, it encourages readers to understand the event through categories that originate outside shrine practice. In the process, questions of divine presence, ritual efficacy, institutional authority, and doctrinal plurality can recede from view—not because they are deliberately omitted, but because public-facing genres reward different kinds of explanation.<sup>4</sup>

### Transediting, Contexts, and Contact Zones

Much of the work performed by these outreach materials remains invisible if translation is understood merely as the transfer of words between languages. The materials examined here do more than translate, because they shorten some explanations, expand others, rearrange material, and adapt it to new audiences and media: whether a website, an introductory booklet, a manga, or an exhibition panel. Translation studies has used the term “transediting” to describe this merging of translation with editorial intervention.<sup>5</sup> Transediting includes such practices as condensation, expansion, restructuring, omission, glossing, and adaptation when a text is prepared for a new readership, institutional setting, or medium. The term is useful here because several of the materials examined below do not reproduce a stable Japanese source text. They construct new explanations from existing language, images, institutional conventions, and assumptions about their intended audiences. The focus in this essay is on the recurring editorial decisions through which institutions make the *sengū* intelligible to readers who do not already share its assumptions. Transediting is not used here to imply that every editorial change can be attributed to an individual translator. The materials are institutional productions, and the available sources do not always identify who wrote, translated, revised, approved, or designed them. The term instead directs attention to the combined linguistic and editorial work visible in the finished materials.

4. Earlier in the symposium, Professor Munsī's talk touched on the risks and rewards of transforming “ways” of interacting with the sacred into “words” that describe it. Perhaps, like the Kakure Kirishitan communities that he discussed, a lot of Shinto and the *shikinen sengu* is poorly conveyed in this manner. And, with modern media such as VR, some of this can be alleviated, even without having the opportunity to visit a shrine. At any rate, the sources examined here are reaching out to readers with a purposefully limited and edited representation of a much fuller dialogic tradition.

5. Stetting's 1989 term, “transediting,” originally described the “grey area” between translating and editing in news or journalistic contexts, but it is used in this essay to draw attention to one aspect of translation, rather than to suggest using it as an analytical category. For more on the issues associated with the term, see Christina Schäffner, “Rethinking Transediting,” *Meta: Journal des traducteurs* 57 (2012): 866–883 and “Transfer in news translation,” in *Transfer Thinking in Translation Studies: Playing with the Black Box of Cultural Transfer*, edited by Maud Gonne, Klaartje Merrigan, Reine Meylaerts, and Heleen van Gerwen, (Leuven University Press, 2025).

Shrine practice depends heavily on forms of knowledge acquired through participation. This kind of problem becomes easier to understand when viewed through work on intercultural communication. Knowing when to bow is relatively easy to explain, because you can “see” it. Knowing why a particular place feels sacred, or why one ritual follows another, is much harder because such knowledge is usually “unseen” and learned rather than stated. The materials discussed here therefore occupy what intercultural communication theorists describe as a contact zone, where a high-context ritual environment encounters readers who cannot be assumed to possess the same background knowledge. “High context,” as the term is used here, does not describe Japan as a whole. It refers specifically to ritual settings in which meaning is sustained through repetition, shared practice, and institutional memory. In such settings, shared histories and embodied repetition allow “simple messages with deep meaning” to circulate without extensive explanation.<sup>6</sup> Much of that meaning becomes visible only when institutions attempt to explain it.

A kind of asymmetry emerges out of having the authority to define. Shrines, religious organizations, and state-supported cultural institutions occupy privileged positions as interpreters of Shinto for domestic and international audiences alike. Shinto’s idioms may saturate everyday life, yet much of their cultural logic becomes visible only when institutions render them teachable for audiences who do not already know how to read them. Shrines, booklets, and expo displays therefore do more than “share information.” They build bridges across unequal conditions of knowledge and authority. As such, they resemble what has been described as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today.”<sup>7</sup> In the present cases, this asymmetry appears not primarily through coercion but through institutional authority, genre constraints, and the politics involved in public representation. Websites, introductory booklets, teaching materials, museum displays, and exhibition panels reward brevity and immediate comprehension. English adds another layer of pressure so that institutional authority, genre, and language work together in shaping what becomes publicly recognizable as Shinto.

Recent outreach increasingly explains the *sengū* through the language of sustainability. References to SDGs allow the *sengū* to be connected with a vocabulary already familiar in public institutions. Christian-derived analogies serve a similar purpose for Anglophone readers by providing familiar points of reference. Questions of ritual efficacy, divine presence, institutional authority, and doctrinal

6. Although now more than fifty years old, Edward T. Hall’s insights about context and culture as well as warnings about technology and its impact on cultures are as relevant today as they were before the widespread use of computers. Edward T. Hall, *Beyond Culture* (Anchor Press and Doubleday, 1976), 46.

7. Mary Louise Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone,” *Profession* (1991): 33–40, 34.

plurality consequently receive less attention than themes such as heritage, craftsmanship, continuity, or environmental stewardship.<sup>8</sup> This essay is concerned with those shifts in emphasis. They are not translation errors. They are consequences of explaining a highly situated religious event within public genres designed to communicate quickly across cultural boundaries.

A note on the selection of sources is needed here. While many explanations of the *sengū* exist in English, the three resources selected here demand particular attention because they carry institutional authority, are widely accessible, assign special interpretive weight to the *sengū*, and are aimed at non-specialists.<sup>9</sup> The most enduring of these three projects is the official Jingū website, whose English-language pages have been produced and maintained for over two decades by the Jingu Administration Office in Ise City, Mie Prefecture. Digital media invites revision, and that revisability allows us to track not only how and what the organization chooses to say in English, but how translation choices have both shifted and remained stable over time. The second project examined in this essay comprises a matched set of texts tied to the sixty-second *sengū* (2013): *Soul of Japan*, an English-language introductory booklet on Shinto and Ise Jingū published by the Association of Shinto Shrines—the religious administrative body that oversees most shrines nationwide—and a 2017 companion handbook that re-frames the booklet in a bilingual format. Neither now circulates in physical form, but the booklet persists as a high-resolution downloadable PDF. The third case study moves from page to panel as an English-Japanese display about Jingū that was shown in the Japan Pavilion at Expo 2025 in Osaka between April and October.<sup>10</sup> Paradoxically, the object made of the most durable material may prove the most fleeting as a source, apparently disappearing from public view once the Expo closed.

8. On how Shinto has been recast as an ancient “nature religion” through the idiom of *chinju no mori* and shrine-based conservation projects, see Aike P. Rots, “Sacred Forests, Sacred Nation: The Shinto Environmentalist Paradigm and the Rediscovery of Chinju no Mori,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 42 (2015): 205–233. For a more lengthy and skeptical perspective on how ritual practices connected to the *Shikinen sengū* have been reframed to align with contemporary values in other genres, see Rots, *Forests of the Gods: Shinto, Nature, and Sacred Space in Contemporary Japan* (PhD diss., University of Oslo, 2013), 339–43.

9. The author edited and translated a book on the subject, but because it has not circulated as widely as some of the others and is no longer in print, it has not been included in the present study. See Kōgakkan Daigaku Kikakubu 皇學館大学企画部, ed., *Sengū Roman: A Two-Person Journey to Ise, English–Japanese Edition* 遷宮浪漫—伊勢ふたり旅: 英語・日本語版 (Kōgakkan Sābisu 皇學館サービス, 2016). The argument made in this essay about the risks and benefits of religious “transediting” holds true for this work, including its limitations as an effort to make the *shikinen sengū* and other aspects of Ise Jingū legible to non-specialists.

10. Out of the more than 25 million visitors to the Expo, it is unclear how many people went to the Japan Pavilion, but it was considered one of the top attractions at the event. Yomiuri Shimbun 読売新聞, “Sūji de miru Ōsaka, Kansai banpaku” 数字で見る大阪・関西万博, November 23, 2025, [www.yomiuri.co.jp/pluralphoto/20251123-OYT150030/](http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/pluralphoto/20251123-OYT150030/).

## The Ise Jingū Website

The Jingū Administration Office website has served as one of the principal English-language introductions to Ise Jingū for more than two decades. During that time, it has been revised repeatedly, and there is no single version of the “Jingū website” under discussion here. This section distinguishes between the current website, which provides a point of comparison, and an earlier version preserved through archived captures and contemporaneous downloads, which forms the primary object of analysis. Unless otherwise indicated, references to the website in the discussion below refer to this earlier version. The current site is identified explicitly when it is being discussed.<sup>11</sup>

The current English site is compact and organized around a short menu of visitor-facing pages, including “About Ise Jingu,” “Rituals and Ceremonies,” “Pray,” “Precinct Map,” and “Access,” together with a small PDF archive that includes the *Soul of Japan* booklet.<sup>12</sup> The current Japanese site extends well beyond this frame. It organizes the visitor’s encounter through headings such as “Know,” “Pray,” and “Feel,” and places the next *sengū* prominently in view through a banner at the top of the page. The Japanese and English versions are therefore no longer closely synchronized, and the present English site says comparatively little about the *sengū* itself. Although the divergence remains significant, but the earlier site makes the editorial choices involved in explaining the *sengū* easier to see. The discussion that follows concentrates on those earlier Japanese and English pages, referring to the current site where later revisions reveal a change in emphasis. Viewed across roughly twenty years, the English-language explanation appears to have narrowed even as its framing has become more universal.

One feature shared by the earlier Japanese and English sites makes some of their initial priorities visible. Both included a flash-era digital presentation that introduced Jingū through four mascot characters rather than through doctrine. The English site labeled it “manga,” although it was not a printed comic. It combined sequential comic-style framing with limited animation and sound, placing it somewhere between manga and anime. The Japanese site called it “anime,” emphasizing its movement, while the English label directed attention toward graphic narrative. Even the name of the medium helped tell viewers how to approach what followed.

11. The earliest extant version of the Jingū site online is dated 12 October 2000 according to the web archive Wayback Machine. The earliest English version of the site that remains available is dated December 17, 2001, <https://web.archive.org/web/20011217195017/http://www.isejingu.or.jp/index.htm>. For the present-day site, Jingu Administration Office, “Ise Jingu,” <https://www.isejingu.or.jp/en/> was used. For the earlier sites, all of the available archived sites dating back to 2000 were viewed, but the main focus is on Ise Jingū, “O-Ise-san” (Flash animation), archived 23 October 2007, Wayback Machine (Internet Archive), [https://web.archive.org/web/20071023052402fw\\_/http://www.isejingu.or.jp/shosai/english/anime2/index.htm](https://web.archive.org/web/20071023052402fw_/http://www.isejingu.or.jp/shosai/english/anime2/index.htm).

12. Jingu Administration Office, “Ise Jingu,” <https://www.isejingu.or.jp/en/>.

Each character carried a different part of the explanation. Navi, whose name suggested “navigator,” guided viewers through shrine protocol and gave the presentation its step-by-step movement. Isuzu, a high-school girl whose name recalled the Isuzu River, connected Jingū with landscape and nature. Through her, the premise that “kami (deities) live in nature” became something that could be seen while moving through the grounds. Yamato, a high-school boy, spoke in the language of national belonging, his name (a synonym for ancient Japan) reinforcing the description of Jingū as a “spiritual home.” Mai appeared in *miko* (a shrine priestess who assists with sacred dances, sales of amulets, and other ritual support) attire, and her name evoked ceremonial performance (“*mai*” being a word for “dance”), allowing *matsuri* to register through movement and atmosphere as well as explanation. The presentation began with nature as cosmology and then guided viewers through space, past *torii* and Ujibashi Bridge toward the carp-filled Isuzugawa. Jingū itself became the lesson. The intended audience was not stated, although the addition of readings even for simple compounds such as *jinja* 神社 suggests that it included children and other non-specialists. The original illustrated characters later disappeared, but the same child-facing graphic logic returned two decades later, as we will see in the last section of this essay, when Doraemon was used to explain the *sengū* at Expo 2025.

The digital presentation stated that “[i]n *jinja* (Shinto sanctuaries), people express their wishes, prayers and thanksgivings to the kami through all kinds of Shinto ceremonies and festivals called ‘*Matsuri*,’” yet it did not mention the *sengū*.<sup>13</sup> The omission reveals how sequencing works as a form of explanation. The presentation first established Jingū through nature, etiquette, movement, and affect. Its most institutionally complex event was deferred to a separate page. Before readers encountered the *sengū*, they were given a more easily grasped account of shrine practice and a route through the physical site.

When the *sengū* appeared on the linked explanatory page, redirecting the digital presentation viewers to a regular web page, the Japanese and English versions shared a basic narrative but differed in the significance they attached to it. Both described the cycle of rebuilding and transfer, and both connected its origins with Emperor Tenmu and Empress Jitō. The Japanese text placed the event within a national and imperial frame by calling the *sengū* “one of the most important festivals in our country” (*wagakuni de mottomo jūyō na omatsuri no hitotsu* 我が国で最も重要なお祭りのひとつ), a claim omitted from the English version. The English makes cosmological reference points explicit for outsiders, naming the deity Amaterasu (the Japanese

13. Ise Jingū, “O-Ise-san” (Flash animation), archived 23 October 2007, Wayback Machine (Internet Archive), [https://web.archive.org/web/20071023052402fw\\_/http://www.isejingu.or.jp/shosai/english/anime2/index.htm](https://web.archive.org/web/20071023052402fw_/http://www.isejingu.or.jp/shosai/english/anime2/index.htm).

does not), and it presented the transfer in terms of a “symbol” of the kami rather than the deity itself (*goshintai* 御神体). It emphasized “the renewal of buildings,” “the renewal of the treasures,” and “the offering of first fruits,” then added that “peace will prevail in Japan and the world,” and that “traditional technologies are preserved.” It also retained institutional specificity, describing the reconstruction of “the fenced enclosure, beginning with the main sanctuary” (*shōden o hajime mikakiuchi* 正殿を始め御垣内). In the Japanese, readings were supplied for compounds such as *mikakiuchi* (fenced enclosure), which many Japanese readers would not necessarily have known. The closing lines became explicitly imperial, describing the *sengū* as “the foremost important affair of the Imperial House, and Jingū’s unparalleled great enterprise” (*kōka daiichi no jūji, Jingū musō no daiei* 皇家第一の重事、神宮無双の大営). In the Japanese version, the endurance of Jingū was thus tied to imperial authority and to the continued performance of this particular institutional undertaking.

## The Soul of Japan

*Soul of Japan: An Introduction to Shinto and Ise Jingū* presents a more systematic form of outreach than the earlier Jingū website. Published by the Association of Shinto Shrines in connection with the 62<sup>nd</sup> *sengū*, the booklet provides a compact, authoritative account of Shinto, Jingū, and the meaning of periodic rebuilding. Its organization moves gradually from general definitions of Shinto, kami, *matsuri*, and *jinja* through mythic narratives and the institutional history of Jingū before arriving at the *sengū*. By the time readers encounter periodic rebuilding, they have already been given a vocabulary of divine presence, ritual transfer, priestly mediation, imperial connection, and sacred history through which to interpret it.

The title, *Soul of Japan*, recalls the language of Nitobe Inazō’s *Bushido: The Soul of Japan*, although the relationship should not be pressed too far.<sup>14</sup> The phrase belongs to a longer history of attempts to explain Japanese traditions through a civilizational vocabulary intended for readers outside Japan. Here it signals the scale of the booklet’s claim. Shinto is introduced as something woven into Japanese life as a whole, not as one religious tradition among others.

The opening chapter, “What is Shinto?,” begins by calling Shinto “the indigenous faith of the Japanese.” It then describes it as “a way of life and a way of thinking,” “an integral part” of Japan “since ancient times,” and “the foundation for the yearly

14. As its title suggests, the booklet appears to position itself as a rearticulation of “the soul of Japan,” in implicit dialogue with Nitobe Inazō’s classic *Nitobe Inazō, Bushido: The Soul of Japan* (The Leeds and Biddle Company, 1900). Like Nitobe’s work, it often relies on Western, including Christian-derived, conceptual scaffolding to render Japanese tradition legible outside the Japanese cultural context, a strategy that can reduce friction for some readers while also courting familiar risks of distortion and misreading.

life-cycles.” The New Year shrine visit appears as an ordinary example of this continuity. The cumulative effect is to position Shinto as the largely unspoken cultural background of Japanese life. This claim brings the booklet close to the problem described at the beginning of this essay: what is treated as implicit within practice must be made explicit for readers encountering it from outside.

The vocabulary chosen to carry that explanation is immediately recognizable in English. The booklet uses terms such as “faith,” “worship,” and “deity,” while also retaining selected Japanese words. Kami is introduced as “a word that corresponds to ‘deity’ in English.” Shinto sanctuaries are first identified as “Shinto shrines” and then as *jinja*, after which the Japanese term can circulate without repeated explanation. The method neither replaces Japanese terminology entirely nor leaves it to stand without support. English categories provide an initial foothold, while retained terms mark the point at which equivalence remains incomplete.<sup>15</sup> The booklet is also engaged in terminological boundary maintenance, though we do not learn that until later with the companion volume.

The 2017 companion volume, *Eigo de tsutaeru Nihon no kokoro: Soul of Japan kōshiki gaidobukku* 英語で伝える日本のこころ Basic Guide: SOUL of JAPAN 公式ガイドブック, is a kind of handbook that makes the institutional labor behind this method visible. Organized as an English-learning and explanatory guide, it reproduces passages from the English booklet and supplements them with vocabulary lists, grammatical notes, relatively literal Japanese translations, fuller Japanese renderings, and explanations of expressions. It does not appear to present a Japanese source text from which the English booklet was translated, if such a text existed. Instead, it prepares Japanese readers to use the English booklet as an institutionally produced explanatory resource.

This changes the direction of mediation. The original booklet addresses readers who may know little about Shinto. The handbook addresses domestic intermediaries who may understand shrine practice but lack the language, or the interpretive frame, expected in international encounters. Its task is to anticipate where explanation may falter and to prepare speakers to respond. Translation becomes a form of institutional preparation: readers are taught not only what an English phrase means but what assumptions an Anglophone listener may bring to it. It identifies cases in which fluent English may produce the wrong institutional image. Its discussion of Naikū and Gekū, for example, rejects “Inner Shrine” and “Outer Shrine”

15. There has been considerable debate in Japan about the definition of kami and the term’s origin, and translations such as “god” and “deity” have long been recognized as insufficient without explanation for an Anglophone audience. See, for example, Timothy J. Vance, “The Etymology of Kami,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 10 (1983): 277–88. Needless to say, this kind of a debate risks being glossed over in public-facing materials when it is more or less “hidden” behind non-translations that simply use the Japanese term without a clear English equivalent.

as potentially misleading, since those terms may suggest a spatial or hierarchical relationship unlike that of Jingū's two principal sanctuaries. Retaining Japanese terminology thus serves not only authenticity but institutional precision.

The handbook's treatment of "guardians of the family" provides a revealing example of cultural mediation. Its commentary invokes "angel" and "saint" as possible points of reference. The handbook alternates between analogy and explicit warnings against equivalence, so these analogies coexist with passages that explicitly distinguish kami from a singular, omnipotent Creator, making the handbook's strategy a managed movement between comparison and differentiation. The strategy may lower an initial barrier for readers familiar with Christian vocabulary, but it also reveals the cultural specificity of what presents itself as accessible English. "Angel" and "saint" are not neutral explanatory categories, and they may clarify little for readers who do not share the religious background they assume. Here the handbook treats translation of the original English less as lexical substitution than as framing. It assumes that the greatest barriers lie not in words but in expectation. It has been argued that effective mediation requires "bilateral cultural adaptation," or a sensitivity to the values and expectations of both source and target communities, together with explicit strategies for handling lexical gaps, pragmatic friction, and non-verbal cues.<sup>16</sup>

The booklet and handbook repeatedly work within this tension. They make Shinto easier to discuss by attaching its vocabulary to categories already available in English, yet they also preserve terms such as kami and *jinja* rather than allowing those categories to replace them. The reader is held in an intermediate position: close enough to proceed, but repeatedly reminded that the English word does not exhaust the Japanese one. The handbook extends that position to its Japanese users, teaching them how to reproduce the accessible frame while retaining the distinctions on which the institution insists.

The chapter on the *sengū* brings these editorial strategies together. Within the *sengū* chapter, the efficacy of the rites and the authority governing their performance receive less sustained explanation than architectural renewal, technical transmission, and intergenerational continuity, although earlier chapters provide a broader account of kami, *matsuri*, priestly mediation, and ritual transfer. The chapter's explanation begins with the statement that "Wood is central to Japanese civilization." From there, the *sengū* is organized around the renewal of wooden structures, the reuse of materials, and the preservation of technical knowledge. The English text emphasizes "sustainability," "reutilization," and the "maintenance of know-how and skills," presenting these as more important to Jingū's continuity

16. Zixi Ye, "Language Barriers in Intercultural Communication and Their Translation Strategies," *Modern Management Science & Engineering* 6 (2024): 178–189.

than the “actual physical existence” of any single building. Rebuilding the wooden “dwellings for the kami” is contrasted with constructing “permanent structures of stone.” Continuity resides in repeated making rather than in the survival of an original object.

The passage does not reduce the *sengū* entirely to craftsmanship. It retains the kami, identifies the buildings as their dwellings, and describes the renewal as “the essence of ‘eternity’ as it is expressed at Jingū.” Its final language, however, moves toward a broadly accessible account of inheritance, declaring that the *sengū* “resonates in the souls of our ancestors, and is a gift to the future.” The event becomes intelligible through a combination of sacred residence, cultural memory, technical transmission, and an ethical obligation to future generations.

The Japanese rendering supplied by the companion volume subtly redirects the account. “Wood is central to Japanese civilization” becomes “wood has been central to Japanese culture” (*ki wa Nihon bunka no chūshin o nashite kimashita* 木は日本文化の中心をなしてきました). “Sustainability” is rendered as *jizokusei* 持続性, a term suggesting persistence or continuity without the more explicitly policy-oriented resonance of *jizoku kanōsei* 持続可能性. The “maintenance of know-how and skills” becomes the “transmission of knowledge and techniques” (*chishiki ya gijutsu no denshō* 知識や技術の伝承). Where the English speaks of a “gift to the future,” the Japanese says that the *sengū* will be “inherited into the future” (*mirai e to keishō sarete yuku* 未来へと継承されてゆく).

These are small differences, but they show that the handbook is doing more than carrying a finished English explanation back into Japanese. The English booklet presents the *sengū* through concepts likely to circulate widely: sustainability, reuse, expertise, eternity, ancestors, and the future. The Japanese commentary reattaches those concepts to a vocabulary of continuity, transmission, and inheritance. It explains the English script while preserving distinctions that the English formulation partially loosens.

The booklet and handbook therefore form a single outreach project with two audiences. One gives non-specialist English readers an ordered introduction to Shinto and the *sengū*. The other prepares Japanese intermediaries to communicate that introduction and explains the choices on which it depends. Together they show transediting as institutional labor. Definitions, analogies, retained Japanese terms, back-translations, and commentary are coordinated to produce an account that can circulate across cultural boundaries without appearing either wholly foreign or wholly familiar.

That account is necessarily selective. The *sengū* emerges as a means of renewing sacred buildings and treasures, re-enshrining Amaterasu, transmitting craftsmanship, sustaining cultural memory, and joining past generations to the future. The chapter explicitly identifies the transfer of the sacred mirror and describes the



FIGURE 1. “Shikinen Sengu” at Ise Jingū, as displayed in the Japan Pavilion at Expo 2025 Osaka-Kansai (photograph by the author).

cycle as a temporal and spatial return to origins. Even so, its extended explanation gives particular weight to the preservation of skills, the reuse of timber, and the transmission of architectural and artistic traditions.

### The 2025 Osaka Expo Ise Jingū Display

The Ise Jingū display in the Japan Pavilion at Expo 2025 differs from the previous case studies because it is experienced while physically moving through an exhibition rather than reading a website or booklet. Visitors encounter a sequence of bilingual manga panels, large graphic slogans, and explanatory text distributed unevenly throughout the exhibit (FIGURE 1). That physical arrangement is itself editorial. The largest elements—the slogan and manga—are impossible to miss, while the explanatory panels appear later in comparatively small print at a point where stopping to read them interrupts the flow of visitors through the pavilion. Unlike a booklet, which presents a fixed linear sequence, the exhibition organizes explanation spatially. Scale, placement, and movement determine what visitors are

most likely to notice, making exhibition design part of the process through which the *sengū* becomes intelligible.

The exhibit opens not with an explanation of Jingū or the *sengū*, which an academic essay like this is prone to do, but with the slogan “Built soft means TRANSMITTABLE.” Only afterwards do visitors encounter Doraemon’s manga explanation, with the historical and explanatory panels placed at the end of the display. Those concluding panels contain the only explicit explanation that “Jingu” is the official term for the 125 shrines, including Naikū, which enshrines the deity Amaterasu, and Gekū, which enshrines Toyouke (unfortunately, the names of the deities are misspelled as Ameterasu and Toyoke). They also explain that someone named Yamatohime-no-Mikoto received a revelation from Amaterasu and established the Inner Shrine, while the Outer Shrine was later founded for the deity responsible for preparing Amaterasu’s meals. Interestingly, the display does not avoid religious claims. Divine agency is explicit in its account of origins. Yet those claims occupy relatively little visual space and appear only after visitors have already encountered a much larger narrative centered on rebuilding, craftsmanship, and renewal.

The manga might appear at first glance to trivialize a religion and a sacred object of worship, but from a transediting point of view, it stages misunderstanding itself. Doraemon functions as a surrogate visitor whose confusion authorizes that of the audience. Arriving at Jingū, he sees an identical shrine complex under construction beside the existing one and asks why they are “building the exact same thing right next to it.” When the old buildings are dismantled, he concludes, “This doesn’t make any sense...” His confusion depends upon a familiar assumption that continuity means preserving an original structure. The manga then takes him backward through time, where he witnesses repeated rebuilding and the transmission of carpentry techniques across generations. By the end of the sequence he announces, “I get it!” The visitor is invited to undergo the same progression. Rather than assuming understanding, the exhibit dramatizes the failure of first-contact understanding and then guides viewers toward an institutionally authorized explanation of continuity through renewal.

This narrative also compresses the *sengū* into an immediately graspable story. Doraemon concludes that Jingū builds “a new Jingu every 20 years so the gods will always have a nice, new place to live!” The sentence gains clarity by glossing over distinctions supplied only later in the explanatory panels. Those panels define Jingū as the collective name for 125 shrines, whereas the manga uses Jingū as though it were a single building replaced during each cycle. The Japanese is more precise, explaining that the sanctuary buildings are reconstructed alternately so that the deity may always reside in a renewed place. The English instead makes Jingū itself the object being built and domesticates divine residence into the image of providing “the gods” with “a nice, new place to live.” This produces an immediately

intelligible narrative while blurring the relationship among Jingū as an institution, the sanctuary buildings reconstructed during the *sengū*, and the ceremonial transfer that gives those buildings their ritual significance.

The movement through time across the Asuka, Edo, and modern periods in one part of the manga likewise teaches continuity through narrative rather than explanation. The figure of a “Master Carpenter” embodies the transmission of specialized knowledge. A senior craftsperson praises a younger worker, while Doraemon observes that “the techniques are passed down with care from generation to generation.” Continuity resides not in preserving a physical object but in maintaining the skills required to recreate it. The same logic appeared in *Soul of Japan*, where Jingū’s endurance depended on preserving the techniques, forms, and institutional knowledge through which they could be rebuilt.

That logic is condensed into the opening slogan, “Built soft means TRANSMITTABLE.” The Japanese, *yawarakaku tsukuru koto de, uketsugu* (やわらかく作ることで、受け継ぐ), links a manner of building with the act of passing something on. The English turns that relationship into a generalized design principle: what is “built soft” becomes “transmittable.” The slogan deliberately leaves unanswered what is transmitted and by whom. It can equally describe architecture, craftsmanship, knowledge, culture, or values. In this sense, it functions as a kind of branding. It transforms the rebuilding cycle into a portable principle suitable for an international exposition concerned with innovation, sustainability, and future design. At the same time, the social and institutional processes that make transmission possible largely disappear. In the manga, transmission occurs through repeated work between senior and junior craftspeople. In the slogan, transmissibility appears almost as an inherent property of the wooden structure itself.

The two explanatory panels at the end of the exhibition on forestry and material reuse extend this idea of transmission across much longer temporal and material scales. A simple diagram places the twenty-year rebuilding cycle beside the approximately two hundred years required to cultivate the shrine forest. The juxtaposition expands the visitor’s temporal horizon. The regularity of the *sengū* depends upon planning that extends across many future rebuilding cycles, linking ritual repetition with forestry whose results will only be realized by later generations. The heading “Forest Self-Sufficiency” translates this long institutional commitment into a phrase readily legible within contemporary environmental discourse. The next panel on reuse makes a similar argument through the circulation of building materials. It explains that timbers removed during dismantling continue to move through structures associated with Jingū and other shrines. The Japanese describes a precise sequence in which the load-bearing pillars of Naikū and Gekū become *torii* at Uji Bridge and, twenty years later, are transferred again to *torii* on the approaches to shrines in the surrounding region. Other materials

are then distributed to shrines throughout Japan. The English preserves the broad outline but diffuses this institutional sequence, stating that the pillars are reused in “structures such as the Uji Bridge and *torii* gates” before later serving “regional shrines.” The distinction is subtle but significant. The Japanese presents reuse as a controlled movement through successive shrine contexts, allowing the materials to retain their religious association with Jingū. The English makes the process resemble a more general program of recycling and environmental stewardship. It does not invent a sustainability narrative, but it makes that narrative easier to separate from the shrine-specific ritual order through which the materials actually circulate.

The exhibit therefore moves among several explanatory registers, so that divine revelation, Amaterasu, and Toyouke appear in the historical introduction. The manga focuses attention on rebuilding, craftsmanship, and continuity. The concluding explanatory panels frame the *sengū* through forestry, material reuse, and long-term stewardship. The result is the redistribution of religion, with religious claims becoming concentrated in the explanation of origins, while the continuing significance of the *sengū* is explained primarily through architecture, craftsmanship, environmental planning, and intergenerational transmission.

The Expo display is consequently the most compressed of the three case studies, but also the clearest demonstration of transediting as institutional mediation. It translates Japanese into English while also constructing an exhibition in which language, image, physical movement, graphic hierarchy, and narrative sequence work together to produce understanding. Doraemon first models conceptual confusion and then recognition. Historical time becomes a succession of rebuildings. Craftsmanship becomes inherited skill. Forests become long-term planning. Reused timbers become visible signs of continuity. Even the physical organization of the exhibit reinforces this editorial process: visitors encounter emotionally compelling images and memorable slogans before they reach the smaller explanatory panels containing the display’s most explicitly religious and historical information.

Across the three case studies, the medium increasingly shapes the explanation. The website separates introductory orientation from institutional detail. *Soul of Japan* develops a carefully sequenced textual account supported by a companion handbook that trains intermediaries to reproduce it. The Expo display must communicate through movement, image, slogan, and brief text before visitors move on. In every case, the *sengū* becomes publicly intelligible through editorial decisions that extend well beyond translation. What changes is not only the language but the medium through which explanation is organized. The Expo display foregrounds renewal, craftsmanship, stewardship, and transmission because those are the aspects that can be communicated most effectively within the spatial and temporal constraints of a world exposition. Ritual efficacy, the transfer of the deities, imperial authority, and the institutional complexity of the eight-year cycle remain

present but comparatively difficult to perceive. Those dimensions can be inferred by a visitor with sufficient background knowledge. However, the display itself gives greater explanatory weight to what can be seen, followed, and remembered after only a few minutes standing in front of it, before snapping photos and being pulled away from the exhibition by the crowds.

Curiously, by the end of the exhibition, one might be forgiven for thinking that the *sengū* is an almost entirely male undertaking. This is one point at which the compression of the event into a public outreach format reveals a limitation of the transeditorial process this time rather than of transediting as a practice or the exhibition medium itself. In modern understandings of the tradition, Amaterasu and Toyouke are female deities, while Yamatohime was an imperial princess and was later enshrined as the deity Yamatohime-no-Mikoto. The exhibition also leaves unmentioned that the institution of periodic rebuilding is traditionally associated with Emperor Tenmu and Empress Jitō, and the first *sengū* was carried out under Jitō. Women therefore occupy central positions in the sacred history of Jingū and in the performance of the *sengū* itself. Their omission is especially striking when the display instead gives visual prominence to two imagined male carpenters and a robot cat. At best, this was a missed opportunity; it also sits uneasily beside the SDG-inflected language used elsewhere in the exhibition, because gender equality is one of the development goals.

## Conclusion

The central challenge of presenting the *sengū* across languages and media is explaining a centuries-old sequence of events whose significance depends upon accumulated ritual knowledge, institutional authority, embodied participation, and assumptions that are rarely made explicit, even for Japanese audiences.

Each medium organizes that work differently. Translation merges with editing, sequencing, simplification, and genre design to produce versions of the *sengū* that can circulate across different media and among audiences with very different levels of background knowledge. The Jingū website treats intelligibility as an ongoing administrative practice. Its early manga or anime-style pedagogy stabilizes an introductory understanding of Shinto centered on nature, etiquette, and affect, while the *sengū* enters later through a separate page where English and Japanese share basic facts but not the same frame. *Soul of Japan* and its companion handbook intensify this labor by standardizing an exportable script and training domestic intermediaries to speak within it. They tether key terms to familiar religious categories and recruit cues that present themselves as universal, although in practice they remain culturally particular. The Expo display compresses explanation still further. Its manga, slogans, graphic scale, and spatial arrangement guide

visitors from Doraemon's incomprehension to an account of continuity grounded in rebuilding, inherited skill, forestry, and material reuse.

These materials keep divine presence, sacred residence, revelation, and shrine terminology visible, though they are unevenly distributed. What changes is the explanatory weight assigned to them. Heritage, craftsmanship, continuity, visitor experience, environmental stewardship, and transmission provide relatively portable frames because they can be understood quickly within websites, introductory booklets, and exhibition spaces. Ritual efficacy, imperial and institutional authority, the ceremonial transfer of the deities, and the full complexity of the eight-year sequence are harder to communicate within those forms. They recede not necessarily because institutions reject them, but because public genres privilege what can be recognized, followed, and remembered without extensive preparation.

This selectivity recalls an older problem in the English presentation of Japanese tradition. Projects such as *Soul of Japan* are, in one sense, Nitobe-style projects. Like Nitobe's early twentieth-century effort to render Bushido intelligible and respectable through a Christian, Buddhist, Shinto, and Confucian amalgam, they try to make a tradition recognizable in a register outsiders are presumed to already know. That work accomplishes a great deal. It provides footholds, offers an authorized script and gives domestic intermediaries a way to speak into an Anglophone public sphere that may have little interest in religious particularity. At the same time, it can become a bottleneck. A great deal of academic insight about Shinto concepts, internal plurality, practice, efficacy, authority, and presence seems to remain uncirculated in public-facing materials.

The concept of transediting helps describe this process without reducing it to either successful translation or cultural loss. It directs attention to the combined linguistic and editorial labor visible in the finished materials: the choice to retain *kami* while glossing it through "deity," to invoke "angel" or "saint" as provisional analogies, to organize the *sengū* around sustainability and transmission, or to place detailed religious explanations after a large slogan and a manga narrative. Such choices create access, but they also establish the terms on which access is possible. Intelligibility is therefore not the transparent transfer of an already complete meaning. It is the production of a public form in which some relationships become easier to see and others become more difficult to recover.

The three cases also show that this work cannot be understood through English alone. The paired Japanese materials explain unfamiliar terminology, reshape English formulations, and prepare Japanese readers to participate in international mediation. The contact zone therefore includes domestic as well as foreign audiences. Institutions are not only translating Shinto outward; they are also teaching Japanese intermediaries how Shinto should be explained when its assumptions can no longer remain implicit.

These materials belong to a polyphonic discourse produced within a rapidly changing social environment in which ancient religious institutions seek to remain legible to modern publics. As public pedagogy, they attempt to define what Japanese culture can mean when it is communicated across media, languages, and audiences. Outreach media actively negotiate an exceptionally difficult cultural barrier, and the materials examined here deserve recognition for the sophistication of that negotiation, even as the process inevitably privileges certain understandings of the *sengū* over others. The case studies suggest not a single process of simplification but the simultaneous production and circulation of multiple Shintos, each shaped by medium, audience, and institutional purpose.

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