



Legacy

I read a story in my newspaper the other day about some trees that were being sent to the Tohoku region as gifts. That's the area that was devastated by the massive earthquake and tsunami a couple of years ago, and it seems that reconstruction efforts have moved along to the point where a number of shrines are now ready to be rebuilt.

Shinto shrine buildings are constructed in a very traditional manner of course, and these days it is not easy to procure the large amounts of straight and clear timber that is required to build one. I imagine the problem is even more acute in the Tohoku area, where so many buildings were damaged, and so much construction has taken place.

So it seems that shrines in other areas are helping out by sending construction materials from their own supply, most notably the Ise Shrine, in Mie Prefecture. And it was when I read *that* part of the story, that my ears perked up, because quite possibly it is some of 'my' wood that is involved ...

My children's grandfather on their mother's side lived at the southern end of Mie Prefecture, in the town of Kiho-cho. They had a small house down in the village and a larger farm area up at the far end of a very narrow mountain valley. The valley was extremely steep, and in most countries it would not have been considered habitable, but in the Japan of some years back, every possible space was utilized, and a series of farms had been carved out of the mountainsides, each one with its own collection of very narrow terraces for growing rice and vegetables. Grandad's farm was the one at the very top of the valley, more than an hour's climb from the bottom.

On my first visit there back in the early '80s, I helped them with strengthening the fence they were building to try and keep out the wild pigs, and I walked around a bit exploring the nearby landscape. At one place on the mountain above the house I came across a grove of *hinoki* trees (a kind of cypress). They were stunningly beautiful, with perfectly smooth and straight trunks soaring high into the sky. Unlike the ones on all the other nearby mountainsides, these trees were obviously being tended well, with branches trimmed neatly and underbrush cleared away.

When I asked about these trees, thinking out loud about what it might be possible for us to build with them, I was told to 'forget it'; those trees had been pledged to the Ise Shrine, for use in some future rebuilding project. Although they were growing on our land, they were now the 'property' of the shrine, and at some point in the future, when the shrine architects and carpenters were ready to use them, they would be harvested. And in fact, the maintenance was being done by foresters working for the shrine; we simply had to provide the environment in which they could thrive until that day.

As it turned out, when grandad passed away some years later, the farm was left to a different branch of the family, so I myself now have no connection with that area at all. The grove of trees is not 'mine' in any sense. But I remember them well. The largest specimens were very large indeed, and it would have needed two people to get their arms around the trunks at the base. The Ise Shrine itself is just this year in the middle of one of its 20-year cyclic rebuildings, and I wonder if our trees are a part of that.

It is sad to think of them being cut down of course, but I think for a tree, this is not such a bad way to end its life - to be harvested very carefully, treated with a great amount of respect in the handling, and to then have an extended life as part of a very carefully built traditional structure, to be honored and respected by all who see it.

Grandad (or was it *his* grandad?) had the right idea I think, when he pledged those trees, and I am glad to have had the chance to meet them!

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