

# THE SAKAKI TREE – FROM MYTH TO MODERN JAPAN

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**Abstract:** In this paper, we will discuss the role played by the Sakaki tree in Japanese mythology as well as in modern culture. This tree is mentioned in the episode of the rites observed to convince Amaterasu-ō-mikami to come out of the heavenly rock cave, in the *Kojiki*. A similar passage is found in *Nihon Shoki*, which also mentions the “Sakaki of Mount Shitsu” and “a flourishing Sakaki” in other episodes. Besides being mentioned by Japanese myths, the Sakaki is present in the life of the Japanese in many forms. It has been used since ancient times in divine rituals, and Sakaki branches are used even today in some *shintō* rituals; one of these is the *Yomisashi Matsuri* (celebrated every October at Ōmiya Shrine in Iwade Town, Wakayama Prefecture), a festival which we briefly present in this paper.

**Keywords:** Japanese mythology, Sakaki tree, Yomisashi Matsuri.

## 0. Introduction

The *Sakaki* tree, or *Cleyera japonica*, is an evergreen tree whose branches are used in *shintō* rituals, usually as offering wands (*tamagushi*) presented before a *kami*. When presented as *tamagushi*, paper streamers (*shide*) are usually attached to the branch. Branches of *Sakaki* are often used for decoration, purification implements, and as hand-held "props" (*torimono*) in ritual dance. *Sakaki* branches are also used to decorate shrine buildings or fences, as a means of delimitating sacred spaces.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, we discuss the role played by the *Sakaki* tree in Japanese mythology as well as in modern culture. For the mythological part, we take a look at the episode describing the rites observed to convince *Amaterasu-ō-mikami* to come out of the heavenly rock cave in ***Kojiki***, and at the similar passage found in ***Nihon Shoki***, which also mentions the tree on other occasions. For the modern culture part, we present the use of *Sakaki* branches during *Yomisashi Matsuri*, a festival held at Ōmiya Shrine in Iwade Town, Wakayama Prefecture.

## 1. *Sakaki* in mythology

In the first section of *Kojiki*, the section dealing with the "divine age", the *Sakaki* tree is mentioned in the episode of the rites observed to convince *Amaterasu-ō-mikami* to get out of the heavenly rock cave. This episode in which *Amaterasu-ō-mikami*, angry with her brother *Susa-no-ono-mikoto*, hides herself into a cage leaving the whole world in darkness is one of the most famous

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<sup>1</sup> Inoue Nobutaka, *Sakaki*, in *Encyclopaedia of Shinto*, site accessed on July 15, 2011.

episodes in Japanese mythology. “Owing to this, eternal night prevailed”<sup>2</sup> says the *Kojiki*, and according to the *Nihon Shoki*, “...constant darkness prevailed on all sides, and the alternation of night and day was unknown”<sup>3</sup>.

The story goes like this: the divine couple, *Izanagi* and *Izanami*, gave birth to the Japanese islands and to many *kami*. Their daughter, *Amaterasu-ō-mikami*, born from the left eye of her father, became the celestial sun goddess from whom the Japanese imperial family claims descent. Her brother *Susano*, the storm god, was sent to rule the sea. But before going, *Susano* destroyed the rice fields, defiled his sister's dwelling, and threw a flayed horse through her weaving hall. Indignant, *Amaterasu-ō-mikami* withdrew to a rock cave and fastened the rock door, plunging the world into darkness. Eight hundred other gods gathered and conferred on how to lure the sun goddess out in order to restore the cycle of night and day. So the gods dug up a 500-branched *Sakaki* tree from the heavenly Mount *Kagu*; on its upper branches they hung an eight-foot string of 500 jewels, on its middle branches an eight-foot long mirror, and on its lower branches were placed white and blue offerings. Then came *Ame-no-uzume-no-mikoto* (*Her-Augustness-Heavenly-Alarming-Female*) and using club moss as a sash, branches from the *Sakaki* as a headdress, and leaves of bamboo grass as a posy, she performed a provocative dance, which delighted the assembled gods so that they roared with laughter. *Amaterasu-ō-mikami*, curious about why the gods could be so merry when the world was plunged in darkness and told that outside the cave there was a goddess more illustrious than she, peeked out of the cave and saw her reflection in the mirror hanging from the *Sakaki*. Entranced by the sight, she was drawn out of the cave and the gods quickly threw a *shimenawa* – a sacred rope of rice straw – in front of the rock door, to prevent her return to hiding. Thus, light was restored to both the heavens and the earth.

Let us look at how the story is told in the *Kojiki* first:

“So thereupon the Heaven-Shining-Great-August-Deity, terrified at the sight, closed [behind her] the door of the Heavenly Rock-Dwelling, made it fast, and retired, Then the whole Plain of High Heaven was obscured and all the Central Land of Reed-Plains darkened. Owing to this, eternal night prevailed. Hereupon the voices of the myriad Deities were like unto the flies in the fifth moon as they swarm and a myriad portents of woe arose.”<sup>4</sup>

**Takamitsu Kōnoshi** points out the fact that although this episode takes place in the *Plain of High Heaven*, it seems to be self-evident that the *Central Land of Reed-Plains* is also affected.<sup>5</sup> And later, when *Amaterasu-ō-mikami* is out of the cave, “both the Plain of High Heaven and the Central-Land-of-Reed-

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<sup>2</sup> Basil Hall Chamberlain (trans.), *The Kojiki. Records of Ancient Matters*, Boston, Tuttle Publishing, 1981, p. 64.

<sup>3</sup> W.G. Aston (trans.), *Nihongi. Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest Times to A. D. 697*, Boston, Tuttle Publishing, 1972, p. 41.

<sup>4</sup> Basil Hall Chamberlain (trans.), *op. cit.*, pp. 64 – 65.

<sup>5</sup> Takamitsu Kōnoshi, *Kojiki to Nihonshoki. 'Tennōshinwa' no rekishi*, Tōkyō, Kōdansha Gendaishinsho, p. 100.

Plains of course again became light.”<sup>6</sup> This means that *Amaterasu-ō-mikami* influences both worlds, proving a strong relation between the world of the gods and the world of the humans. On the temporal aspect, both mythological records emphasize the unchanging condition of darkness, although there is no hint of time coming to an end.<sup>7</sup>

What happens in this myth is that the principle of *kegare* (impure, unclean) becomes predominant, making it necessary for certain rites to be performed, so that the *ke*<sup>8</sup> (ordinary, mundane, everyday life) can be restored. In this context, the role and the description of the *Sakaki* in this myth are very interesting. **The passage in the *Kojiki* states that "they tore from the very roots the flourishing *masakaki* of the mountain *Ame no Kaguyama*," and festooned it with jewel beads, a mirror, and cloth (*nigite*).** The *Sakaki* is called "*the true*" tree and it is said to have five hundred branches, which become the support of the various *sacred objects* – *the jewels, the mirror, the blue and the white offerings*. Then, "liturgies" are recited in the presence of the *tree*, clearly showing that some kind of religious manifestations were associated with it.

“Hereupon the voices of the myriad Deities were like unto the flies in the fifth moon as they swarm and a myriad portents of woe arose. Therefore did the eight hundred myriad Deities assemble in a divine assembly in the bed of the Tranquil River of Heaven, and bid the Deity Thought-Includer, child of the High-August-Producing-Wondrous-Deity think of a plan, assembling the long-singing birds of eternal night and making them sing, taking the hard rocks of Heaven from the river-bed of the Tranquil River of Heaven, and taking the iron from the Heavenly Metal-Mountains, calling in the smith *Ama-tsu-ma-ra*, charging Her Augustness *I-shi-ko-ri-do-me* to make a mirror, and charging His Augustness Jewel-Ancestor to make an august complete [string] of curved jewels eight feet [long], of five hundred jewels, and summoning His Augustness Heavenly-BeckoninAncestor-Lord and His Augustness Grand-Jewel, and causing them to pull out with a complete pulling the shoulder [-blade] of a true stag from the Heavenly Mount Kagu, and take cherry-bark from the Heavenly Mount Kagu, and perform divination, and pulling up by pulling its roots a true cleyera japonica with five hundred [branches] from the Heavenly Mount Kagu, and taking and putting upon its upper branches the august complete [string] of curved jewels eight feet [long], - of five hundred jewels, - and taking and tying to the

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<sup>6</sup> Basil Hall Chamberlain (trans.), *op.cit.*, p. 70.

<sup>7</sup> There is a very similar story in the Bible, Joshua 10:12, when the sun stands still in answer to the call “Stand still, O Sun!”, but time does not stop.

<sup>8</sup> *Ke, hare, and kegare* are three concepts specific to Japanese festivals. For more on these concepts, see Rusu Renata Maria, *The Japanese and Time*, in *STUDIA UNIVERSITATIS BABES-BOLYAI PHILOLOGIA*, 1, 2006, pp.171 – 184.

middle branches the middle branches the mirror eight feet [long], and taking and hanging upon its lower branches the white pacificatory offerings and the blue pacificatory offerings, His Augustness Grand-Jewel taking these divers things and holding them together with the grand august offerings, and His Augustness Heavenly-Beckoning-Ancestor-Lord prayerfully reciting grand liturgies, and the Heavenly Hand-Strength-Male-Deity standing hidden beside the door, and Her Augustness Heavenly-Alarming-Female hanging [round her] the heavenly clubmoss from the Heavenly Mount Kagu as a sash, and making the heavenly spindle-tree her head-dress, and bidding the leaves of the bamboo-grass of the Heavenly Mount Kagu in a posy for her hands, laying a sounding-board before the door of the Heavenly Rock-Dwelling , and stamping till she made it resound and doing as if possessed by a Deity, and pulling out the nipples of her breasts, pushing down her skirt – string usque ad privates partes. Then the Plain of High Heaven shook, and the eight hundred myriad Deities laughed together.”<sup>9</sup>

A similar passage is found in the *Nihon Shoki*, which also includes a passage in the record of Emperor *Keikō* that mentions the *Sakaki* of Mount Shitsu, while the record of Emperor *Chūai* refers to a “flourishing *Sakaki*”. All of these records note that *jewels*, *swords*, and *mirrors* were hung from the branches. In the *Nihon Shoki*, the above episode is retold as follows:

“Then the eighty myriads of Gods met on the bank of the Tranquil River of Heaven, and considered in what manner they should supplicate her [*Amaterasu-ō-mikami*]. Accordingly Omohi-kane no Kami, with profound device and far-reaching thought, at length gathered long-singing birds of the Eternal Land and made them utter their prolonged cry to one another. Moreover he made Ta-jikara-wo no Kami to stand beside the Rock-door, Then Ame no Koyane no Mikoto, ancestor of the Nakatomi no Muraji, and Futo-dama no Mikoto, ancestor of the Imibe no Obito, dug up a five-hundred branched True *Sakaki* tree of the Heavenly Mt. Kagu. On its upper branches they hung an august five-hundred string of Yasaka jewels. On the middle branches they hung an eight-hand mirror. One writing says Ma-futsu no Kagami. On its lower branches they hung blue soft offerings and white soft offerings. Then they recited their liturgy together.”<sup>10</sup>

All the preparations the *kami* make in order to make *Amaterasu-ō-mikami* get out of the cave – the dance performed by *Ame-no-uzume-no-mikoto*, the use

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<sup>9</sup> Basil Hall Chamberlain (trans.), *op.cit.*, pp. 64-70.

<sup>10</sup> W. G. Aston (trans.), *op.cit.*, pp. 42-43.

of the *Sakaki tree branches*, the *jewels*, the *mirror*, which are objects that can all be seen today in any *shintō* shrine – are elements of such rites. *Mirrors*, together with *swords*, *spears*, and *halberds* were found among the bronze – and later iron – artefacts of the *Yayoi* period (250 B.C. – A.D. 250) used for religious and ceremonial purposes.

The use of *mirrors*, together with *gems* and *bronze spears*, *swords*, and *halberds* for ceremonial purposes is specific to the people of Kyushu, while the people of Yamato used *bronze bells*. The ritualistic use of these artefacts was connected to political control; apparently, *shields* and *spears* were sent to governors and chiefs, and were interred in the sacred hills to ensure the protection of the frontiers. The *bronze spear* thus became a symbol of divine presence and of power. The imperial family used the sacred *sword*, the *mirror*, and the *gem* as the three symbols to assert its authority and legitimacy, proving that the possession of such symbols endowed the possessor with authority and legitimacy.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, the *Sakaki* has been used since ancient times in divine rituals. While the name originally referred to all evergreens, it gradually was limited to trees of the tea family. However, a number of other trees, such as oak (*kashi*), cryptomeria (*sugi*), boxwood (*tsuge*), and fir (*momi*) are sometimes substituted in ritual use. As the examples of *masakaki* found in *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* suggest, the trees are decorated in a number of different ways: some are adorned with *mirrors*, *jewels*, and *swords*, some with *five-coloured silks*, *mirror*, *jewels* and *swords*, while others were decorated only with *five-coloured silks*.<sup>12</sup>

According to the *Encyclopaedia of Shinto*,

“In the Rules for Ritual Procedure at Shrines (*Jinja saishiki*) implemented in 1875, the term *masakaki* is used to refer to two poles of Japanese cypress (*hinoki*), to the tips of which are attached branches of *Sakaki* and below which are attached *five-colour silks* (blue, yellow, red, white, and purple). The pole on the right (when facing the shrine) is decorated with a *mirror* and a *jewel*, and the one on the left with a *sword*.”<sup>13</sup>

Even today the chief place of worship of *Amaterasu-ō-mikami* is the Grand Shrine of Ise, the foremost *shintō* shrine in Japan. She is manifested there in a mirror that is one of the three Imperial Treasures of Japan. The *Sakaki* is represented by the *shinno-mihashira* – a sacred central post – over and around which the wooden shrine is built. Also, in imitation of the myth, mirrors are hung in *Sakaki* trees at other *shintō* shrines.

As we see, the *Sakaki tree* plays a crucial role both in myth and in *shintō* rituals. In the perspective of the symbolism of the concept of *axis mundi*, the

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<sup>11</sup> Mikiso Hane, *Premodern Japan. A Historical Survey*, Colorado, Westview Press, 1991, p. 13.

<sup>12</sup> Inoue Nobutaka, *Sakaki*, in *Encyclopaedia of Shinto*, site accessed on July 15, 2011.

<sup>13</sup> *Loc. cit.*

above myth is interesting as the *Sakaki tree* seems to be associated with a mountain, *Mount Kagu*. As to the cave, it is itself a very important aspect. **E. A. Kasper**, quoted by **Hans Biedermann**, says:

“The retreat to the cave is primal; the cave is refuge, shelter. Going into it is returning to the womb, negating birth, submerging into shadow and the nocturnal world of non differentiation. It is the renunciation of life on earth in favour of the higher life of the unborn ... [In the cave] there is no time, neither yesterday nor tomorrow, for day and night there are as one.”<sup>14</sup>

In the section about *Chūai* in the *Nihon Shoki*, we learn that when *Kumawani*, the ancestor of *Agatanushi of Oka*, and *Itote*, the ancestor of *Agatanushi of Ito* received the emperor, they

“... hung an eight-span jewelled necklace, a bronze mirror, and a ten-span sword on an uprooted sakaki tree, and told the emperor 'may you oversee mountains, rivers, and oceans as clearly as the bronze mirror, may you govern as skilfully as the intricately curved jewels, and may you pacify the realm with this ten-span sword.'”<sup>15</sup>

This section retells the ritual of receiving the visit of an emperor, but it also applies to receiving the visit of a *kami*. It is interesting to note that similarly to the above description, in a poem attributed to prince *Karu* in the section about emperor *Ingyō* in the *Kojiki*, a mirror hung on a *sacred pillar (igui)* and jewellery hung on a *true pillar (magui)*<sup>16</sup> are mentioned, as well as raising *sacred pillars* during rituals of veneration for a *kami* by a river.<sup>17</sup>

## 2. Yomisashi Matsuri and the sacred *Sakaki tree*

Nature is sacred for the Japanese and for *shintō*, as contact with nature ensures closeness to the *kami* – the deities worshiped as part of this “way of the gods”. In ancient times, the *kami* were thought to dwell in various things, like mountains and stones, as well as mighty trees, and so trees and woods were objects of worship in primitive Japan. Trees of great age and size or deep forests were particularly looked upon as sacred and possessed by *kami*. People selected specific locations or specific trees in forests as *himorogi* (seats of the *kami*) and specially honored them as places of worship. Later, the *kami* were thought to dwell in the shrines, but even now, on the occasion of a *matsuri*, at least once a year, they are escorted in a solemn procession from the shrine back to the sacred

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<sup>14</sup> Hans Biedermann, *Dictionary of Symbolism. Cultural Icons & the Meanings Behind Them*, translated by James Hulbert, New York, Meridian, 1994, p. 62.

<sup>15</sup> W. G. Aston (trans.), *op.cit.*, pp. 220-221.

<sup>16</sup> Basil Hall Chamberlain, *op.cit.*, p 366.

<sup>17</sup> Sugiyama Shigetsugu, *Ancient Shinto in Encyclopaedia of Shinto*, site accessed on July 15, 2011.

trees or the sacred mountain on which they are believed to have descended from heaven. Shrine precincts in Japan are commonly surrounded by deep forests and tall trees, but these are not mere accessories of a shrine, they have an inherent significance: the forests and trees are tokens of the *kami*'s presence and symbolize the *kami* themselves. At present, sacred trees are often seen surrounded by *shimenawa* ropes all over Japan.

The *Sakaki* is unquestionably the best known and most common tree symbol in *shintō*. The *Sakaki tree*<sup>18</sup>, with a unique history, holds a particular position as an especially *sacred tree* not only in mythology, as we saw in the previous section, but also in sacred rituals. From the tree, the divine spirit is transferred to a branch of *Sakaki*. The primitive belief in the virtues of the *Sakaki* has continued through the centuries and individual trees of great age and size are worshipped everywhere in Japan. Commonly used in *shintō* rituals, it is part of the everyday life of Japanese people, and branches of this tree are commonly found on sale in flower shops in present – day Japan.



***Sakaki tree branches sold in a flower shop in a supermarket in Nagoya, Japan (picture taken by the author of this article)***

In *shintō* rituals and ceremonies, holy streamers called *gohei* are hung on holy straw ropes or branches of the holy *Sakaki* tree to invoke the presence of the *kami*. *Gohei* are also known as *ō-nusa* or "great offerings" and are still in use on important occasions. The *ō-nusa* consist of two wands placed side by side, from the ends of which hang hemp fibre and several strips of paper. One of the wands is made of *Sakaki* wood, while the other is made from a bamboo stem. Their use is connected with an old Japanese rule of etiquette that presents to a superior should be delivered attached to a branch of a tree, so as to mark the respect of the giver from the receiver.

There are many theories regarding the etymology of the word *Sakaki*. Some are based on the nature of the *Sakaki* as an "evergreen" or "always thriving tree" (*sakaeru-ki*), and thus point to the sense of prosperity or thriving, or to the fact

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<sup>18</sup> *Cleyera japonica* is a low-spreading, medium-sized evergreen tree of the tea family, which also includes tea and camellia. It has relatively smooth bark and alternate leaves, which are a deep green on top and pale yellowish-green underneath. In spring, the *Sakaki* produces creamy-white flowers, followed by dark red berries. It grows in warm areas of Japan, Korea, and mainland China, and it may reach a height of about ten meters. The wood is often used for building, for utensils or combs, and as fuel.

that the evergreen *Sakaki* represents constancy or permanence and expresses the eternal presence and power of a *kami* at a shrine; others derive from the use of the tree as a "border-tree" (*sakai-ki*) used to demarcate sacred space.<sup>19</sup> This last theory is very evident in the use of *Sakaki* branches during *Yomisashi Matsuri*, a festival held at Ōmiya Shrine in Iwade Town, Wakayama Prefecture.

Traditionally, *Yomisashi Matsuri* used to be celebrated on October 6 every year – on the day of the new moon. This happened for a very good reason: as part of this festival, *Sakaki sacred branches* – the representation of *kami*, are carried through the village.

As a *kami* should never be seen by anyone, complete darkness is required to go through with this festival. However, due to modern-day constraints, such as attending work and school, the festival is presently held on the first Saturday in October. Ironically, when we attended the festival, on October 3, 2009, it was a full moon, defeating, in a way, the purpose of the festival.



It is a common practice in *shintō* to set up *Sakaki sacred tree branches* prior to a festival and *Yomisashi Matsuri* is no exception.

*Sakaki* tree branches prepared for the *Yomisashi matsuri* at Ōmiya Shrine in Iwade Town, Wakayama Prefecture (picture taken by the author of this article on October 3, 2009)

*Yomisashi*, the name of the rite performed during this festival and which gives its name, means "... entry into the sacred period of a festival and [it is] also the rite of marking the spatial range of a festival by setting up purified *Sakaki* branches at important places, such as the village border"<sup>20</sup>

As people are not supposed to see the *kami* (the *Sakaki tree branches*), the festival is held at midnight, when all the lights are out. Young men start from the shrine after having undergone a purification rite and run to the temporary shrines located to the East and West, where they set up a large *Sakaki*. Originally, this yearly ritual was meant to enforce the boundaries of the land to which the shrine extended its influence, the *Sakaki branches* thus having the role of delimiting the territory, a role often fulfilled by the *world axis*.

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<sup>19</sup> Inoue Nobutaka, *Sakaki*, in *Encyclopaedia of Shinto*, site accessed on July 15, 2011.

<sup>20</sup> Mogi Sakae, *Yomisashi Matsuri*, in *Encyclopaedia of Shinto*, site accessed on September 1, 2009.





Men taking part in *Yomisashi Matsuri*, carrying *Sakaki tree branches* and getting ready to run to the temporary shrines at midnight (picture taken by the author of this article on October 3, 2009)

For those accustomed to Japanese festivals being a huge agglomeration of people, it is interesting to see that nobody is actually at the shrine during this festival, but rather the entire community is waiting at the temporary shrines, feasting, and when the *Sakaki branches* arrive, they all rush to grab them, as *Sakaki* leaves are believed to cure all illnesses.

Other similar festivals are celebrated all over Japan through the year. To give just one more example, we mention the

naked (*hadaka*) festival of Yanahime Shrine in Iwata city, Shizuoka Prefecture. This festival also includes a rite to set up *Sakaki* branches called "*mishiba oroshi*." A week prior to the festival, during the night, the lights of the houses in the region are turned off and 30 young men dressed in starched white clothes (*hakuchō*) run around town, setting up *Sakaki* branches (*omishiba-sama*) and reciting prayers at thirteen different places.<sup>21</sup>

### 3. Conclusions

In this paper, we have discussed the significant role played by the *Sakaki* tree in Japanese mythology, especially in the Japanese creation myth, as well as in modern culture, particularly in modern Japanese festivals. For the mythological part, we saw that in the *Kojiki*, the *Sakaki* tree is mentioned in the episode of the rites observed to convince *Amaterasu-ō-mikami* to come out of the heavenly rock cave. Its role and description in this myth are very interesting. It is called "*the true*" tree and it is said to have five hundred branches, which become the support of the various *sacred objects* – *the jewels, the mirror, the blue and the white offerings*. Then, "liturgies" are recited in the presence of the *tree*, clearly showing that some kind of religious manifestations were associated with it. It is due to the *Sakaki* tree as well as the activities of the deities in this myth that life can continue in Japanese cosmogony for both men and *kami*. A similar passage is found in *Nihon Shoki*, which also includes a passage in the record of Emperor *Keikō* that mentions the *Sakaki* of Mount Shitsu, while the record of Emperor *Chūai* refers to a flourishing *Sakaki*.

Besides being mentioned by Japanese myths, the *Sakaki* is present in the life of the Japanese in many forms. It has been used since ancient times in divine

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<sup>21</sup> *Loc. cit.*

rituals and *Sakaki* branches are used even today in *shintō* rituals as offering wands presented before a *kami*; they are also used for decoration, as purification implements, or as hand-held “props” in ritual dance. Also, there are a number of festivals in which *Sakaki* branches are used, such as the *Yomisashi Matsuri* celebrated every October at Ōmiya Shrine in Iwade Town, Wakayama Prefecture. During this festival, *Sakaki sacred branches* are carried through the village at midnight, in complete darkness, so that nobody sees them, because they are identified with the *kami*, and nobody should see the *kami* in person.

From mythology to festivals, the *Sakaki* tree claims a unique place in *shintō* and in Japanese culture.

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