

## “ Saioh ”



Saioh was an unmarried female who served at Ise Grand Shrine on behalf of the Japanese emperor. She was chosen from among daughters and sisters of the emperor and resided at Saiku (modern Meiwa, Takigun, Mie prefecture) far from the capital of Kyoto.

Saioh served as High Priestess at Ise Grand Shrine for around 660 years during the Asuka and Nara periods to the Kamakura period. It is said that the first Saioh was Princess Ohku, daughter of Emperor Tenmu who became the emperor after the Jinshin War in A.D.672. Princess Ohku was sent to Ise in appreciation for the victory.

Saioh was selected by divination called “Bokujyou” using a burnt tortoise shell. The shape of the crack on the shell was used to divine the fortune of Saioh candidates.

Newly selected Saioh spent about three years at the capital for preparation, and then set out from Kyoto to Saiku for the six day and five night journey which was called the Saioh procession.



The main role of Saioh was to conduct three rituals a year at Ise Grand Shrine: the Kannamesai Festival in October, and the Tsukinamisai Festivals in June and December.

From Saiku to Ise Grand Shrine, Saioh journeyed for four days and three nights, and made offerings of the large sprig of Sakaki sacred tree to the goddess Amaterasu Ohmikami.

During the other months, she lived a gracious life at Saiku with imperial dignity, spending her time playing games of matching sea shells, composing waka verses, and enjoying boat ridings.

Among approximately sixty Saiohs during the period of 660 years, it is said that there were many sad and sorrowful stories. Some Saiohs were selected at the age of two or three. Some were prohibited from marrying even though they were planning to. Some had to see off their lovers from the port after taking part in unpermitted affairs. Since Saioh was to serve God and not allowed to fall in love, some killed themselves to prove their innocence, some were dismissed from the duty because of love, and some were separated from their lover.

Saioh served the emperor and was not permitted to return to the capital until the emperor abdicated the throne, death in the family, and/or Saioh became ill. One Saioh is said to have served for fifty years.



### “ Saioh Festival “

More than thirty years have passed since the first Saioh Festival was held in A.D.1983 when volunteers of the local ladies' club sought to celebrate the existence of Saioh at Meiwa town, where excavation and research of the Saiku site had begun. That intention is still inherited in the heart of many people who have supported the Saioh Festival for more than a quarter of century just like those who had been involved in maintaining the Saioh system for nearly 660 years in the past. Now the Saioh Festival is placed at the important position in Saioh's history. The highlights of the Festival are the purification ritual, the departure ceremony, the procession, and the welcome ceremony, reenacting the largest procession of its kind in Japan all the way from the capital of Kyoto to the land of Ise.



There is also an episode of love story of Ariwara-no-Narihira and Princess Yasuko depicted in the tales of Ise (Ise Monogatari). It is said that Saioh and her lover had a secret meeting on the shore of Oyodo port, where they exchanged waka verses to show their feelings of love and regret, knowing they would have to part from each other.

The Eve Festival on the first night, which takes place on Saturday, especially impresses many people in late years with the elegance and splendor displayed on the lighted-up stage. The second day of the Festival on Sunday starts with the purification ritual, followed by the Saioh procession and the welcome ceremony, creating an atmosphere as if we were in the picture of the scroll in the Heian period. What's more, the Saioh Festival has developed into festivities which attract people of all ages from children to adults with more than 100 booths of fun activities, foods and drinks.

The Saioh Festival is coordinated and managed by dedicated volunteers.

