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Distant Worlds, Together: Modernization and the Traditions and Cultural Practices of the Shinto Religion and its Relation to Contemporary Japanese Lifestyle and Popular Culture

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Loyola Marymount University

Distant Worlds, Together

Modernization and the Traditions and Cultural Practices of the Shinto Religion and its Relation to Contemporary Japanese Lifestyle and Popular Culture

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Abstract

Japan is one of the most technologically advanced nations in the world, constantly innovating and constantly evolving. However, even as Japan rushes into the future, a closer look at the country shows that Japan is still very in love with its past. Shinto and Buddhist shrines, most hundreds of years old, can still be found dotting the landscapes of Tokyo, Japan's capital and most advanced city. Shinto, a Japanese religion, roughly translated as "Way of the Gods", has no founder, date of founding, or even a sacred text. A symbol of Japanese culture, Shinto has been a part of Japanese lifestyle since before Japan was even a nation. Still, faced with modernization, Shinto continues to influence Japanese culture today, even as the population of religious believers in Japan continues to decrease. Evidence of Shinto even exists in popular Japanese media such as manga and anime. Through my research, I hope to see how Shinto manages to survive in the modern world, how modernization affects Shinto and its public perception, rituals, and festivals, and how Shinto affects popular Japanese media.

Distant Worlds, Together: Modernization and the Traditions and Cultural Practices of the Shinto Religion and its Relation to Contemporary Japanese Lifestyle and Popular Culture

Introduction

Today, Japan is seen as the poster child of innovation and the future. Boasting the fourth largest economy in the world, despite only having the tenth largest population, globally, Japan has become a technological powerhouse, exporting electronics, automobiles, trains, and other goods across the globe [JAP16]. However, while Japan as a nation seems to rush ahead with the times, given a closer look, one finds a different world.

It is logical to conclude that Japanese culture, like the foundations of its economy, would be steeped in modernity, but for a country that has so embraced technological advances, Japan is still very much a country that treasures its history and its traditions. Arguably the most technologically advanced city of them all is Japan's capital, Tokyo. But tucked away amidst the skyscrapers, subway stations, and expressways of Japan's beating heart, lie markers of a city that was, and still very much is, "hundreds of temples, shrines, stone steles, Buddha images, and statues" [77, LOV15]. In addition, these pillars of the past are not isolated incidents constrained to a tiny portion of a sprawling metropolis. Rather, the modern and the ancient coexist peacefully, granting audiences to Tokyo sights like the one below. Still, it begs the question, how? And where does Shintoism fit into all this?

In the foreground, Senso-ji Temple, the oldest Buddhist temple in Tokyo, established in 628. Towering in the background, the "neo-futuristic" [TOK12] Tokyo Skytree, the tallest structure in the country.

Image Credit: [EXP15]

Background

Shintoism has long been a major part of Japanese culture. However, unlike many religions, there is no agreed upon date of founding, nor is there any real data as to how Shinto came to be, even in ancient times. Quite simply put, while most religions can name its founder, Shinto's founder may be time immemorial [SHI09]. Though, while we cannot trace its beginning, we can glimpse into how the religion developed in its early recorded stages.

A folk religion, Shinto has "no founder, no official sacred scriptures in the strict sense, and no fixed dogmas" [SHI16]. As ancient Japan was being discovered and populated, the animistic traditions among its first settlers carried over, and thus, what can be seen as a form of

“proto-Shintoism” was born. Early Japanese settlers called the gods of their religion “*kami*”, eventually naming their religion “Shinto”, meaning “Way of the Gods”. Found in the nature that surrounds them, *kami* could be anything, including but not limited to: plants, animals, mountains, spirits of the dead, and even, the natural phenomena that shape our planet, like earthquakes and thunderstorms [SHI09]. What makes *kami* unique is that their status as *kami* does not necessarily imply divinity in the Western or Abrahamic sense, as Shinto views that humans and *kami* live on the same plane. In addition, Shinto was not a single faith. Local areas worshipped their own *kami* and there was no single thread that connected them all except for the animistic tradition, at least until the government intervened.

During the Meiji Restoration, an early draft of the 1889 Constitution of Japan, now more popularly known as the Meiji Constitution, called for Shinto worship to be “the symbolic expression of civic obligations and human virtues”, a “frenzied move to suppress [growing] Buddhism” [160, DUB11]. Shinto became a unifier of the state, a “civic obligation”, and this “State Shinto” as it came to be known, “was more than religion: it was the spiritual core of the Japanese people” [160, DUB11]. And in fact, it *was* more than religion. State Shinto was declared in the constitution to not be a religion at all, but rather a core foundation of Japanese culture above the concept of religion [160, DUB11].

After World War II and the Allied Occupation of Japan, during which Allied forces actively suppressed Shinto, though still offered freedom of religion, Japan’s post war economic miracle began to take shape. Freely embracing technological innovation, Japan rushed into the future, seemingly leaving behind religion as a whole. In fact, a “vast majority” of the Japanese “are not totally committed to a specific religious faith” [477, HAN13], despite figures from the CIA World Factbook stating that 66.8% of Japanese are Buddhist and 79.2% are Shinto, with a glaring footnote stating that “many people practice both Shintoism and Buddhism” [JAP16], which is why the numbers add up to greater than 100%. This disparity can be found in the fact that Western and Eastern concepts of religion are different. Westerners tend to see religion as codified, objective, and acquired. However, the Japanese see religion as something internal, a “nebulous emotional predisposition lying undetected until the individual is made aware of it” [477, HAN13].

Still, Shinto festivals, known as *matsuri*, are enormously popular across the nation, bringing forth unusual sights, such as fully tattooed members of the Yakuza (Japanese mafia) in plain view dancing alongside geisha and Shinto celebrants [SAN14]. In addition, the hybridization of past and modern present are evident throughout Japan, with arguably the most notable scenario being at the Kanda Shrine in Akihabara, a district in Tokyo known as “the country’s foremost commercial showcase for Japanese technology” [197, LOV15], in which Shinto priests regularly bless electronics (see image below).

A Shinto priest blesses computers at the Kanda-Myojin Shrine to ward off malware and other computer anomalies.

Image Credit: [WIL08]

Again, with the rise of modernity and the steady decline in religious belief (though not religious self-identification) in Japan, it begs the question of how religion has a place in Japanese society today [GIN15]. Many source materials and texts related to answering this fundamental question leave out the specifics of ritual practices, instead only mentioning the fact ritual practices survive, and in the end, failing to arrive at a definitive conclusion. Also, studies into Shintoism also fail to look at popular Japanese culture (manga, anime, etc) as a potential means by which Shinto spreads through the population, with film studies and theological studies largely remaining in their own separate spheres. A large oversight as the root of some popular Japanese films contain elements of Shinto mythology, such as Hayao Miyazaki's Oscar-winning film *Spirited Away* and *Princess Mononoke*. [PAN12] [BOY16] [50, DRA14]

Bearing all this in mind, I hope to answer the following questions as I embark on my research:

- In what ways does the Shinto religion survive in the modern Japanese society?
- What implications does modernization have on Shintoism? More specifically, how does it affect Shinto festivals and the public perception of Shintoism?
- How is popular Japanese media influenced by Shintoism? And how does this affect the modern Japanese culture?

Research Methods

In order to adequately study the impact of modernization on the Shinto religion and, in turn, how modern Shinto affects Japanese society, my project will require direct access to a large variety of Shinto religious sites, Shinto festivals, and a broad range of Japanese media and cultural outlets. In this case, Tokyo, Japan and its surrounding regions, with a brief stint in Kyoto, the ancient capital of Japan and what many consider to be Japan's cultural heart. While in

Japan, I plan on documenting my travels on video using equipment already owned, compiling interviews and videos of Shinto religious sites and rituals as I observe them during my travels abroad. I also plan on connecting with Dr. Cyril Veliath, SJ, Professor of Global Studies at Sophia University in Tokyo, who has already agreed to help me with my research and will provide resources on the ground.

My travels will begin on May 17th, arriving in Tokyo on the 18th. My first few days in Tokyo will align with the Sanja Matsuri festival, one of the largest and most significant Shinto festivals in Tokyo, attracting some 2 million attendees every year. Held at the Senso-Ji Temple Complex at the adjacent Asakusa Shrine, the three day festival, from May 20-22, will be the first major stop on my trip. The second major stop on my trip, also during the month of May, is a National Sumo Tournament, held in Tokyo throughout the month. Shinto mythology states that a sumo match determined the "origin of the Japanese Islands" [SUM16]. Sumo and Shinto both still have great cultural significance today. Over the course of several days in Tokyo, I plan on visiting several more Shinto shrines and religious sites including, the Kanda Shrine, site of the Kanda Matsuri, the Hie Shrine, site of the Sanno Matsuri, the Meiji Shrine, in which the *kami* of Emperor Meiji is honored, Sengaku-ji, where the 47 Ronin from Japanese legend are said to be buried, and the contentious Yasukuni Shrine, in which the Japanese war dead are memorialized, including war criminals from the Second World War.

In addition to religious sites in Tokyo, I also plan on visiting several popular culture sites, to see and learn more about the extent of Shinto influence on modern Japanese culture. These sites include the Ghibli Museum, the Tsukiji Fish Market, Yoyogi Park, and the beating hearts of youth Japanese culture, the districts of Shinjuku, Shibuya, Harajuku, and Akihabara, the last of which is known as a hub of manga and anime [183, LOV15].

While several of my days in Japan will be spent in Tokyo, I also plan on taking several day trips to other religious sites outside Tokyo, namely Hakone, home to Hakone Shrine, an important religious site on the water's edge near Mount Fuji, Mount Takao's Yakuoin Temple dedicated to the Shinto mountain *kami,* Nikko, a Shinto religious hub and location of Toshogu Shrine, the final resting place of Tokugawa Ieyasu, founder of the Tokugawa Shogunate, Kamakura, another religious hub, and finally, Kyoto.

In the City of Kyoto, I plan on visiting Fushimi Inari Taisha, a Shinto shrine known around the world for its 10,000 torii (gates), marking the entrance to a shrine, the two Kamo Shrines, the oldest shrines in Kyoto that predate the city's founding, and the Heian Shrine, dedicated to the *kami* of the first and last Emperors of Japan that ruled in the city.

On June 4th, I will return to Los Angeles.

Expected Results and Conclusion

After returning to Los Angeles, I will begin editing and posting completed videos of my findings to online video sites (YouTube and Vimeo) and creating a small series dedicated to

Japanese culture and religion each in the style of a short informative video and travel video blog hybrid. I also plan on creating a longer video and a paper of my findings to be presented at the LMU Undergraduate Research Symposium in 2017 and potentially, to be submitted for consideration for publication in the "Journal of Religion and Film" at the University of Nebraska, Omaha

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