

# SHINTO OVERSEAS AND ONLINE



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AS A NEW addition to the staff at the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture as of April 2023, I would like to share a summary of my academic interests and my ongoing doctoral research on the globalization of contemporary Shinto and the creation of digital Shinto communities. My training at the University of Pennsylvania and the University of California, Santa Barbara is primarily in Chinese and Japanese cultural studies, but I would describe myself as an anthropologist of religion. I am particularly interested in exploring topics related to Shinto as well as other Japanese and East Asian religions, digital media, popular culture, environmentalism, and globalization.

My interests in religious studies began from childhood. I grew up the daughter of a Presbyterian (Calvinist Protestant) minister who has been called to two small churches in the states of New Jersey and New York in the United States. I often liken this experience to growing up in a shrine family (*shake* 社家) or as a shrine maiden (*miko* 巫女), as it gave me the opportunity to understand and participate in the life of religious communities “behind the scenes.” I have observed that many religious communities of different faiths face the same kinds of problems. For example, both churches and shrines deal with the aging of their local members and elders, insufficient and decreasing financial support, new lifestyles and changing ideas about religion and spirituality, the adoption of digital technologies and, more recently, social distancing measures following the outbreak of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Due to this background, I am interested in how Shinto communities—especially digital and transnational communities—respond to these problems as compared with other religions.

## Toward a Global History of Shinto

Shinto is notoriously difficult to define. According to the National Association of Shinto Shrines (Jinja Honchō 神社本庁), Shinto is “a faith that was born from the Japanese way of life,” or in other words, “the indigenous faith of Japan” (Jinja Honchō 2024). From this perspective, Shinto is something that belongs to the geographical region, culture, and people of Japan. Both popular and official discourses claim that Japan is a divine nation inhabited by the myriad kami and that Shinto ritual and thought are the source of traditional Japanese culture. My research interrogates these discourses concerning Shinto’s “indigeneity” and the possibilities for the existence of shrines and Shinto practice outside of Japan. In fact, overseas Shinto shrines have a long history that goes back centuries, and there have been new developments in the global spread of Shinto thanks to a number of phenomena, including the emergence of the internet, the growing accessibility of international travel such as migration and tourism, Japan’s rise as a pop culture superpower (Iwabuchi 2002), and general shifts in attitudes toward religion being “spiritual but not religious” (Wuthnow 1998; Roof 1999; Fuller 2001).

My research explores Shinto shrines and communities that span several countries, but in this article I will focus on examples from the North American continent, as these cases are relatively unfamiliar in what I consider to be the global history of Shinto. According to Suga Kōji (2010), two types of overseas shrines were established in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: colonial shrines and emigrant (or settler) shrines. The Japanese government and military established colonial shrines dedicated to the imperial cult and deities as sites for (often mandatory) patriotic participation in civil ritual in territories such as Taiwan, Korea, and mainland China, while Japanese emigrants brought their local deities with them to places like Hokkaido, Hawai‘i, and Brazil.

In comparison, the history of overseas Shinto shrines established in the continental US and Canada is not well known. It is not that such a history does not exist, but rather that it was deliberately erased by the state in the course of World War II. Immediately following the Japanese attack on an American naval base at Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, the US government forcibly incarcerated Shinto and Buddhist clergy who had been included on a surveillance list kept by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. On 19 February 1942, President Franklin Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, authorizing the forced relocation and incarceration of approximately 122,000 Japanese American men, women, and children in interment camps. Shrine property was either confiscated or destroyed by the military, though some sacred materials survived by being hidden away or sent back to Japan, and the majority of the buildings and land was not returned to their original owners after the conclusion of the war. Abe and Imamura (2019)

suggest that these traumatic experiences and lingering stigma help explain why there are so few remaining Shinto shrines and domestic altars (*kamidana* 神棚) found in the US today. Japanese Canadians suffered similar incarceration and loss at the hands of the state during World War II. While the majority of historical Shinto shrines in North America were established by Japanese emigrants, the Japanese army did in fact build several colonial shrines in the Aleutian Islands, which are part of the state territory of Alaska. Due to the paucity of extant materials and a general lack of awareness, the prewar history of Shinto in North America remains unexplored.

I seek to answer several questions through my ethnography of contemporary Shinto shrines, communities, and practitioners outside of Japan. What is the international appeal of Shinto? How do people around the world define and practice Shinto? What historical precedents do they draw upon, and what innovations might there be? Finally, how does the globalization of Shinto affect Shinto thought and practice? In order to research these dispersed and diffuse religious communities and answer these questions, I employ digital ethnography as my primary methodology. It is a common misconception that the “digital,” “online,” or “virtual” stands in binary opposition to the “physical,” “offline,” or “real” and, by extension of this logic, that digital ethnography ignores embodied experiences and materiality. However, recent theories of digital religion and mediatization reject the existence of a clear boundary between the “online” and “offline” (Campbell and Lövheim 2011). Digital technology and activities necessitate the physical, from the material infrastructure for internet connection and the materiality of devices to the human bodies that interact with them. Moreover, the digital is becoming increasingly integrated into our everyday lives. Even when conducting in-person fieldwork on Mt. Inari or on the streets at the Gion Festival in Kyoto, perhaps quintessential ethnographic fieldwork experiences like those of Bronisław Malinowski (1922) or Clifford Geertz (1973), I use my smartphone to navigate and stay in contact with people as my Bluetooth-connected camera immediately uploads the photos I take to a digital file folder in “the cloud.” Digital ethnography seeks to capture and analyze all aspects of these experiences, not just those of the researcher but, more importantly, those of their research participants. Thus, my methodology combines traditional ethnographic methods including interviews and participant observation with social media engagement—synchronous and asynchronous—and digital archival research.

### **Pathways to the Kami**

Before examining global Shinto practitioners’ activities in further detail, let us first consider the sources of Shinto’s global appeal. The term “Shinto” 神道 may be

literally translated as “the way of the kami.” However, the phrase may be singular or plural. My research demonstrates that there are in fact various “ways” or “paths” to becoming interested in kami, the deities that constitute the focus of ritual veneration in Shinto. Broadly speaking, I have found three main reasons for why my research participants began to practice Shinto.

The first path to discovering Shinto is ethnic and cultural heritage. Many *nikkei* 日系 (people of Japanese descent) around the world are interested in recovering the spiritual traditions of their ancestors. Moreover, non-Japanese individuals with Japanese partners and children often learn about Shinto in order to participate in and pass on family and cultural traditions. In my surveys and fieldwork, I have observed that people of Japanese descent appear to be underrepresented in online Shinto communities. This may be due to a number of factors, including a preference for engaging with local ethnic communities in-person, language barriers, or the existence of private online communities of which I am not aware or a member. Some *nikkei* members of the largest online Shinto communities have voiced frustrations, arguing that these predominantly non-Japanese groups do not make space for and value heritage practitioners’ perspectives and concerns over contentious issues such as cultural appropriation and Orientalism.

The second path to Shinto is an interest in Japanese religion and culture. Some global practitioners identify as Buddhists and appreciate the complex, intertwined historical relationship between Buddhism and Shinto in Japan. Many non-Japanese Shinto practitioners discover Shinto through martial arts, particularly *aikidō* 合気道. This is because *aikidō* *dōjō* typically include *kamidana* in their space, sometimes even a torii gate, and incorporate elements of Shinto ritual. Japanese popular culture and media such as manga, anime, and video games also contribute significantly to growing awareness of and interest in Shinto. For example, the films of Miyazaki Hayao 宮崎駿 and Studio Ghibli, as well as Shinkai Makoto 新海誠 more recently, often include kami and *yōkai* 妖怪 (supernatural creatures), shrines, rituals, material culture, and themes that are often interpreted as evoking Shinto (Boyd and Nishimura 2004; Thomas 2012; Rots 2017). In addition, this area of my research accounts for the influence of the Japanese government’s soft power industry, centered on the Cool Japan initiative, and tourism. An appreciation for Japanese traditional and popular culture often inspires my research participants to travel to Japan, where they have had profound experiences while visiting shrines that have since had a lasting impact on their spiritual life.

Finally, the third path to discovering Shinto is an interest in alternative spiritualities. A significant portion of my research participants grew up in evangelical Christian households and seek to find a tradition that they feel aligns better with their values, including inclusivity, tolerance, an optimistic view of life, and closeness to nature. In interviews, global Shinto practitioners often characterize Shinto

as a more open and welcoming religion because it is focused on ritual, without strict doctrines and scriptures. In particular, they perceive Shinto as an ancient, animistic, “green,” and LGBT-friendly tradition. While the extent to which this global Shinto imaginary is a reality in Japan—past or present—remains a matter for debate, this is the Shinto that attracted their interest and inspires their practice.

### Shinto in Global Practice

Once a person living outside of Japan decides to practice Shinto, how can they do so? Shrines remain fundamental to the community as physical ritual sites, distributors of sacred items (particularly talismans called *ofuda* お札 needed to enshrine the kami in one’s domestic altar) and other resources, and authorities and organizers in communities on social media. Although the number of overseas shrines in operation today are admittedly very few in number, there are more than most people think—approximately twenty, from Los Angeles and Amsterdam to Thailand and the Republic of San Marino on the Italian peninsula. Of the shrines among these that support Anglophone online communities, the ones located in North America are the largest and most active. There are four shrines of note: Kannagara Earth Shrine 神流地球神社 in Florida, Shinto Shrine of Shusse Inari アメリカ出世稲荷神社 in Los Angeles, California, Kamunabi Ban’yū Ko-Shinto Shrine 神奈備万有乃杜 in Maryland, and Tsubaki Grand Shrine of North America 北米椿大神社 in British Columbia, Canada.

Nonetheless, the opportunity to visit a shrine in-person in the US remains rare unless one already lives nearby. Moreover, Shinto Shrine of Shusse Inari has no permanent physical shrine building, and Kamunabi Ban’yū Ko-Shinto Shrine is located on private land. If the majority of people living in North America have difficulty traveling to distant shrines, much less those who live in other countries, how can they practice Shinto and form shrine communities? The answer lies in the availability and affordances of social media platforms which connect users via the internet. My digital archival research reveals that digital Shinto communities emerged almost simultaneous with the birth of the public internet and the earliest forms of social media such as bulletin board systems (BBS), forums, and mailing lists (Bruns 2008; Ugoretz 2021; Ugoretz 2023). At least as early as 2000, an official Shinto Mailing List was created in connection with the Shinto Online Network Association on Yahoo! Groups. Over time, new social media platforms emerged and offered new features and affordances for creating community, leading to the migration and proliferation of Shinto interest groups on sites like Facebook, Reddit, and Discord. In addition, digital groups are not limited to a single social media platform; rather, they are multi-sited communities that make use of different platforms simultaneously. Calculating the total number of people active within these

communities is very difficult, if not impossible, but I estimate that there may be as many as ten thousand individuals within this network.

Shinto shrines outside of Japan use the internet in innovative ways to network with practitioners and supporters around the world. Online, they share information about Shinto and festivals, distribute *kamidana* and sacred items, organize shrine membership groups (*sūkeikai* 崇敬会) and confraternities (*kō* 講), receive electronic donations, and perform rituals over livestream and broadcast. One of the most innovative overseas shrines in my research is Shinto Shrine of Shusse Inari in Los Angeles, which does not have a permanent physical shrine building. Even prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, the chief priest Rev. Izumi Hasegawa livestreamed her shrine's monthly *tsukinamisai* 月並祭 and annual ritual events via Instagram and YouTube. Moreover, Rev. Hasegawa uses a platform called Patreon, which allows fan communities to support content creators, to manage shrine membership, offerings, newsletters, and access to other resources based on different donation tiers. This approach to creating a digital shrine community is particularly significant in light of Jinja Honchō's official opposition to internet-mediated worship (*intānetto sanpai* インターネット参拝 or *bachuaru sanpai* バチュアル参拝) since 2006 (Kurosaki 2019).

It must also be remembered that these digital Shinto communities are “hybrid,” in that they allow for both online participation and in-person participation. The use of digital technology does not replace in-person experiences, but rather creates new opportunities for participation for those who are unable to engage in-person. Overseas Shinto shrines continue to carry on their material and embodied traditions. Shrines in North America may hold events and perform rituals within their sacred precincts if they have a permanent location, and they also often hold festivals outside of shrine grounds. For example, Rev. Hasegawa performs rituals to bless the fields at Koda Farms, a rice farm owned by Japanese Americans for three generations. This practice and relationship emphasizes the connections between Shinto, Japanese people, and the cultivation of rice. Rev. Kuniko Kanawa of Kamunabi Ban'yū Ko-Shinto Shrine conducts opening ceremonies and offers prayer services (*kitō* 祈祷 or *kigansai* 祈願祭) to visitors of Japanese cultural celebrations such as the Subaru Cherry Blossom Festival in Philadelphia, reifying the relationship between Shinto and nature, in particular forms of nature associated with Japan such as cherry blossoms. Furthermore, while festivals (*matsuri* 祭り) held at Japanese cultural and ethnic centers such as Little Tokyo in Los Angeles strengthen the association of Shinto with “Japaneseness,” priests also offer ritual services, give lectures on Shinto, and even hold *miko* training courses at anime and Japanese popular culture conventions, suggesting that anyone may practice Shinto. Through these ritual activities, we can see that, on the one hand, Shinto shrines overseas continue their association with the land, culture, and people of Japan,

while, on the other hand, interest in Shinto is expanding due to its association with the environment, tourism, and fandom.

Because the majority of global Shinto practitioners are far removed from these shrines and ritual events, the focus of their practice has shifted from shrines to their personal *kamidana*. As most shrines in Japan will not send *ofuda* and other sacred items overseas by mail, overseas shrines are responsible for their creation, distribution, and ritual disposal. In a previous article, I examined how both global Shinto practitioners and shrines in Japan and around the world have negotiated the glocalization—a process of simultaneous globalization and localization—of Shinto offerings (Ugoretz 2022). For example, a practitioner might substitute a local spirit for the traditional offering of *sake* or oats for uncooked rice. Contemporary global Shinto practitioners are not alone in their glocalization practices, as there are shrines such as Meiji Jingū that serve wine instead of sake on some ritual occasions, and there is precedent for localization to be found in the history of colonial and settler shrines, such as the offering of a local spirit made from sugar cane called *cachaça* at shrines in Brazil (Kebbe 2021, 156; Shimizu 2022).

## Conclusion

In this article, I have shared a brief sketch of my ethnographic research on overseas Shinto shrines and digital Shinto communities. Outside of my dissertation research, I am committed to creating publicly accessible resources for understanding Shinto and Japanese religions more broadly. One of my projects is an educational YouTube channel called “Eat Pray Anime,” through which I use popular culture media such as manga, anime, and videogames to share religious studies research. I have also created a digital map of historical and extant *torii* gates built outside of Japan to demonstrate the global history of Shinto. Finally, since joining the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, I started a series of popular explanatory posts about *torii* of different shapes, sizes, and colors under the hashtag #ToriiTuesday which I share on the social media platforms Twitter and Bluesky. I eagerly look forward to continuing to develop my research, contributing to the publication of cutting edge scholarship as Associate Editor, and collaborating with my new colleagues at Nanzan in the future.

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