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Sacred Forests, Sacred Nation

The Shinto Environmentalist Paradigm and the Rediscovery of *Chinju no Mori*

In June 2014, a large international and interreligious conference took place at the shrines of Ise, Shinto's most sacred site. Devoted to the topic of religion and environmental sustainability, the event constitutes a clear example of the global trend to reinterpret religious beliefs and practices in the light of contemporary environmental concerns, and to redefine sacred sites as ecological resources in need of conservation. One religious tradition that has been reconceptualized as an environmentally friendly tradition, allegedly characterized by centuries-old nature worship, is Shinto. This article outlines the development and characteristics of this "Shinto environmentalist paradigm," which has led to the transformation of Shinto identities and shrine practices, and analyzes one of its core concepts: *chinju no mori* (sacred shrine forests). In addition, the article gives some concrete and representative examples of shrine-based conservation projects, and discusses some of the ways in which the Shinto environmentalist paradigm is adapted and negotiated by local actors.

KEYWORDS: Shinto—*chinju no mori*—shrine projects—forest conservation—Jinja Honchō—religious environmentalism

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In June 2014, a unique and unprecedented event took place at the shrines of Ise (Ise Jingū 伊勢神宮), generally considered as the most sacred site in Shinto. Dressed in the official robes of their respective traditions, religious functionaries from all over the world—representing Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, Hinduism, Islam, Roman Catholicism, Sikhism, Shinto, and various Protestant denominations—collectively paid an official visit to the Inner Shrine of Ise, where the Japanese sun goddess and imperial ancestress Amaterasu 天照 is enshrined. They were accompanied by representatives of the United Nations and other international NGOs. In addition to visiting the shrine and paying respect to its goddess, they all participated in an international conference entitled "Tradition for the Future: Culture, Faith and Values for a Sustainable Planet," where various issues related to religion and environmental issues were discussed. The conference was organized by Jinja Honchō 神社本庁 (Association of Shinto Shrines), the umbrella organization with which the majority of Shinto shrines in Japan today are affiliated, in cooperation with the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC), a UK-based nonprofit organization which defines itself as "a secular body that helps the major religions of the world to develop their own environmental programs, based on their own core teachings, beliefs and practices."[1]

Among the conference speakers were Jinja Honchō's current president, Tanaka Tsunekiyo 田中恆清; Princess Akiko of Mikasa 三笠宮彬子女王, an art historian and member of the Japanese imperial family; and Olav Kjørven, Assistant Secretary General of the United Nations, a Norwegian Christian Democrat politician who has embraced the idea that religion can play a significant role in sustainable development—as illustrated by his conference speech, which was later published on *The Huffington Post* (Kjørven 2014). Although the event was not open to the general public, it was reportedly attended by approximately seven hundred Shinto priests from all over the country (Dougill 2014a), as well as by a number of selected journalists and scholars. One of them, Paul Vallely (a well-known author who has written several books and articles on religion, ethics, and development issues) published a report in *The Independent*, in which he described the conference as part of the "remarkable resurgence of Japan's ancient religion of Shintoism," which according to him "has produced a new Japanese openness to the wider world" (Vallely 2014). This openness was illustrated

1. See http://www.arcworld.org/about_ARC.asp (accessed 5 March 2014).

by the event's interreligious character, as well as the apparent environmental awareness of the actors involved, which, he suggested, "could benefit the whole world" (Vallely 2014).

Describing Shinto in such positive terms, the article no doubt constitutes useful international publicity for Jinja Honchō. In particular, it underlines the claim that Shinto constitutes a form of ancient nature-centered spirituality offering models for environmental sustainability, which has become more and more pronounced in recent years. However, although such claims reflect recent popular discourse on Shinto, they are not entirely unproblematic. First, as anybody familiar with recent academic studies of the history of "Shinto" and *kami* 神 worship can confirm, the notion of Shinto as an essentially apolitical prehistoric tradition of nature worship is historically inaccurate. Although this image continues to be spread in popular scientific books, websites, social media, and tourist guidebooks, by Shinto actors as well as non-Japanese Shinto aficionados, it has been challenged convincingly by a number of historians. They have demonstrated that Shinto as it exists today—an institutionally and theologically independent religion, conceptualized as Japan's ancient "indigenous" ritual tradition and seen as intimately connected with the imperial family—is grounded largely in early-modern ideological inventions, which were given concrete shape in the subsequent Meiji period (1868–1912) (Breen and Teeuwen 2010; Hardacre 1989; Josephson 2012; Kuroda 1981; Thal 2005).

Second, one wonders what the "international openness" observed by Vallely entails, and how far-reaching it is. After all, the current right-wing national government has made some significant changes to the secular and pacifistic postwar constitution, while attempting to reintroduce imperial symbolism into the public sphere, rewrite the national historical narrative by denying Japanese war crimes, and explore the possibilities of nationalizing Yasukuni Jinja 靖国神社. Significantly, it does so with the support of Jinja Honchō and its influential political lobby organization, the Shintō Seiji Renmei 神道政治連盟 (Breen 2010a; Mullins 2012). Thus, when looking at the political involvement of the shrine establishment, "international openness" surely is not the first term that comes to mind. Of course, it may be argued that one thing does not necessarily exclude the other: while Chinese diplomats are protesting the umpteenth official Japanese ministerial visit to Yasukuni, Chinese Daoist priests are paying an official visit to Ise, providing legitimacy to the notion that Shinto is "international" and "environmentally oriented." Nevertheless, the argument that Shinto is increasingly open-minded and cosmopolitan does not do justice to the current Japanese political reality, and to the ideological ambiguity characterizing institutions such as Jinja Honchō.

This brings me to the third point, which constitutes the main topic of this article: the credibility of the "sustainable Shinto" narrative. Vallely optimistically

writes that religious environmentalism "is not just talk," as "religious leaders involved with the Alliance of Religions and Conservation have, for more than a decade, been running major projects to improve farming, land management, health and sanitation, and to curb the illegal wildlife trade" (Vallely 2014). Shinto, he suggests, offers a prime example of a sustainable religious practice: for the reconstruction of the shrines of Ise in 2013 (the *shikinen sengū* 式年遷宮: a ritualized and nowadays highly mediatized event, which takes place every twenty years and which constitutes one of Jinja Honchō's main concerns [see Breen 2010b]), some timber from the shrine's own forest was used, something which had not happened since the fourteenth century.[2] When framing this wood production in terms of environmental sustainability, and concluding that "ancient religions have a lesson to teach the rest of the world," Vallely copies the recent rhetoric of Jinja Honchō and Ise Jingū (for example, Inata 2009; Public Headquarters for Shikinen-Sengu 2010). Thus, he underlines the widespread notion of Shinto as an ancient "nature religion" said to contain important clues for overcoming environmental problems—a notion I refer to as the "Shinto environmentalist paradigm"—and contributes to the spread of this image, at least among British newspaper readers. The article does not, however, refer to Ise's long history of deforestation and resource depletetion; nor does it mention the fact that the forestry techniques deployed by the Ise foresters today are decidedly "modern," dating from the 1920s, and are based on European forest science at the time (Kimura 2010).

While it is undeniably true that Shrine Shinto has undergone some significant transformations in recent decades—including a resurgent interest in shrine forest conservation, at least in some places—the impact of these changes remains subject to debate. In particular, some scholars have expressed skepticism at the commitment of the shrine establishment to environmental sustainability, other than as a rhetorical device. Indeed, Jinja Honchō's attitude to environmental issues is ambivalent. On the one hand, the organization has actively contributed to the new paradigm by means of various academic and popular publica-

2. In the medieval period, the shrines of Ise had large areas of mountainous forest land, called *misomayama* 御杣山. Due to poor forest management, overexploitation, and natural disasters, the mountains suffered from severe deforestation for centuries. The current forest, called *kyūikirin* 宮域林, was planted in 1923, in accordance with the latest European forestry science at the time. It mainly consists of *hinoki* ヒノキ (*Chamaecyparis obtusa*) plantation forest, but also has areas of natural mixed forest. For the first time in modern history, for the 2013 *shikinen sengū* timber from Ise's local forest was used (approximately 20 percent of the total amount). Significantly, in recent Japanese mass media texts, popular books, and information brochures, the forestry and architectural practices taking place at Ise are framed as "sustainable" and based on ancient ecological knowledge, while the rebuilding of the shrines is described as recycling *avant la lettre* because some of the old building materials are reused for other purposes (*Chūnichi shinbun* 2013; Inata 2009; Rots 2013, 339–51).

tions devoted to the topics of Shinto, environmental issues, and shrine forests (Jinja Honchō 1999; 2000; n.d.), as well as its involvement with ARC projects (for example, the establishment of a global and interreligious "Green Pilgrimage Network," marked by the 2014 Ise conference).[3] On the other hand, as suggested above, Jinja Honchō is a generally conservative organization, devoted not only to priestly education and fundraising for the *shikinen sengū*, but also to the support and re-sacralization of institutions such as the imperial family and Yasukuni Jinja. Accordingly, some scholars have questioned the motives behind Jinja Honchō's expressions of environmentalism, which tend to be more pronounced in English than in Japanese-language texts (Breen and Teeuwen 2010, 207–209; Nelson 2000, 246–47).[4]

Nevertheless, "nature" and environmental issues have become central to Jinja Honchō's self-definition. In particular, the notion of "sacred shrine forests" (*chinju no mori* 鎮守の森) is employed increasingly regularly in Jinja Honchō publications and like-minded works, to the point that it has become one of the core tropes in contemporary Shinto discourse. It is no coincidence that the title of the book based on the Ise conference, published half a year later, suggests that "shrine forests save the world" (*chinju no mori ga sekai o sukuu*) (Kōshitsu Henshūbu 2014). Likewise, in Jinja Honchō's weekly newspaper *Jinja shinpō* 神社新報 as well as other publications, *chinju no mori* are mentioned increasingly often, and shrine forest preservation is a recurring topic. The significance of these forests for the shrine establishment extends well beyond ecology and nature conservation proper. Constituting continuity between the present and the ancestral past, they have come to be seen as local community centers that provide social cohesion and spiritual well-being. That does not mean the concern with environmental issues is merely cosmetic, however: all it means is that it is secondary to other concerns, such as reestablishing Shinto as a national ritual tradition. Indeed, as this article argues, a professed concern for environmental issues—*some* environmental issues, at least—is not necessarily incompatible with concerns of a more politically conservative nature. Quite the contrary, perhaps: the association of Shinto with global environmental concerns may

3. The Green Pilgrimage Network is defined on its website as "a global network of pilgrim cities and sacred sites around the world intending to be models of green action and care." Among its activities are projects for "greening the *hajj*" and for tackling pollution and waste issues at Daoist and Hindu pilgrimage sites; see http://greenpilgrimage.net/ (accessed 14 August 2014).

4. For instance, while the organization has actively lobbied for the (re)establishment of imperial symbols and against equal rights for women or immigrants (Breen and Teeuwen 2010, 201–202), it has done little or nothing to convince the government to improve its environmental policies. Accordingly, John Breen has argued that Jinja Honchō's "real concerns are not nature-oriented at all," and that the organization still has an "obsession with prewar, emperor-oriented ethics and rites" (Breen and Teeuwen 2010, 208).

well serve to provide the tradition with new legitimacy, in Japan as well as internationally, and help dissociate it from more controversial issues such as those related to war memory and imperial patronage. Arguably, then, the reconceptualization of Shinto as a "nature religion"—not merely a rhetorical strategy, but given substance by various social and spatial practices like the Ise conference discussed above—contributes to Shinto's discursive depoliticization, which may be one of the reasons behind its increasing popularity.[5]

For the time being, then, to what extent Shinto can provide real solutions to global environmental problems remains an open question. But then, most claims concerning the importance of religious traditions (including but not limited to Shinto) to solving environmental problems rest on arguments of a theological, ethical, or aesthetic nature; very few are backed up by concrete scientific evidence. I therefore suggest that we shift the focus away from the question of Shinto's significance for environmental issues (or lack thereof) to the question of Shinto's recent transformations, and look at the impact of environmental issues on Shinto shrine practices, self-understandings, and ideology. How has the global association of religion and environmental issues been interpreted and appropriated by Shinto scholars, priests, and followers? How have existing ritual and ideological elements been reinterpreted and transformed in the light of environmental concerns? And how have these ideas been negotiated and adopted by shrine actors, and transformed existing practices? This article constitutes a first attempt to address these questions. Thus far, many scholars of Japanese religion have noticed the tendency to define Shinto as a nature religion and associate it with environmental issues, but few of them—if any—have studied this development systematically. This article therefore has an explorative rather than conclusive character. I do not have the space to discuss every single expres-

5. Reportedly, in 2013, Ise Jingū was visited by approximately fourteen million people (Vallely 2014), many of whom came to experience parts of the *shikinen sengū*. Earlier that year, Izumo Taisha 出雲大社—another major historical shrine—celebrated the ritual rebuilding of its main hall (*daisengū* 大遷宮), which likewise attracted large numbers of visitors. In the past years, shrines throughout the country have benefitted from a resurgent nationwide interest in "sacred places" providing "spiritual energy": the so-called "powerspot boom" (*pawāsupotto būmu* パワースポットブーム, which was promoted by popular magazines and TV programs as well as travel agencies and local authorities (Rots 2014c; Suga 2010). Meanwhile, there also appears to be an increasing interest in Shinto among non-Japanese people: for instance, in recent years several English-language online communities have been set up, where members discuss their own attempts at integrating Shinto practices and beliefs into their own lives. Examples include the Facebook groups "Shinto, Religion of the Forest" (https://www.facebook.com/groups/224216070927645/?fref=ts; accessed 10 November 2015) and "Inari Faith International" (https://www.facebook.com/groups/inarifaith/?fref=ts; accessed 10 November 2015). The blog Green Shinto is also likely to have contributed to the popularisation of "an open, international and environmental Shinto" (http://www.greenshinto.com/wp/about/; accessed 10 November 2015).

sion of Shinto environmentalist discourse, nor will I list every single initiative concerned with shrine forest conservation. Instead, I will discuss a number of texts and cases which I consider representative of Shinto's recent discursive and institutional transformations, insofar as these are somehow related to environmental issues.

As illustrated by the example of the "Tradition for the Future" event at Ise, in recent years the Shinto environmentalist paradigm has exercised considerable impact on the tradition as a whole, and influenced the ways in which it is perceived by outsiders. In the following section, therefore, I will have a closer look at the emergence of this paradigm, outlining its main features and introducing some of its most prominent representatives. I will also briefly discuss the notion of *chinju no mori* (literally: "forest of the tutelary god"), which refers to the small groves surrounding Shinto shrines. Having discussed these ideas, I will then proceed to describe and analyze some of the activities currently taking place at shrines, such as forest conservation projects, nature education, and tree-planting. After all, understandings of nature and the environment—whether "religious" or not—are not merely abstract ideas: they influence and are influenced by daily life practices, social relations, and ways of using space. In order to understand Shinto's contemporary transformations, therefore, we need to take into consideration scholarly and ideological developments as well as concrete shrine practices.

The Shinto Environmentalist Paradigm

The notion of "Shinto" is by no means unambiguous. It is a contested concept, one that has been employed in a number of different, and at times contradictory, ways. In academic debates on Shinto, various historical narratives coexist, reflecting different ideological and normative positions regarding the essence of the Japanese nation, the position of the emperor, and the role of "religion" and ritual ceremonies in the public sphere. The category "Shinto" is subject to ongoing negotiation, and conflicting definitions represent different political agendas. Accordingly, it is practically impossible to give a neutral, empirically adequate definition of Shinto, as the very term is ideologically charged. "Shinto" is an ideal-typical construction that may be based on actual ritual practices and shrine traditions, but does not equal them. In Mark Teeuwen's formulation, it "is not something that has "existed" in Japanese society in some concrete and definable form during different historical periods; rather, it appears as a conceptualization, an abstraction that has had to be produced actively every time it has been used" (Teeuwen 2002, 233).

As noted before, the notion that Shinto is the "ancient" and "indigenous" ritual tradition of Japan continues to be widespread, but is historically problematic.

Before the Meiji period, shrines were not usually independent from Buddhist temples, either institutionally or theologically. Thus, it may be argued that modern Shinto is largely an invented tradition, which developed out of Buddhism and incorporated elements from a variety of sources—including existing shrine traditions, imperial rites, and Confucian ideology (Breen and Teeuwen 2010; Kuroda 1981). Hence, imaginations of "Shinto" as a single national tradition going back to primordial times often lead to the anachronistic projection of modern notions onto earlier shrine practices. While some shrines do indeed go back many centuries, in some cases predating the introduction of Buddhism to the Japanese isles, they have been subject to continuous processes of transformation and reinvention (Breen and Teeuwen 2010, 66–128; Thal 2005). By no means does the diversity of practices concerned with the worship of local deities in ancient times equal the singular, "indigenous" tradition "Shinto" as it was imagined in the Edo and Meiji periods. Significantly, then, there "have been historical processes of 'Shintoization'" (Breen and Teeuwen 2010, ix)—that is, in the course of history, some places and practices were configured as "Shinto," while others were excluded from this category.

That does not mean, however, that the term is merely an empty signifier that should be excluded from scholarly analysis altogether. In the modern period, it serves an important function as a generic category covering a variety of institutions usually called *jinja* 神社 or *jingū* 神宮 (conventionally referred to as "shrines" in English), as well as associated ritual and discursive practices. Today, "Shinto" stands out as a very real presence in Japanese society, even though its category boundaries have never been clearly defined, and the societal and political position of institutions and practices referred to by this term has gone through significant transformations. Many aspects of contemporary Shinto go back to the early Meiji period, when Shinto took shape as a public ritual-ideological system centered on the divine emperor, participation in which was mandatory. At the time, Shinto was legally, societally, and discursively separated from the newly-introduced category "religion" (*shūkyō* 宗教), which was seen as private and optional and which included Buddhism, Christianity, and a number of new movements focused on the worship of particular kami (grouped together as "Sect Shinto"). Shrine Shinto, by contrast, was classified as public and "nonreligious," and eventually became an integral part of the national-imperial ideology known as *kokutai* 国体 ("national body"; see Hardacre 1989; Josephson 2012).

This situation continued until the end of World War II. After the Japanese surrender, however, Shinto practices and mythology were forcibly removed from the state apparatus, and Shinto shrines were reclassified as religious legal persons (*shūkyō hōjin* 宗教法人) without formal ties to the state. As Breen and Teeuwen have demonstrated (2010, 6–7), at the time priests and scholars disagreed not only on the question of what shape postwar Shrine Shinto should

take, but also on the even more fundamental issue of what exactly it *was*. Different paradigms developed, according to which the tradition was conceptualized. The Meiji-period notion of Shinto as an emperor-centered, nonreligious ritual system lingered on. Shinto was also described, however, as a trans-religious and trans-historical tradition existentially intertwined with the Japanese nation (or "race"); as premodern folk worship, only preserved in declining rural traditions; as (potentially) a world religion, originating in Japan but with global salvific potential; and/or as a tradition of Eastern spirituality, the essence of which can only be grasped intuitively, through experience, rather than through philosophical reasoning. What these views have in common is that they all trace the origins of Shinto back to the prehistoric period, and perceive the tradition in essentialist ways, defining it in terms of certain core features that are seen as foundational and unchanging. There are significant ideological differences, however, between these various essentialist conceptualizations (ROTS 2013, 126–55).

In recent decades, a new paradigm has emerged, which I refer to as the "Shinto environmentalist paradigm": the notion that Shinto is a primordial tradition of nature worship (sometimes referred to as "animistic"), said to contain ancient ecological knowledge on how to live in harmonious coexistence with nature. Proponents of this paradigm draw attention to the intimate connection between Shinto mythology, shrine practices, and natural environments. In addition, they often assert that this ancient ecological knowledge—which, they argue, has been forgotten by most Japanese people as a result of the twin processes of modernization and "Westernization"—contains important clues for living sustainably and overcoming the environmental problems of today. In their arguments, they draw on the works of prewar Japanese scholars—in particular, folklorists Yanagita Kunio 柳田國男 (1875–1962) and Orikuchi Shinobu 折口信夫 (1887–1953), and philosopher Watsuji Tetsurō 和辻哲郎 (1889–1960)—as well as Western scholars asserting the intimate connection between religious world views and environmental issues (see below). This notion has gradually spread, to the point that it has come to exercise significant impact on mainstream Shinto self-definitions and practices—including, as we have seen, those of the generally conservative umbrella organization Jinja Honchō. Considering how widespread it has become, it can be said to have achieved paradigmatic status.

Some scholars have argued that the association of Shinto with environmental issues far predates the postwar period, claiming that shrine worship has "always" been focused on deities residing in sacred natural elements, and that the preservation of centuries-old sacred groves is evidence of a premodern concern with environmental conservation. It is certainly true that, throughout history, some shrines (and Buddhist temples, for that matter) have made attempts to prevent people from logging and gathering natural resources from their lands. Whether this was because of some sort of intrinsic proto-environmentalist concern with

the protection of "sacred nature" or because of concerns of a more economic nature may be subject to debate, however (Domenig 1997; Rambelli 2007, 129–71; Totman 1989). Others have referred to the scientist and political activist Minakata Kumagusu 南方熊楠 (1867–1941), who opposed the destruction of local shrines and shrine groves brought about by the so-called "shrine merger" policy (*jinja gōshi* 神社合祀 or *jinja gappei* 神社合併) in the early twentieth century (see Hardacre 1989, 98–99), to prove that Shinto's concern with environmental issues is older than the postwar period. Thus, Shinto scholars arguing for the importance of shrine forest preservation today often refer to Minakata as their main predecessor (for example, Ueda 2001, 65–67), while others have described him as an early "environmentalist" (Katō 1999)—despite the fact that his reasons for opposing the mergers may have had more to do with social and political, than with ecological, issues (see Minakata 1981). In any case, whether environmentalist or not, Minakata's views are by no means representative of prewar Shinto discourse: he was neither a Shinto priest nor an active layperson, and there is no reason to assume that his ideas reflect those of the majority of the Shinto clergy at the time, let alone their leaders.

The *explicit discursive association* of "Shinto" with environmental problems, I argue, corresponds to the description of shrine forests (*chinju no mori*) by scientists as ecological resources in need of conservation, which dates from the late 1970s. That is, it was around this time that a movement for the protection of *chinju no mori* emerged, and that Shinto was linked directly to environmental issues. Initially, this movement was mainly run by non-clergy scientists—well-known proponents include architect Ueda Atsushi 上田 篤 and forest ecologist Miyawaki Akira 宮脇 昭 (see Miyawaki 2000; Ueda 2007)—but Shinto scholars and priests soon became interested, and joined forces with these scientists to protect shrine forests. Among them were two of Japan's most prominent "green" Shinto scholar-priests, Sonoda Minoru 薗田 稔 and Ueda Masaaki 上田正昭, both of whom have written extensively on Shinto history and culture, shrine forests, and environmental issues (see for instance Sonoda 1998; 2000; Ueda 2001; Ueda ed. 2004). Not coincidentally, then, the first articles in the weekly shrine newspaper *Jinja shinpō* discussing environmental issues—predominantly those related to forest conservation—date from around 1980. Still, it was not until the late 1990s or early 2000s that the notion of Shinto as an ecological tradition gained widespread acceptance, as illustrated by the sharp increase in the number of books and articles addressing this topic around that time. Within Japan, influential in this respect were, first, the works of some popular public intellectuals writing about Japanese religion as essentially an "animistic" forest tradition (Umehara 1995; Yasuda 2006; Yamaori 2001; see also Rots 2014c); second, the activities employed by the Shintō Kokusai Gakkai 神道国際学会 (International Shinto Foundation), an organization devoted to promoting research on Shinto as well

as popular dissemination abroad (Shintō Kokusai Gakkai 2000; 2010); third, a series of conferences and books on the topic of "nature and Shinto culture" by the Jinja Honchō-affiliated Shintō Bunka Kai 神道文化会 (Shinto Culture Society) (Shintō Bunka Kai 2009a; 2009b; 2010); and, fourth, the work done by the Shasō Gakkai 社叢学会 (Sacred Forest Study Association), a nonprofit organization founded in 2002 for the purpose of research on and conservation of sacred forests and groves (Ueda and Ueda eds. 2001; Ueda ed. 2004).[6]

It should be pointed out, however, that the development of the Shinto environmentalist paradigm has not been a solely Japanese affair. Ideas concerning Shinto, nature, and environmental issues have developed in a transnational context: English-language texts may well have influenced Japanese interpretations, and vice versa. Already in 1970, H. Byron Earhart (1970) briefly explored the possibility that Shinto might serve as an alternative, environmentally friendly world view. Others suggested that the famous Japanese "love of nature"—a mythical construct, which has played a central part in Japan's modern nation-building project (Morris-Suzuki 1998, 35–59; Rots 2013, 98–125)—might serve as a possible antidote to the environmental destruction supposedly caused by the Christian or "Western" world view, without explicitly mentioning Shinto (Watanabe 1974; Shaner 1989). Employing similar cultural-essentialist terminology, later authors argued that this love of nature is best preserved in Shinto, which according to them constitutes a unique ethical and spiritual resource for overcoming the current ecological crisis (Picken 2002; Shaw 2009; Sonoda 2000). These arguments all echo the classical thesis of Lynn White, Jr., who famously alleged that the global environmental crisis is a direct influence of the Judeo-Christian episteme, which states that man is superior to the rest of Creation and therefore free to exploit it. Asian religions, by contrast, are believed to be holistic, grounded in notions of humans and nature as interdependent and, *as a consequence*, more environmentally oriented (White 1967).

White's article has been criticized by many, and for good reasons. Yi-Fu Tuan, for instance, was right to point out that there are significant discrepancies between attitudes towards nature, as formulated in classical texts, and actual behavior—not only in Europe but also in China, where Daoist and "animistic" understandings of nature could not prevent massive deforestation long before

6. The term *shasō* 社叢 refers to Japanese sacred forests in general. In theory, it not only includes shrine forests (*chinju no mori*), but also forests surrounding Buddhist temples, Okinawan sacred groves (*utaki* 御嶽), and forested imperial tombs (Ueda 2004, 12–15). In practice, though, the terms *shasō* and *chinju no mori* are often used interchangeably, and most people involved with Shasō Gakkai are affiliated with shrines, not with temples. The association organizes research seminars, forestry courses, academic symposia, and excursions; it also publishes the annual journal *Shasōgaku kenkyū* 社叢学研究 (Research in sacred forest studies). See http://www.shasou.org/index.htm (accessed 15 August 2014); Rots 2013, 287–94.

the advent of any "Western" technology and science (Tuan 1968). Likewise, Japan experienced serious deforestation and resource depletion long before the modern period (Totman 1989). Nevertheless, White's article has exercised significant influence on subsequent academic and religious-institutional discourse on culture, religion, and environmental issues worldwide, including Japan (Fujimura 2010). Indeed, it is one of the foundational texts for what anthropologist Poul Pedersen has called "the religious environmentalist paradigm": the "appeal to traditional, religious ideas and values" (Pedersen 1995, 258) for tackling environmental problems, and the association of religion with environmental ethics. As Pedersen shows, White's arguments have been appropriated by a variety of non-Christian actors for purposes of identity politics. The redefinition of Shinto as a tradition of nature worship said to contain solutions for today's environmental crisis is thus similar to the reinterpretation of other worship traditions worldwide—as is the essentialist differentiation between a "Western" Christianity (or "monotheism"), believed to be one of the root causes of environmental destruction, and "non-Western" traditions said to contain "ancient ecological knowledge."

The reinterpretation of religious traditions and doctrines in the light of contemporary environmental issues, and the collaboration between scholars/scientists and religious actors on these issues, has been going on for several decades. As a result, there is now a great number of academic and theological texts devoted to the topic of religion and environmental issues. The development has exercised significant impact on some religious organizations' practices and self-definitions, and has been advocated strongly by a number of scholars in the field of religious studies—prominent examples include Harvard University's organization of the "Religions of the World and Ecology" conferences (1996–1998) and book series (including Tucker and Williams eds. 1997), as well as the subsequent establishment of the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology.[7] More recent academic initiatives include a project developed by scientists at the University of Oxford Biodiversity Institute to "scientifically measure the coverage of religious and sacred land" in the world, which rests on the assumption that "sacred sites contain some of the richest biodiversity in the world" (University of Oxford 2011). This idea is in full accordance with the current trend to redefine sacred sites as "natural heritage sites" and "biodiversity hotspots" that are in need of pro-

7. Significantly, the third of the "Religions of the World and Ecology" conferences was devoted to the topic of "Shinto and Ecology," bringing together several well-known scholars working on Japanese culture and religion as well as Shinto leaders and ecologically-minded priests. Unfortunately, in contrast to other conferences in this series, the conference proceedings were never published as a book in English. There is a Japanese version of the conference proceedings published by Jinja Honchō (Jinja Honchō 2000), but it was not distributed widely and is not endorsed by the conference organizer.

tection and conservation, which is enforced by organizations such as ARC and UNESCO (for example, BHAGWAT and RUTTE 2006; VERSCHUUREN et al. eds 2010).

While environmental issues have been embraced by members of all major "world religions"—including Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Sikhism, and so on—it has been suggested that the traditions that have gone through the most significant transformations as a result of the global proliferation of the religious environmentalist paradigm are, first, so-called "indigenous religions" (for example, Native American worship traditions); and second, Asian religious traditions (KALLAND 2008; LOHMANN 1993; PEDERSEN 1995). After all, in contemporary Asian societies, which are influenced by globalization, urbanization, and secularization, traditional institutions and epistemologies are losing their former self-evidence (MADSEN 2011); in such a situation, the discursive association with environmental issues can provide new legitimacy for religious institutions, thus constituting a possible adaptation strategy. Moreover, the rebranding of "sacred places" as heritages sites rich in biodiversity can provide powerful incentives for preventing those sites from being used for other purposes (for example, construction or resource exploitation), especially since it provides local religious actors with new funding opportunities, for instance from international NGOs. This applies to Buddhism (TUCKER and WILLIAMS eds. 1997) and Hinduism (KENT 2013) as well as Chinese "religious" traditions (MILLER, YU, and VAN DER VEER eds. 2014).

Thus, the Shinto environmentalist paradigm is by no means unique: other religious traditions have been subject to similar transformations, especially but not only in Asia. Likewise, the preservation and cultivation of "sacred groves" as sites of both ecological and cultural importance mirrors developments in other countries, such as India (KENT 2013). What is interesting about the Shinto environmentalist paradigm is that it is closely intertwined with ideas of what it means to be Japanese. In the case of Jinja Honchō and like-minded ideologues, environmentalist discourse is often coupled with utopian beliefs in the rebirth of a Japanese society characterized by social cohesion, "harmony with nature," and traditional values such as respect for ancestors and national pride (UMEHARA 1995; YAMAORI 2001; TANAKA 2011). Thus, the ideological implications of the discourse on Shinto and nature extend beyond shrine practices proper, and concern the basic societal structures of postwar Japan—in particular, the constitutional separation of state and religion, which is challenged by contemporary Shinto ideologues (ROTS 2014b).

This is well exemplified by the contemporary discourse on shrine forests, *chinju no mori*. Today, the term *chinju no mori* is commonly used to refer to the groves surrounding Shinto shrines.[8] Indeed, as any visitor to Japan can confirm,

8. The compound word *chinju no mori* dates from the late nineteenth century, when it was coined by novelist Tayama Katai 田山花袋 (1872–1930) (ONO 2010). It is composed of the

many shrines are surrounded by small areas of woodland, or flanked by forested sacred mountains. Some of these shrine groves are said to constitute Japan's last remaining areas of primeval forest. Accordingly, the archetypal *chinju no mori* is a clearly demarcated, broccoli-shaped patch of natural (that is, not planted) forest mainly consisting of indigenous broad-leaved trees (Miyawaki 2000; Ueda 2007). In reality, however, many shrine forests consist of high coniferous trees that were planted (or replanted) in the premodern or modern period.[9] Nevertheless, depending on size, species composition, and geographical location, some of these shrine forests are said to constitute important ecological resources (Ueda 2007). As mentioned previously, the association of *chinju no mori* with ecology and nature conservation dates from the late 1970s, when scientists such as Miyawaki Akira and Ueda Atsushi started doing research on the topic. They have succeeded in drawing attention to the ecological value of shrine forests and to the importance of conservation, thanks to which shrine forest preservation has now become an issue of nationwide concern. Correspondingly, since the 1990s the concept has been used with increasing frequency, regularly appearing in the titles of books and articles on a range of topics including shrine history, forest management, landscape conservation, spirituality, and Japanese national identity (for example, Miyawaki 2000; Ueda 2007; Ueda ed. 2004; Ueda and Ueda eds. 2001; Yamaori 2001).

Now that the concept *chinju no mori* has come to be used widely, however, it no longer solely refers to the physical forests (or areas of woodland) surround-

terms *chinju* 鎮守 or *chinjugami* 鎮守神, an originally Buddhist term denoting a guardian spirit or tutelary local deity, and *mori*, which means "forest." It is usually written with the regular character for "forest," 森. Within Shinto circles, however, it is also written with the character meaning "shrine" or "society" 社; or, alternatively, with the character 杜, which likewise means both "grove" and "shrine." The latter character is used mostly in *Jinja shinpō* and other Jinja Honchō publications (for example, see Tanaka 2011), which is in accordance with their usual preference for archaic vocabulary and spelling; this writing has spread rapidly throughout the shrine world in recent years. As different characters carry different meanings, it is perhaps not surprising that there is disagreement among Shinto priests, scholars, and scientists about the choice of character (Sonoda 1998, 33–34; Ueda 2001, 42).

9. For instance, Tadasu no Mori 糺の森—the well-known sacred forest belonging to Shimogamo Jinja 下鴨神社 in Kyoto, one of the city's World Heritage sites—is often referred to as a remnant of Kyoto's ancient "primeval forest" (*genseirin* 原生林), on information panels as well as in popular scientific texts (for example, see Dougill 2014b, 79; Ueda 2003, 20). In reality, though, at several points in history large parts of the forest were destroyed, and there is evidence suggesting it was a coniferous plantation forest for some time prior to becoming the "natural" broad-leaved forest it is today (Kyōjō 2010; Shidei 1993). In the past decades, the forest has been subject to landscape design projects, supposedly in order to restore it to its original shape—a project which has been embraced by Shasō Gakkai as an example for other shrines (Ueda 2003). Thus, Tadasu no Mori has gone through significant transformations in the course of history, today resembling an urban park rather than a primeval forest; see Rots (2013, 274–86).

ing shrines. As the concept is employed regularly in mainstream conservative Shinto texts—for example, the shrine newspaper *Jinja shinpō*, as well as other Jinja Honchō publications (Jinja Honchō 1999; Tanaka 2011)—it has acquired symbolic significance extending far beyond forest ecology. Representing spiritual, ecological, and cultural continuity between the present and the imagined ancestral past (and, if preserved well, the future), the shrine grove has come to be seen as the number one focal point of a local community—both physical, as meeting place and center of cultural and commercial activities, and symbolic, signifying social cohesion and spatial belonging. Not surprisingly, then, *chinju no mori* now feature prominently in contemporary Shinto texts that try to renegotiate postwar secularism and argue for the ongoing importance of shrines in twenty-first century Japan—not as private religious institutions, but as community focal points, located in the center of public space both literally and metaphorically. In these texts, they have come to signify Shinto's essentially public character (for example, see Tanaka 2011; Rots 2014b).

Thus, it may be argued, the term has now acquired significant ideological potential. That does not mean it is merely an abstract concept, however: as the following section demonstrates, shrine priests and practitioners throughout the country are actively trying to give shape to their *chinju no mori* by means of a variety of social, spatial, and ritual practices, implementing and adapting the scientific and ideological developments on a local scale. It is to these practices that I will now turn.

Shrine Forest Practices

Considering their symbolic significance, it should come as no surprise that the majority of shrine-based environmental, cultural, and educational initiatives that have been developed in recent years are somehow related to *chinju no mori*. These "forests" can be anything from a handful of old sacred trees (*shinboku* 神木) on shrine precincts to sizeable areas of woodland on mountain slopes. What they have in common is that they are all somehow associated with a Shinto shrine and its deities, and, some notable exceptions notwithstanding—for example, the forest of Meiji Jingū 明治神宮, which was planted in the 1920s—they are believed (correctly or not) to go back to medieval or even ancient times. In addition, they are often seen as "sacred," and set apart from the "ordinary" rural or urban landscape physically as well as discursively. Thus demarcated, they were long protected from exploitation, at least to a certain extent: it has been argued that, historically, the protection of forest resources was an important reason for shrines and temples to redefine their land as "sacred" and make it subject to taboos, the violation of which (for example, stealing timber) would lead to divine retribution (Domenig 1997; Rambelli 2007, 129–71). The necessity of

such theological inventions, incidentally, shows that not all Japanese were as ecologically and animistically oriented as some proponents of the Shinto environmentalist paradigm would have us believe.

In the twentieth century, however, such notions of "sacred space" and "forbidden forests" no longer sufficed to prevent forests from being destroyed: in the course of the century, the total amount of shrine-owned forest land has decreased significantly as a result of government policies and construction projects, especially in the first decades after the occupation (Sonoda 2006). In some cases, priests and local volunteers have tried to prevent their *chinju no mori* from being destroyed and giving way to roads, buildings, or power plants. For instance, the head priest of the small Shishigaguchi Suwa Jinja 獅子ヶ口諏訪神社 in Yamagata prefecture (located near the sacred mountains of Dewa Sanzan 出羽三山) was successful in opposing a construction project that would have led to the destruction of a sacred forest. In order to prevent this, he cooperated with the local communist party (a somewhat unusual alliance, given the latter's opposition to the imperial institution, but reportedly they were the only politicians interested in helping him). Although the priest's activism was initially frowned upon by many of his colleagues, his achievement is now lauded and referred to by some as an example of Shinto's environmentalist orientation (Yamamura 2011, 61–67). Another interesting case of shrine-related environmental advocacy took place in the forested western part of Tokyo prefecture (the Mount Takao 高尾山 area, in Hachiōji 八王子 city) in the early 1990s. At the time, there were far-reaching plans to develop the area by destroying part of a local mountain and using the land for a construction project. A movement emerged to protect the mountain and its forest, made up of local activists and a group of foreign expats (see *Asahi taunzu* 1992). In order to prevent the environmental destruction, they started restoration work on the dilapidated local shrine, Kotohira Jinja 金刀比羅神社 (devoted to the maritime deity Konpira 金比羅 or Kotohira 金刀比羅, whose main shrine is located in Shikoku [see Thal 2005]), and recommenced shrine worship. As the shrine did not have a priest, one of the activists, Patricia Ormsby, went to Shikoku to undergo training and be ordained as a shrine priest in the Konpira tradition—the first non-Japanese to do so, reportedly (personal communication, November 2011). The movement received quite a bit of media coverage, and eventually succeeded in protecting the mountain and its shrine from demolition.[10]

As these two cases illustrate, sacralization can be employed as a tactic for environmental advocacy, and the existence of a shrine may serve as a powerful argument against forest destruction as long as there are people willing to engage

10. The movement has also tried to prevent other construction projects in the area, but with considerably less success. As an anonymous reader rightly pointed out, it could not prevent the construction of an expressway in the vicinity of the shrine.

in legal and political battles. It may be argued, however, that this type of activism constitutes the exception rather than the rule: many *chinju no mori* have been destroyed without much organized opposition at all, especially when there were significant economic interests at stake. Those shrine priests who do oppose construction projects may end up having conflicts with community members, or even losing their job, as in the case of the shrine priest in Kaminoseki 上関 (Yamaguchi prefecture) who opposed plans to use shrine lands for the construction of a nuclear power plant. As Breen and Teeuwen write (2010, 208), this priest "opposed nuclear power on the grounds of its capacity to destroy the environment and human life; it was his responsibility, he maintained, to protect sacred shrine land." His position met with much opposition within his shrine committee, however, as influential members of the shrine parish (*ujiko* 氏子) were in favor of the power plant. Eventually, Jinja Honchō became involved in the conflict, and put pressure on the head priest to resign. Soon thereafter, in 2004, the shrine sold its lands to the energy company responsible for constructing the plant (Breen and Teeuwen 2010, 207–208; Dusinberre 2012). Arguably, this is not the kind of approach one would expect from a self-declared nature religion; in any case, it illustrates the ambivalence of Jinja Honchō's attitude to environmental issues, the importance of which apparently does not always outweigh more immediate economic concerns.

There are many such examples of shrine forests that were sacrificed on the altar of economic growth, and only a few cases of shrine actors successfully opposing construction projects, despite the existence of organizations such as Shasō Gakkai. On the other hand, not all shrine forests are under threat of development: on the contrary, as they have taken on new symbolic significance, some of them have been subjected to conservation and heritagization initiatives, attracting increasing numbers of visitors. Examples of well-known urban shrines with carefully preserved forested precincts include Shimogamo Jinja and Fushimi Inari Taisha 伏見稲荷大社 in Kyoto, Meiji Jingū in Tokyo, Atsuta Jingū 熱田神宮 in Nagoya, and Kasuga Taisha 春日大社 in Nara. Not coincidentally, these are among Japan's most-visited tourist destinations. Meanwhile, priests and volunteers at smaller shrines throughout the country make active attempts to follow in their lead, engaging in and organizing activities such as cleaning litter, tree-planting, pruning and weeding, guided forest walks, firefly-watching, and so on. Central to these activities is the ideal typical notion of *chinju no mori* as sacred sites of great social and cultural significance, characterized by ecological diversity and natural beauty (Motegi 2010; Ueda 2003; Ueda ed. 2004; Rots 2013).

Today, few people in the shrine world would deny the threefold (ecological, sociocultural, and moral) importance attributed to *chinju no mori*, whether acting upon it or not. Moreover, a new generation of shrine priests has now come to the fore, most of whom have little or no personal connection with war-related

issues or "State Shinto" imperialism but who are well familiar with the *chinju no mori* concept and the Shinto environmentalist paradigm. When asked, many priests express a concern for nature conservation and other environmental issues, even though they may not actively engage with such issues. Clearly, not all of them have the time or financial means to organize activities at their own shrine. Nevertheless, in recent years several noteworthy projects have been set up at shrines throughout the country (see below), which are related to nature conservation and environmental education. In many cases, this is combined with the organization and popularization of cultural activities such as "traditional arts," cuisine, and of course *matsuri* 祭. Usually, the focus of these projects is on small-scale issues and symbolic practices: activities include forest maintenance or reconstruction, tree planting and reforestation, cleaning litter, and various educational projects. For legal reasons (in particular, fundraising opportunities), in most cases the activities are organized by nonprofit organizations that are *de facto* related to the shrine but *de jure* independent. The founders and organizers may be shrine priests, but this is not always the case: there are also examples of local *chinju no mori* movements that are founded and run by scientists or non-clergy shrine staff, such as the forest conservation project taking place at Shiroyama Hachimangū 城山八幡宮 in Nagoya (Hasegawa and Okamura 2011; Rots 2013, 302–11). Most of these movements have very limited financial means; their success depends on the involvement and engagement of a handful of active volunteers, not all of whom necessarily identify with Shinto.

It is difficult to say how many such shrine-based projects there are in total—not only because they tend to have a local character and may be short-lived, but also because it is not always easy to distinguish between projects that have an environmental focus and those that are concerned more with cultural activities. In any case, successful *chinju no mori*-related nonprofit organizations have been set up at well-known shrines such as Kamigamo Jinja 上賀茂神社 and Shimogamo Jinja in Kyoto, Meiji Jingū in Tokyo, and Tsurugaoka Hachimangū 鶴岡八幡宮 in Kamakura (Afuhi Project 葵プロジェクト, Tadasu no Mori Zaidan 糺の森財団, npo Hibiki npo 響, and Enju no Kai 槐の会 respectively). Similar projects have been set up at various smaller shrines, including the aforementioned Shiroyama Hachimangū in Nagoya (Mori-zukuri Kaigi 森づくり会議), Gosho Komataki Jinja 五所駒瀧神社 in rural Ibaraki prefecture (Sennen no Mori no Kai千年の森の会), Ōmi Jingū 近江神宮 in Shiga prefecture, Mukō Jinja 向日神社 in Kyoto prefecture, and Hiraoka Jinja 枚岡神社 in Osaka prefecture; I have also heard about active shrine-related forest conservation movements in Kumamoto and Gifu prefectures. Furthermore, there has been active shrine involvement in various tree-planting initiatives in the Tōhoku region, which are part of reconstruction initiatives following the 2011 tsunami (Rots 2014a). Finally, it is worth mentioning the hundreds of "secular" local nonprofit organizations and volunteer groups

working to improve local environments throughout the country (SORENSEN and FUNCK eds. 2007), some of which may cooperate with neighborhood shrines even though they may not in any way identify with "Shinto" or be concerned with shrine traditions *per se*. For instance, Hatakeyama Shigeatsu's *Mori wa umi no koibito* 森は海の恋人 ("the forest is the lover of the sea") reforestation project, which aims to reduce pollution and improve the coastal ecosystem (and which earned him the 2012 UN Forest Hero Award), was developed in cooperation with a local shrine (HATAKEYAMA 2010).

While shrine initiatives tend to have a strongly local character and are not necessarily long-lived, there are a few examples of well-organized projects that have been going on for several years, and which have received nationwide attention. One of the earliest examples of a successful local *chinju no mori* conservation movement is the Sennen no Mori no Kai ("thousand-year forest association"), affiliated with Gosho Komataki Jinja, a village shrine near Sakuragawa 桜川 in Ibaraki prefecture (SAKURAI 1999; 2009; ROTS 2013, 294–302). It was one of the first such initiatives, and one of the first places where the explicit association was made—discursive as well as practical—between forest preservation, environmental awareness, moral education, a renewed sense of community, and a revitalization of a supposed "traditional Japanese culture," which influenced later Shinto discourse and shrine practices nationwide. Thus, it is worth discussing the Sennen no Mori no Kai in more detail, not only because it influenced later initiatives such as NPO Hibiki and Afuhi Project (either directly or indirectly), but also because it constitutes a concrete example of what Shinto environmentalism may look like, suggesting that shrine priests can indeed play a role in the establishment of sustainable ecosystems, at least on a local level.

The founder of this organization, head priest Sakurai Takashi 櫻井崇, may well be considered a pioneer in shrine-based environmental activism. He traces his activities to 1971, when he graduated from Kokugakuin University and returned to his native Ibaraki to become priest at Gosho Komataki Jinja. Reportedly, there was a food shortage at the time, and he started growing rice on a small paddy near the shrine (SAKURAI 1999, 77). Soon thereafter, however, the pine trees that constituted the shrine forest died one by one, and he gradually became aware of the importance of forest conservation. In the course of the 1980s, he started carrying out several reforestation and forest conservation activities. In the process, Sakurai learned about the ecological interdependence between the mountain, the shrine forest, and the surrounding rice paddies; he also realized that rural depopulation and environmental conservation are related issues. Accordingly, he developed several social activities that focused not only on forest conservation but also on rice cultivation, community empowerment, and environmental education. In 1991, the nonprofit organization Sennen no Mori no Kai was formally established. As Sakurai has explained on various occasions, this organization has

five objectives: growing and preserving a healthy *chinju no mori*; raising awareness of the ecological importance of the local river, and keeping it clean; teaching people the importance of a simple life, without waste or overconsumption; giving them the opportunity to experience rice planting, in order to "restore the rice cultivation culture that has been transmitted from ancient Japan";[11] and preserving traditional skills, such as charcoal-making (Sakurai 1999, 77–78; 2009). This is done by means of guided walks, workshops, and other educational activities, which involve local volunteers as well as, often, school children.

Sakurai's activities did not go unnoticed. As one of the first local *chinju no mori* preservation initiatives, Sennen no Mori no Kai has captured the interest of quite a few Shinto scholars and organizations (including Shasō Gakkai and Jinja Honchō), and Sakurai has been invited to give presentations about his activities on a number of occasions (Sakurai 1999; 2009). In 1997, he was even invited to participate in the aforementioned "Shinto and Ecology" conference at Harvard University. He has been a trendsetter not only because his organization has served as an example for other projects, but also because he addressed topics and organized activities that in the 1980s and 1990s were not widely considered to be the responsibility of Shinto priests, yet have now become mainstream. As he told me, when he had just started his activities, people accused him of "being a communist"; today, however, he is praised by many (including the current Jinja Honchō president, Tanaka Tsunekiyo) for his groundbreaking work. Indeed, Sakurai confirmed that in the past twenty years, there has been an important shift in the shrine world: young priests in particular are increasingly aware of environmental issues, and interested not only in forest conservation but also topics such as alternative energy, a development which he applauds (personal interview, May 2013).

While Gosho Komataki Jinja is a rural shrine, it should be pointed out that similar activities have been set up in urban environments. A well-known example of an urban *chinju no mori* initiative is Tadasu no Mori Zaidan: a foundation

11. It is no coincidence that organizations such as Sennen no Mori no Kai combine forest maintenance, environmental education, and tree planting activities with rice cultivation. The symbolic connections between rice and Shinto are strong: rice products and references to the rice harvest play a central part in many shrine ceremonies, whether old traditions or modern inventions. In addition, rice cultivation has significant ideological connotations, as it is associated with the Japanese landscape, national identity, and the imperial family (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993). Accordingly, some shrines have small rice paddies, used for symbolic purposes. Today, some shrine priests are active in projects teaching young, urban Japanese how to grow rice. For instance, this is one of the main activities undertaken by NPO Hibiki volunteers in the forest of Meiji Jingū in central Tokyo. As mentioned by an anonymous reader, it is also one of the core objectives of the Tanbo Gakkō 田んぼ学校 ("Rice paddy school") project taking place at Komiya Jinja 古宮神社 in Kumagaya (Saitama). Significantly, the head priest of this shrine is a professor in Shinto studies, who has written several articles on *chinju no mori* (for example, Motegi 2010).

set up by Shimogamo Jinja in Kyoto to improve the quality of its forest, Tadasu no Mori, and contribute to local neighborhood cohesion. The foundation is active in forest conservation, promotes the conservation of traditional culture, supports archeological research in the forest, and organizes various educational and cultural activities, ranging from public lectures and scouting groups to flea markets and open-air concerts (Rots 2013, 274–86). Somewhat similarly, a few kilometers north of Tadasu no Mori, Kamigamo Jinja has set up its Afuhi Project (pronounced as "aoi project") as a means to reintroduce *futaba aoi* フタバアオイ (*Asarum caulescens*, often incorrectly translated as "hollyhock") plants into the local ecosystem. Associated with Aoi Matsuri 葵祭, one of Kyoto's most important festivals, these plants have great historical and mythological significance. They had disappeared from the shrine precincts, but now local school children are asked to grow and cultivate one *futaba aoi* for a year, then plant it near the shrine in order to personally experience the connection between Kyoto's traditional culture and its natural environment. In addition, various cultural events and educational activities are organized for the purposes of fundraising, local community cohesion, and education in Shinto ritual and belief (Rots 2013, 326–38). Likewise, Meiji Jingū has set up NPO Hibiki, which organizes guided forest walks for foreign visitors, acorn-collecting and tree-planting activities, nature camps for teenagers, and rice-planting events, all of which have an environmental as well as an educational component (Rots 2013, 319–25).

More examples could be given from other shrines, but it is beyond the scope of this article to give a complete overview of all local shrine-based initiatives taking place in the country. What these cases illustrate, however, is that popular notions of Shinto as a "nature religion" concerned with environmental issues are not merely discursive constructions employed for various ideological and marketing purposes. At various shrines, local actors attempt to appropriate and give shape to such ideas, finding new ways to assure the significance of shrines and shrine forests in twenty-first century Japan. There are undeniably differences between these projects when it comes to approach, core focus, priorities, organizational structure, and ecological impact—after all, each of them has a predominantly local orientation, and is thus contingent upon local circumstances and individuals. Nevertheless, they all share a family resemblance as they organize similar activities, uniting different actors—shrine priests, environmental activists, local volunteers, scientists, and school children—around the shared symbolic and ecological capital of *chinju no mori*.

Clearly, the majority of these initiatives not only serve to preserve or improve shrine forests and their ecosystems: the organizers are equally committed to the teaching of "traditional culture," the reestablishment of a "community spirit," and, often, a revitalization of supposedly traditional Japanese values. To what extent they represent cases of genuine environmental advocacy, or merely

appropriate natural symbols for purposes of identity politics and fundraising, may therefore be subject to debate—and probably differs from project to project, and from person to person. Environmentally speaking, the impact of such initiatives is fairly limited, hardly ever extending beyond local ecosystems. That does not make them less significant, however: in addition to possible ecological effects, they may have a positive impact on local community life, help preserve urban green space, and contribute to a general awareness of environmental issues among those involved. Thus, whether ecologically beneficial or not, these practices are contributing to the transformation of local environments, physically as well as socially. By doing so, they also contribute to the transformation of Shinto, if only in the popular imagination.

When discussing Shinto's apparent "environmental turn" and its possible relevance for nature conservation, it is important to distinguish between local shrine projects on the one hand, and the shrine establishment's appropriation of those initiatives, on the other. In recent years, Jinja Honchō has embraced *chinju no mori*, discursively if not in practice. After all, shrine forests provide legitimacy not only domestically but also internationally, especially through the cooperation with ARC and its various member denominations. Today, they are even attributed the power to "save the world" (Kōshitsu Henshūbu 2014). In reality, though, Jinja Honchō's involvement with and support for nature conservation has been limited; its primary concerns lie elsewhere. Meanwhile, most shrine projects have a predominantly local focus, combining forest maintenance with symbolic activities such as tree-planting, rice cultivation, and education in Shinto ritual and mythology. Thus far, few shrine priests have been active in environmental movements that address large-scale problems such as industrial pollution, climate change, or energy issues. Despite the growing awareness of "nature" and "the environment," therefore, there is little evidence of serious political activism among priests, a few exceptions notwithstanding. Likewise, few priests publicly criticize the appropriation of *chinju no mori* by the shrine establishment. Thus far, shrine forests have proven capable of uniting actors with different interests and agendas, ranging from scientists and conservationists to local priests and conservative Shinto leaders, rather than dividing them.

In any case, whether discussing Jinja Honchō's involvement with international nature conservation organizations or initiatives undertaken at local shrines, it is important to bear in mind that different actors within a single movement (priests, organizers, volunteers, and participants) may have different motivations and priorities. Crucially, conservatism and conservationism are not mutually exclusive, and nationalist motives are not *a priori* incompatible with a genuine concern for forest conservation and ecology. Indeed, it may be argued that in the Shinto environmentalist paradigm—and, correspondingly, in the various shrine forest preservation initiatives that have emerged in recent years—

they complement rather than contradict each other. Normative understandings of Shinto as the ancient, unifying worship tradition of the Japanese nation, intimately connected with the imperial institution and the physical territories of the Japanese state, go hand in hand with initiatives to preserve ancient landscapes such as *chinju no mori* and "restore" the symbiotic human-nature relationship supposedly characteristic of ancient Japanese society. By associating themselves with environmental issues and reinterpreting shrine practices accordingly, some Shinto scholars and shrine priests are actively contributing to the transformation of their own tradition—making it a "tradition for the future," perhaps.

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