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## Power Spots and the Charged Landscape of Shinto

This article explores religious practices and institutional tensions related to the contemporary phenomenon of power spots (*pawāsupotto*) in Japan. The concept, which holds that certain places emanate special energies from the earth, emerged in the global New Age movement before its transmission to Japan in the 1980s. It has since been shaped by discourse on spirituality and nature, mass media, commercial interests and, more recently, associations with Shinto. This latter development has exposed fissures in the broader Shinto community that concern practice, economics, national symbolism, and issues of authority. Based on field results from a variety of sites between 2015 and 2017, this article provides an overview of the phenomenon before examining the conflicting interests it has exposed among regional shrines, Jinja Honchō (Association of Shinto Shrines), and the Ise Shrines. Ultimately, power spots strike at two fundamental questions facing the Shinto community: how should the religion be defined and whose interests should it serve? The current phenomenon and resulting debate portend a charged landscape for Shinto in the years ahead.

KEYWORDS: power spots—Shinto—Jinja Honchō—Ise—spirituality—New Age

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ONE OVERCAST weekend in July of 2015, I met a man who had just finished pressing his hands against one of the sacred cedars (*shinboku* 神木) at Takachiho Jinja 高千穂神社 in Miyazaki Prefecture. He was in his thirties and accompanied by several friends of mixed gender. The group was on a casual outing, admiring the great conifers as they meandered through the shrine premises. Their relaxed tone, however, did nothing to diminish the man's excitement over this particular tree. Gesturing to a splintered path of bark ascending its trunk, he informed me of its miraculous recovery from a major typhoon. This was a testament to the remarkable energy it embodied. Simply by touching the tree, that energy was passed on to him.

Soon after, a family of four entered the shrine. After praying before the *haiden* 拜殿 (worship hall), they proceeded to a stone located inconspicuously towards the rear of the building. Only its round top emerged from the flat ground, and it was cordoned off by a thin *shimenawa* 注連縄 rope. Guided by the mother, the family (including a father and two teenage children) bowed. Then they raised their hands toward the stone, palms outward. After a few moments, they gave a slight parting bow, explored the rest of the area, and exited the shrine.

The town of Takachiho features this shrine and another known as Ama no Iwato Jinja 天岩戸神社. Takachiho is nestled in the central mountains of Kyushu at the juncture of two single-lane roads crisscrossing the island and is not easily accessible. By car it takes at least ninety minutes from the nearest regional airport. Yet this has not stopped a steady flow of visitors who descend upon the town from all reaches of the country. There are multiple reasons for its popularity. The shrines have long been recognized, especially since the Meiji period, for their associations with ancient mythology. According to eighth-century texts, Ninigi no Mikoto 邇邇芸命, the celestial grandson of the sun goddess Amaterasu Ōmikami 天照大神, descended to Takachiho from the Heavenly Reed Plains as the first deity to make contact with the world.<sup>1</sup> The community also

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1. Versions of this story appear in the *Kojiki* 古事記 (712), *Nihon shoki* 日本書記 (720), and *Hyūganokuni fudoki* 日向國風土記 (ca. early eighth century).



FIGURE 1. Visitors on a private bus tour stroll across the precincts of Takachiho Jinja after a *kagura* performance in the summer of 2017. While *kagura* has long attracted regional visitors, bus tour companies now regularly promote packages that feature *kagura* and power spots at Takachiho. Trees regularly treated by visitors as power spots are visible in the background. (Photograph by author.)

traces its origins to the famous myths, recounted in the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*, of Amaterasu's seclusion beyond the door of a cave following an attack by her brother Susanowo no Mikoto 須佐之男命. In order to draw her out and restore light to the world, the gods of the heavenly realm held a meeting. According to local legend at Takachiho, the site of that meeting was none other than a cave at Ama no Iwato 天岩戸, giving birth to the shrine that bears its name (literally, "Heavenly Rock Door"). Alongside a visit to the shrine and cave, regional busloads of sightseers arrive at Takachiho Jinja to enjoy daily *kagura* 神楽 reenactments of the story—nationally designated as an "important intangible asset of folk culture" (*jūyō mukei minzoku bunkazai* 重要無形民俗文化財) since 1978. Beyond these associations, images of Takachiho's deep gorge and misty mountains gloss tourist brochures and websites, tantalizing first-time visitors to experience its scenic beauty.

This combination of features has inspired yet another point of attraction for Takachiho in the last decade: its appeal as a "power spot." Pronounced *pawā-supotto* in Japanese, the term loosely refers to a place thought to embody spiritual energies from the earth. The terminology, practices, and beliefs surrounding this idea emerged in Japan in the mid-1980s via the global New Age movement.<sup>2</sup>

2. Admittedly, the term "New Age" covers an array of beliefs and practices that are sometimes related and other times disparate. For an overview of criticism of the term as well as a case for its continued use, see CHRYSSIDES (2007). Here I use it to refer to millennial movements from the

However, its entry into mainstream Japanese society in the twenty-first century has grown out of a variety of elements: contemporary tourism, pilgrimage, and mass media as well as popular discourses on spirituality (*supirichuariti*), nature, and sacred sites. Coverage of power spots in the mass media and marketing reached a fervor in the latter half of the first decade of the twenty-first century, peaking in 2010 (TSUKADA and ŌMI 2011). While media attention has declined since then, interest in power spots among the broader public continues down to the present. As such, the phenomenon has become one that cannot be easily dismissed or ignored by the associated sites or their institutional alliances. This is especially true in the case of Shinto, with which power spots have become most associated in the last decade.

The various influences that have shaped discourse and practice on power spots make it a diffuse phenomenon that lacks any single, overarching doctrine. This malleability has tested the ideological stance and institutional authority of Jinja Honchō 神社本庁 (Association of Shinto Shrines), which promotes a unitary vision of Shinto rooted in national symbolism and public worship of the emperor. Nonetheless, many priests have found the concept resonant with long-standing associations between power, kami, and place, and it has also been an economic boon to shrines fortunate enough to fall under the identification.

From 2015 to 2017, I conducted ethnographic research on practices associated with power spots as well as responses to the phenomenon among the professional Shinto community. As the following pages show, my encounters reflect a diverse, at times conflicting, field of opinions and ideas that revolve around issues of practice, economics, national symbolism, and institutional authority. I consider these positions among three broad categories: shrine visitors compelled by the idea of a given shrine as a power spot; shrine priests and local (nonclerical) residents, often motivated by economic interests (especially among rural shrine communities); and Jinja Honchō, which has reacted with an evolving mix of dismissal, rejection and, most recently, hints of some acquiescence. In this last category, I also include the Ise Shrines, given their preeminent position within the Shinto organization. After providing a brief historical background into this relatively new and little-studied area of Japanese religious life, I will explore ways in which the power spot phenomenon has opened up both opportunities and tensions within the Shinto community.

### *Ley Lines to Shinto Shrines*

Indicative of vernacular religious beliefs and practices, power spots emerged out of a myriad of influences in Japan. While the phenomenon has been absorbed

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1960s through the 1980s that were especially invested in theories of sacred sites and an emergent discourse on power spots.



into Japan's religious culture, it began in transnational New Age movements of the twentieth century and earlier. Theories linking archeological sites into a geologic, sacred grid trace back to mid-nineteenth century England, but gained prominence through an English businessman and field naturalist named Alfred WATKINS in the 1920s. In his book *The Old Straight Track* (1970; originally published in 1925), Watkins posited that historical trade routes developed along natural lines—he called them “ley lines”—that coursed across the Earth's surface. The theory was popular in its day but enjoyed a resurgence in the 1960s and 1970s amid a growing New Age movement of counterculturalists and spiritual seekers. Centered mainly in Great Britain and the United States, they envisioned the coming millennium as the dawn of a heightened spiritual age for humanity. Adrian IVAKHIV (2001, chapter 2) locates three interlocking premises that connected these theories to the sacred landscape: first, the Earth is a living organism, an idea inspired by mythology about the Greek goddess Gaia; second, it comprises complex flows of energy that operate in distinct geometric patterns; and third, these patterns are poorly understood by modern science but were readily discernible to ancient civilizations and indigenous populations.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to the urban, industrialized world, sites embodying this energy were situated in picturesque, natural settings that held archeological evidence of earlier human activity. Indicative of these features, Glastonbury, England, with its arresting coastline and ancient monastery (the ninth-century Saint Michael of the Tor), began attracting artists, intellectuals, and spiritualists as far back as the 1920s. By the 1960s, the desert town of Sedona, Arizona, and Mount Shasta (located in California's central Sierra Nevada) had become well-known spots in the United States.

Yet if the theory of Earth as a living organism with power nodes known by ancient cultures really held true, then it would certainly extend beyond just Great Britain and North America. To that end, the English counterculturalist John MICHELL authored a highly popular book titled *The View Over Atlantis* (1972) that invoked an array of elements (ley lines, numerology, ancient architecture, pyramids, gematria, and Chinese geomancy) to postulate that mystical energy centers were spread across the globe. These ideas reached a pinnacle in 1987 with an event dubbed the Harmonic Convergence. Performed in mid-August (amid an unusual solar, lunar, and planetary alignment), participants meditated in synchronization at purported energy spots around the world. Among these sites was Mount Fuji. Not only did its history of ancient worship and iconic beauty fulfill the criteria of the power spot phenomenon, but, more broadly, it

3. Concerning the last category, anthropologists have devoted a significant body of scholarship on the cultural appropriation of indigenous cultures by New Age practitioners. For an overview and rebuttal of the literature, see WALDRON and NEWTON (2012).

aligned with an idealized image of Eastern spirituality that, not unlike the American Zen movement, captivated practitioners of the New Age movement (DIEM and LEWIS 1992).

The earliest indication that power spots had taken root in Japan appear in various textual sources from the mountain village of Tenkawa 天河, located in Nara Prefecture. It was there that a community of foreign and Japanese artists and musicians converged at the village's Daibenzaiten 大弁財天 Shrine in the mid-1980s. The idea was readily adopted by the shrine's head priest KAKISAKA Mikinosuke, who published a book titled *Tenkawa: Sūpā saikikku supotto* (Tenkawa: Super Psychic Spot) in 1986 (HORIE 2017, 193).

The neologism “power spot” entered Japanese discourse at this time, but it was one of a number of terms circulating in the New Age movement. Hippies in the late 1960s deemed Glastonbury to be a “power center,” John Michell referred to “power places,” and the common nomenclature of the Harmonic Convergence was “power point” (IVAKHIV 2001, 48, 82). Vortex was another common referent. The term “power spot” itself appears in descriptions of Sedona by the spiritualist Dick Sutphen in 1976 (COATS 2009, 384), revealing its use before adoption into Japanese.

In Japan, an emerging theory of these spots was articulated in 1991 by the spiritualist Kiyota Masuaki in his book, *Hakken! Pawāsupotto* (Power spots discovered!). Kiyota was heavily indebted to the New Age movement, as is apparent in his references to Gaia, ley lines, channeling, and the dawn of a “new age” (*nyūeiji*) of spiritual awareness. As such, he described power spots as specific places where the Earth absorbs and releases energy flowing between it and the universe (KIYOTA 1991, 48). The landscape of Japan, he exclaimed, was abundant with such places: they included Buddhist temples, Shinto shrines, and some sites located in natural settings.

Outside of Japan, the idea of power spots declined in the 1990s, never fully transcending its origins in the New Age movement (also on the decline). By contrast, power spots rose to widespread popularity in Japan in the first decade of the twenty-first century. A number of social and religious trends can be attributed to this success, beginning with a broad interest in notions of spirituality and the “spiritual realm” (*supirichuaru sekai* 世界). While difficult to define, spiritual practices are often aimed at cultivating a deeper sense of meaning and purpose in one's life. Within this context, they are often invoked under the language of “spiritual care” (*supirichuaru kea*) over issues related to anxiety, stress, and loss (MCLAUGHLIN 2013). Such interests have been traced back to the so-called new religious movements of the mid-nineteenth century (HARDACRE 1986; SAWADA 2004), but they continued through the twentieth century, especially from the 1970s onward (MULLINS 1992; HAGA and KISALA 1995; SHIMAZONO 2004). In the last two decades, discourse on spirituality has correlated with a decline in public

use of the term “religion” as well as the founding of new religious groups. The trend escalated amid distrust and unease toward newly organized religions following the 1995 subway attacks by the radical cult Aum Shinrikyō オウム真理教 (HORIE 2009). Nevertheless, interest in the spiritual realm fulfills a continuing desire to pursue religious motivations, if not under a new set of terms.<sup>4</sup>

In response to this shift, a significant corps of spiritual counselors (*supirichu-aru kaunsera*) has emerged. While a few have reached celebrity status, authoring books and appearing frequently on television, the vast majority conduct their practice on a one-to-one basis in booths at shopping malls and plazas around the country (GAITANIDIS 2012). Both groups have been essential to the growth of power spots, promoting them as ideal places for healing and rejuvenation. The influence of celebrity counselors is especially apparent from the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century onward, as their promotion of power spots led to a surge in their popularity (SUGA 2010). The power spots they anointed were often swiftly transformed into must-visit places, leading to throngs of visitors.

Another factor shaping the power spot phenomenon has been evolving ideas about nature and ecology, which have grown in public and religious discourse in recent decades. Some Shinto shrines have recast the trees surrounding their sanctuaries as “sacred groves” (*chinju no mori* 鎮守の森), despite their mundane treatment in the past (ROTS 2015; 2017a; 2017b). Members of various Japanese Buddhist sects have revisited traditional doctrines through an ecological lens. Examples include the notion of codependent origination (*engi* 縁起), which suggests the interdependence of all living things, in Sôtō Zen as well as the medieval Buddhist concept of trees and grasses possessing buddha nature (literally, becoming buddhas; *sômoku jôbutsu* 草木成佛) in the Tendai school (WILLIAMS 2010; DESSÌ 2013). The mountain-based tradition of Shugendo has likewise enjoyed a modest resurgence as weekend practitioners escape the cities in order to rejuvenate in the mountains (MCGUIRE 2013).

This emphasis on nature has merged with interests in spirituality and power spots. In this sense, it is the old-growth trees, boulders, rivers, waterfalls, and clean air itself that are attributed with healing energies. Counselors regularly advise their patrons on the therapeutic properties associated with these places, as I learned from a number of power spot seekers. This equation of nature, healing, and spirituality recalls similar orientations in the New Age movement, and the ever-increasing urbanization of Japan only adds to the idea that nature itself

4. As one example of this continuity, interest in spirituality fits into the broader aim of worldly benefits (*genze riyaku* 現世利益), a concern that permeates Japanese religions past and present. These are non-soteriological aims, which in power spot worship, as elsewhere, include healing and personal well-being but also expand to a range of material pursuits such as wealth, good fortune, personal and family safety, high academic scores, and so forth (READER and TANABE 1998).

can counter the ailments of modern city life. A number of well-known spots have emerged in major cities too, and even these places—Kiyomasa’s 清正 Well in Meiji Jingū 明治神宮 or Tokyo Daijingu 東京大神宮, for instance—typically offer respite from the surrounding urban environment.

At the same time, spirituality discourse and its impact on power spots has been heightened by what Jeremy Carrette and Richard King identify as the “selling of spirituality.” This neoliberal trend arose around the world in the late twentieth century as large corporations began marketing products under the veneer of spirituality. As CARRETTE and KING (2005, 31) argue, “the term ‘spirituality’ functions so well in the market space of business and professional efficiency ... because it is a vague signifier that is able to carry multiple meanings without any precision.” In Japan the language of spirituality has been deployed in advertising an array of services and products: alternative health care programs, special diet foods, vitamins, cosmetic products, publications, and so forth (PROHL 2007). The idea of power spots as places of spiritual rejuvenation has been especially appealing to the travel industry. Often distant from urban metropolises like Tokyo and Osaka, they can require a host of services, including airfare, hotel, meals, and local transportation. Beyond domestic travel, some agencies have expanded the list of power spots to tropical destinations like Okinawa and Hawai‘i (DORMAN 2016).

Bus tours working in collaboration with shrines offer another means of accessing power spots. Takachiho Jinja, for instance, receives buses of visitors arriving to view its *kagura* performances and experience its power spots—features commonly promoted side by side. Not unlike those discussed by Ian READER (2005, chapters 5 and 7), some specialized tours provide instruction on ritual protocol to their patrons. This was evident in a one-day bus tour I joined in July of 2017 to the Tendai Buddhist temple of Enmyōin 円明院. Enmyōin is located three-and-a-half-hours north of Shinjuku on the coast of Fukushima Prefecture. Despite its close proximity to the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant (still recovering from its meltdown in the triple disaster of 3 March 2011), the temple has flourished in the last several years from its self-promotion as a power spot. Through interviews with the tour guide and the head priest of Enmyōin, I found that the tour company and temple share a close relationship that benefits the financial interests of both parties.

Among these various elements shaping the power spot phenomenon, arguably the greatest influence in the last decade has been its increasing identification with shrines. As HORIE Norichika (2017) demonstrates, much of this shift can be attributed to Ehara Hiroyuki 江原啓之, the most prominent of the celebrity spiritual counselors. At the height of the media coverage of power spots, Ehara authored dozens of books and appeared regularly on TV, touting his pilgrimages to shrines around the country. Among his publications was a series of photo-

journalistic works titled *Spiritual Sanctuary* (*Supirichuaru Sankuchuari shirīzu*), published between 2005 and 2007. These books featured his visits to Shinto shrines in various regions of the country. This attention often jump-started their reputation as power spots, as is the case with both Takachiho and Togakushi 戸隠 Jinja (discussed in detail below). Originally a Shinto priest, Ehara has emphasized shrines, Shinto ritual, and kami worship in his promotion of power spots. His single-minded focus on shrines marked a departure from the earlier inclusion of Buddhist and nonreligious sites found in Kiyota's work. While Ehara's celebrity presence has waned in the last decade, his alignment of power spots with Shinto endures. There are some exceptions to this convergence, including a handful of Buddhist temples, as well as Chinese influences such as *qigong* (*kikō* 氣功) and *feng shui* (*fūsui* 風水) embedded in power spot discourse. Nevertheless, the association with Shinto has become a dominant feature, due in no small part to Ehara.

The meeting of power spots with Shinto coincides with an additional interest among the public in so-called Ancient Shinto (*ko shintō* 古神道). Although most scholars agree that little to no concept or institutional structure of Shinto existed in the eighth century, various strains of the idea have perpetuated since at least the eighteenth century (for example, the *kokugaku* 國學 movement). Its recent popularity builds upon underlying neo-nationalist trends among the public, the government, and the Shinto establishment (MULLINS 2012a); however, it has been especially propelled by the thirteen-hundredth anniversary of the *Kojiki* in 2012. This event, commemorated across the country and highly publicized in the national media, sparked a national fervor over Japan's early mythology. This excitement has merged with the power spot phenomenon, elevating shrines of ancient pedigree within the discourse of power spots. As such, Ise and Izumo Taisha 出雲大社, which enshrine Amaterasu and her brother Susanowo no Mikoto respectively, have become two of the most cited power spots in publications and the media.

In some ways, the identification of ancient Shinto shrines as power spots resonates with the earlier New Age movement in its romantic orientation toward ancient civilizations. In the latter case, however, the claim was applied universally. In keeping with this earlier strain, Kiyota's book on power spots mentions early Japanese society but does so within the broader category of the world's "ancient peoples" (*kodaijin* 古代人) (KIYOTA 1991, 37–39).

In contrast, the current rhetoric privileges Japan. This has submerged power spots into the modern discourse of Japanese exceptionalism (*nihonjinron* 日本人論), as evident in commercial publications. One recent guidebook opens with the following: "Unlike other countries, the deities in this country are exceedingly numerous. They radiate mystical power from their places of dwelling, and that is why power spots are especially abundant here" (KANAYA 2015, 8). This

strain of nationalism was evident in some comments I heard at shrines too. One woman I met at Takachiho was deeply committed to visiting power spots as a form of spiritual care and healing. Following the advice of her spiritual counselor, she had been making frequent trips to Takachiho and other reputed spots. As a result, she had miraculously recovered from her illness. She then added that the existence of these healing energies at so many places in Japan was evidence of the country's superior sacredness.

### *Observations from the Field*

The various elements outlined above have shaped ideas and practices related to power spots in Japan today, as I found through field research between 2015 and 2017. Most of the sites I visited were shrines (as indicative of the recent alignment with Shinto): Ise Jingū 伊勢神宮 (Mie Prefecture), Togakushi Jinja (Nagano Prefecture), Takachiho Jinja, Aso 阿蘇 Jinja, and Heitate 幣立 Jingū (both in Kumamoto Prefecture). Outside of these shrines, I conducted fieldwork at the Buddhist temple of Enmyōin as well as two nonreligious sites: Kiyomasa's Well and Nabegataki 鍋ヶ滝 (a waterfall in Kumamoto Prefecture). My aim was to visit places that address the range of this phenomenon (Shinto, Buddhist, non-religious, rural, and urban) but also give due emphasis to their overwhelming association with shrines.

Among the sites in my study, this article focuses in particular on Togakushi, Takachiho, and Ise. The first two sites exemplify key orientations in the power spot phenomenon: rural settings, proximity to the natural environment, local economic concerns, and resonance with the Ancient Shinto movement. Ise shares these traits, but its premier position within Jinja Honchō, as well as its unparalleled popularity as a power spot, makes it an especially good case in exposing rifts between the agenda of the Shinto establishment and popular practices.

At each shrine, I conducted between ten and fifteen informal interviews with visitors, priests, and residents, generally over the course of two days. With visitors, I was interested in their primary motivations for attending the shrine. If the visit was prompted by the site's reputation as a power spot, what was hoped to be gained? What did the designation mean? What was their personal investment in power spots, and what were the associated rituals and practices? In turn, I asked priests about their theological responses to the concept as well as the practical impact upon their shrines. I also asked nonclerical residents of the area about their general impressions of the phenomenon. I took care not to lead interviewees toward any one particular response or conclusion, particularly since many visitors presumably held no interest in the idea of power spots. I maintain the anonymity of my subjects here—an issue especially relevant for clergy, who often share views that conflict with the stance of Jinja Honchō.

In total, I spoke with roughly sixty visitors who expressed interest in power spots and observed many others. From these results, I found that power spot enthusiasts vary widely in terms of dedication and commitment. On one end of the spectrum are the merely curious participants, often guided by others, while on the other end are devout adherents, who possess extensive knowledge and theories on power spots and make frequent visits. Most, however, are situated somewhere in the middle: they ascribe to the conceptual framework of power spots while simultaneously appreciating the associated sites as traditional shrines. There is no self-identifying group but rather varying degrees of interest and commitment toward the phenomenon.

Within this broad range of participation, significant diversity exists in terms of age and gender. Previous scholarship, alongside common perceptions, often limits the trend to young, unmarried women in their twenties and thirties. This impression may result from a lack of field-based research, combined with the fact that this demographic is the most targeted in media and marketing campaigns. On the ground, however, I found that a sizeable number of participants were men (about one-third). I also observed opposite-sex couples of all ages and friends of mixed gender. Their ages ranged from thirty to seventy, with the largest percentage (roughly half) in their thirties. This diverse demographic resists the simplistic confinement of only young women to the phenomenon—an assessment that is, at best, inaccurate, and at worst, dismissive. The latter possibility may explain the dearth of research on power spots, despite their widespread popularity for over a decade and a half now. Delimiting the movement to a fad among young women is one way of subtly writing it off as a serious object of investigation.

As for the women in my study, they varied widely in age and lifestyle: single, married, young, and elderly. Many I encountered appear to figure prominently in the religious lives of their social groups and families. Similar conclusions have been drawn in regard to contemporary religious life in Japan by Helen HARDACRE (1984), Paula ARAI (2011), and Barbara AMBROS (2015, chapters 8–9). To this end, I regularly met groups of friends and families that were visiting a site under the informal leadership of one woman (friend, colleague, or family member).

### *The Togakushi Shrines*

Togakushi Jinja offers one example of a Shinto site that has been recently reinterpreted as a power spot. Situated in the mountains of northern Nagano Prefecture, the shrines lie just to the southwest of the jagged ridgeline of the peak bearing the site's name. There are five shrines in total, three of which are fully staffed and operational. In the Edo period, Togakushi served as a *jikimatsu* 直末 of the Tendai institution, placing it directly under the head temple of Kan'eiiji





FIGURE 2. Visitors line up at Chūsha (Togakushi) to pray on a summer weekend in 2015. The large cedar on the left and small waterfall in the far right are treated by many as power spots. (Photograph by author.)

寛永寺 (in Edo). It was staffed by fifty-three cloisters (*in* 院) and managed by a chief administrator (*bettō* 別當) who was dispatched from either Kan'eiji or Hieizan 比叡山. At the start of the Meiji period, the Tendai priests and *yamabushi* 山伏 (practitioners of Shugendo) of the site were compelled under government directives to cease all Buddhist activities and convert to Shinto or change professions. The newly designated shrines joined the nascent, state-sanctioned order of Shinto and were classified as *kokuhei shōsha* 国幣小社, a distinguished rank that implied the site's allegiance and tribute to the emperor and country. Today, Togakushi remains a Shinto site and is affiliated with Jinja Honchō, though there is an active interest among its clergy to revive aspects of its historical roots in Buddhist-Shinto-Shugendo combinatory practices.<sup>5</sup>

Nowadays people visit the area for a variety of reasons. Tourism has been long promoted through its local products (soba and handwoven baskets), winter sports (including a ski resort established in the 1970s), the surrounding natural beauty, and of course, the shrines themselves. More recently, the site's reputation

5. Since 1989, the shrines have revived a premodern festival (suspended in the Meiji period) known as the *hashira-matsu* that combines Buddhist, Shinto, and Shugendo elements. In recent years, they have invited *yamabushi* from the Tokyo area to participate in the event. As another example, the Hōmotsukan 宝物館 (Hall of Treasured Objects) showcases regular exhibits on the history of Togakushi and its possessions. Opened in 2011, it is curated by local historians and priests of the shrines (information available online at [www.togakushi-jinja.jp/seiryuden/home.html](http://www.togakushi-jinja.jp/seiryuden/home.html); accessed 29 September 2017).



FIGURE 3. Visitors to Togakushi Jinja touch one of the sacred trees in front of Chūsha. It is thought by many to be a power spot. (Photograph by author.)

as a power spot has drawn many new outside visitors. According to residents with whom I spoke, this began with Ehara Hiroyuki, who published an extensive account of his visit to Togakushi in 2006 in his *Spiritual Sanctuary* series, claiming it to be a “sacred place of overwhelming power” with “especially high levels of energy” (EHARA 2006, 32). Since Ehara’s endorsement, the number of visitors to Togakushi has steadily increased. While there was no significant jump directly following his visit, prefectural statistics show that the annual average of 1 million visitors to the region rose to 1.2 million in 2010 and again to 1.6 million in 2015 and 2016.<sup>6</sup> While a variety of factors account for this increase (including the Ancient Shinto trend), Togakushi’s notoriety as a power spot remains a major influence.

Visitors drawn by this recent designation carry out many of the practices typical of those at an ordinary shrine, making it difficult, if not problematic, to

6. These figures are for the Togakushi High Plains (Kōgen 高原) which, besides the shrines, includes a local ski resort and scenic places of interest. Tourism statistics are available on the Nagano prefectural government website at <https://www.pref.nagano.lg.jp/kankoki/sangyo/kanko/toukei/riyousya.html> (accessed 24 November 2017).

distinguish between types of patronage. Power spot enthusiasts continue to pray and make offerings at each *haiden*, talk about the kami, and observe general shrine etiquette. Nevertheless, certain patterns in behavior and language suggest common orientations in the power spot phenomenon. This is first evident in the heightened level of attention and reverence paid to particular natural objects like trees, stones, and waterfalls. While the entire region of Togakushi is often said to be a power spot, a number of tall cedars and a small waterfall next to the main shrine of Chūsha 中社 stand out as especially popular. These objects have long been designated as sacred by the shrine (evident in the *shimenawa* ropes and *shide* 紙垂 strips of paper demarcating them), but their new designation has elevated their status among visitors. Following prayers at Chūsha, visitors often stand before the waterfall, sometimes with palms facing outward, as Ehara has been shown to do. Many also lay their hands on the trunks of the large trees. I was told by older residents that this practice dates back as far as they can recall but that it has substantially increased under the power spot phenomenon. As for the basis of this power, visitors often describe it simply as an “energy” (*enerugi*) that facilitates rejuvenation, purification, and healing. It is sometimes associated with the kami but more often attributed broadly to the earth and surrounding natural elements.

If visitors to Togakushi are entranced by the idea of the shrine’s qualities as a power spot, priests and residents of the village do not appear particularly perturbed by it. One male priest in his sixties reasoned that if one understands the kami as a source of power, the notion of Togakushi as a power spot is entirely conducive. The site, after all, is endowed with many local deities. Another priest (a man in his eighties) took a similar stance: as a local historian of Togakushi, he found the idea consistent with historical views of the mountain as a place of numinous power. Nonclerical residents with whom I spoke similarly associated this power with the kami or, more broadly, the natural landscape.

There is also a positive economic side to the site’s new reputation. Like many rural communities, Togakushi Village has long struggled with a decreasing population and an aging community. Aiming to stave off further decline, regional municipalities around the country have been enacting policies, touted as *gurin tsūrizumu* (green tourism), since the 1990s that promote domestic tourism (FUNCK and COOPER 2013, 187–91). The issue became a national priority in 2008 under the newly conceived Japan Tourism Agency.

Togakushi residents themselves have long been aware of these downward trends. The new reputation of their shrines is welcomed by many. The Togakushi Tourism Association has made power spot pilgrimage a centerpiece of its campaigning efforts. In 2017 it promoted taxi tours featuring the region’s power



FIGURE 4. The cover of a stamp foldout purchased by the author at Chūsha, Togakushi Jinja. Although the shrine does not overtly promote itself as a power spot, paraphernalia such as this one hint at an implicit, if not playful, acquiescence to the popular designation.

spots on its official website.<sup>7</sup> Users of the website could book a tour of Zenkōji, Togakushi, and nearby Akakura Onsen 赤倉温泉 that combined cuisine, hot springs, and “encounters with the power of the gods” (*kami no pawā o fureru*). The Togakushi portion included access to all five shrines along with a lunch of soba noodles (the area’s famous dish) at one of the village’s restaurants. Apart from the activities of the Tourism Association, local business owners have taken individual initiative. The façade of one gift shop just outside the *torii* at Chūsha was plastered with signs advertising “power stones” (*pawāsutōn*) when I visited in 2015.

As residents themselves, the priests also benefit from the overall uptick in tourism. Many of them are inn proprietors, descending from families who historically operated *shukubō* 宿坊, or lodges that hosted confraternities (*kō* 講) centered on the worship of Togakushi’s buddhas, bodhisattvas, and local deities. With that baseline of support steadily shrinking, most have now opened

7. See <http://mkt-liner.jp> (accessed 21 November 2017).

their establishments to the public as inns. The rise in new visitors has, no doubt, helped to fill more rooms, as one priest informed me.

It should be noted that the reception by priests to the notion of Togakushi as a power spot should be interpreted as a private view. The shrines do not overtly endorse the idea. Indeed, their official publications, including books, newsletters, and fliers, do not mention the term “power spot.” That said, hints of implicit approval occasionally emerge. In 2015 I purchased a playful stamp foldout at Chūsha that centered on the “three great power spots of northern Shinano.” Alongside Togakushi, it featured the neighboring Iizuna 飯綱 Shrine and the temple of Zenkōji 善光寺 in Nagano City, a nod to their historical connections and sign of continued coordination. Echoing the sentiment of the priests with whom I spoke, the cartoon imagery represents the power of the three sites through their respective deities. In addition to this souvenir, subtle endorsements sometimes appear on the shrines’ official website under its “news” headlines. In the summer of 2017, these included one hyperlink connecting to a guidebook to Japan’s power spots and another to a popular blog on power spots, both of which featured Togakushi.<sup>8</sup>

Reactions from the clerical community at Togakushi were largely consistent with my findings at other shrines. A middle-aged female shrine attendant at Takachiho Jinja noted that the shrine neither promotes nor rejects its reputation as a power spot. In a separate conversation, one of its younger priests elaborated on this stance with his own take: the shrine lends itself to multiple interpretations, power spots included. As such, he welcomes power spot seekers and does not find the concept to be necessarily wrong or misguided. That said, he prefers a more expansive definition for the site—one that does not cling too narrowly to a specific set of terms and discourse. I received a similar response from a priest of nearby Heitate Jingū, a village shrine located in central Kyushu that has received national attention in recent years as a power spot. When I asked him if the shrine was a power spot, he replied with a twinkle in his eye that he doesn’t know (*Wakaranai...*)—a response that leaves the door open for flexibility on the issue. He then offered his own interpretation: those who come to his shrine to “receive power” (*pawā o itadaku*) should later reciprocate by engaging in work that will benefit others.

The most unease I encountered—excepting Ise, which I return to later—came from a young male priest at Aso Jinja, located in the Aso Caldera of central Kyushu.<sup>9</sup> He too did not oppose the idea of power spots and felt grateful for the increased number of visitors it brought. That said, he expressed some annoyance

8. See <http://togakushi-jinja.jp/news/index.html> (accessed 6 September 2017).

9. Incidentally, this interview took place in 2015, a year before the collapse of the shrine’s two-story gate and *haiden* in the Kumamoto earthquake of 2016.



by those who rushed in and out of the shrine, consumed primarily by its status as a power spot and uninterested in further engaging with it.

While his feelings are probably shared by others in the Shinto clergy, the general impression I received was twofold: one, the reputation as a power spot contributes to the overall economic well-being of communities otherwise facing long-term downward trends; and two, the idea of the power spot is viewed as compatible with long-standing notions about the power of the kami. These responses represent local economic and religious concerns that, for the most part, Jinja Honchō has not given significant weight.

### *Resistance from Jinja Honchō*

Jinja Honchō was established in 1946 as an umbrella organization to nearly eighty thousand shrines around the country (some shrines remain independent). Its original objective, as directed by the Allied General Headquarters, was to remove all collusion that had existed between Shinto shrines and the state since the Meiji period. As such, the newly-minted association would ensure this separation through its operation as a private religious entity.

Needless to say, this postwar structure has been tenuous at best. From the onset, it was met with widespread criticism by the Shinto clergy (HARDACRE 2017, 447). As a growing body of research attests, persistent political, legal, and ideological attempts have since been made on various fronts to erode the distinction.<sup>10</sup> Jinja Honchō has often led this resistance, advocating Shinto as a public (that is, state) religion that ensures the well-being of the emperor and the nation—in other words, a vision fairly reflective of the Meiji era. Under such a narrative, the religion of Shinto exists as the eternal, spiritual core of Japan. As one might guess, the conceptualization of shrines as power spots—an idea obviously both recent and imported—has not aligned well with an institutional logic that is grounded in the symbols of tradition, nation, and timelessness.

Jinja Honchō voices its position on a range of issues in its weekly newspaper, the *Jinja shinpō* 神社新報. The paper is distributed in print to member shrines around the country, prefectural shrine offices (*jinja chō* 神社庁), individual subscribers, and published online ([www.jinja.co.jp](http://www.jinja.co.jp)). Its editorials, as the following excerpt shows, routinely criticize the power spot phenomenon.

10. See SHIMAZONO (2007) on the postwar reintegration of imperial worship and the directives of Jinja Honchō. On the problematic distinction between religious and secular categories in postwar Japan, see MULLINS (2012b) and ROTS (2017a). BREEN (2010a) and LARSSON (2017) discuss legal cases that have challenged this separation. MULLINS (2012a) addresses the political alliances of Jinja Honchō with the neo-nationalist lobby Nippon Kaigi 日本会議 and the Liberal Democratic Party in the past several decades.

Nowadays youth who are interested in the so-called “spiritual” realm and “power spots” are increasing in number. It has been claimed that this trend has led to a surge in shrine activity. Yet even if the trend has increased interest in Shinto among young people, it does little to engage them [over the long-term]. In order to not deter those youth who are only superficially attracted to shrines, and to avoid creating further distance, the existing bonds between the Shinto priesthood, parish representatives (*sōdai* 総代), and young members (*ujisei* 氏青) must be strengthened. (*Jinja shinpō*, 16 July 2012)<sup>11</sup>

Interest in power spots, in other words, is merely a short-term trend that does nothing to support long-term patronage. By confining the phenomenon to young people, moreover, the editors use the category as code language for temporality and superficiality. This premise of a youth-centered phenomenon, incidentally, conflicts with my observation of all generations taking interest in power spots.

Another editorial takes aim at associated practices.

Shrines are preserved for the devotion of the kami and those who worship them. They are endowed with an abundance of natural elements, thus calming and rejuvenating people. These long-worshipped sites are now thought to be power spots by some. However, when we recognize that the term “spot” (*supotto*) implies [a single] “point” (*ten* 点), the timeless history and traditions that have been passed down to us are ignored. Instead, only certain objects within the shrine receive attention. Take the example of a sacred tree reconceived as a power spot: because this spot is interpreted as *the* point [that is, the power spot], all other areas of the shrine become neglected. As a result, strange behaviors like stroking and hugging sacred trees have grown rampant.... Feverishly laying their palms on the trees to “receive energy” (*ki o itadaku* 気をいただく), these visitors fail to appreciate the solemn atmosphere of the shrine premises and forget to pray before the kami. Captivated only by the word “power spot,” they truly mistake the original essence (*honrai no sugata* 本来の姿) of the shrine. (*Jinja shinpō*, 18 August 2014)

On one level, the notion that some visitors fixate on certain objects seems to expose a certain anxiety. After all, what use are the priests when one can immediately experience the power of a shrine through its trees, air, and water, absent an intermediary? This threat, however, may be overstated. In my observations, I found that visitors of all stripes continue to wait patiently in line to offer coins before the *haiden*, purchase amulets (*ofuda* お札 and *omamori* お守り), buy paper fortunes (*omikuji* 御神籤), and commission formal prayer services (*gokitō* ご祈禱). Some then go on to commune with the trees.

On another level, the antagonistic dichotomy constructed here serves a more implicit function. By delineating correct behavior (prayers before the shrine)

11. All translations in this article are my own.



from deviant behavior (tree-hugging), Jinja Honchō attempts to establish a set of norms for shrine worship. This points to an underlying concern regarding its authority over ritual and practice. Kokugakuin Shinto scholar Kurosaki Hiroyuki has drawn attention to another recent point of contention regarding practice: the worship of shrines via the internet. *Intānetto sanpai* インターネット参拝 (internet-based religious veneration), as it is known, allows for a range of possibilities for remote forms of patronage. While some priests have highlighted the advantages for parishioners (*ujiko* 氏子) who have relocated or are otherwise physically unable to attend the shrine, Jinja Honchō has charged that worship via the internet violates the norms of Shinto ritual (KUROSAKI 2011).

These cases suggest that Jinja Honchō is driven more by orthodoxy and orthopraxy than by the practical interests of regional shrines. That said, there are some signs that Jinja Honchō may be shifting its stance as of late. One example comes from its current president, Tanaka Tsunekiyō 田中恆清. Based at Iwashimizu Hachimangū 石清水八幡宮 in Kyoto, Tanaka has become an influential figure in the Shinto community, holding leadership positions in a number of national organizations. On a variety of issues, he has taken a nuanced approach that does not always coincide with that of Jinja Honchō. On the one hand, he remarks in his book *Shintō no chikara* 神道の力 (The strength of Shinto, 2011) that the prayer activities of Shinto priests primarily serve the interests of the public, not private, realm (TANAKA 2011, 7). The public (*ōyake* 公) in this instance refers to the government and emperor, suggesting a narrow, state-centered vision of Shinto ritual that hues with that of Jinja Honchō. On the other hand, he has challenged the Meiji-era notion of Shinto shrines as historically independent from Buddhist temples, citing the combinatory history of his own shrine of Iwashimizu (TANAKA 2011, 189–92). While the idea of two historically separate religions has been broadly disproven in scholarship, it continues to underlie conservative attitudes in the Shinto community. Seeking to bridge this gap, Tanaka helped found Shinbutsu Reijō Kai 神仏霊場会 (Association for Shinto-Buddhist Sacred Sites) in 2008 in order to encourage dialogue and collaboration between the two religious systems.<sup>12</sup>

Tanaka's views on Buddhist-Shinto relations coincide with a growing interest in temple and shrine itineraries (promoted as *jisha meguri* 寺社巡り) in parts of Japan. His stance on power spots similarly demonstrates a certain level of tolerance, if not going too far afield from the position of Jinja Honchō. TANAKA (2011, 6–10) contends that the ancient Japanese intuited the true meaning of a “power spot” (invoking the term himself), because they were immediately aware of the

12. Tanaka shares his goals for Shinbutsu Reijō Kai in an interview from 21 October 2015, published in *Jisha Now* (寺社 Now), vol. 6. <http://jisy-a-now.com/?p=1334> (accessed 6 September 2017).

kami when visiting a shrine. The contemporary phenomenon, for him, stands at odds with this original perceptivity. He does not expand on the nature of this difference—simply that current interpretations threaten to mislead young people away from the original faith of Shinto. Yet signaling a receptive approach, he allows that the resulting increase in visitors presents an opportunity for priests to reach out to a new potential group of patrons.

There are hints that Jinja Honchō could move closer to Tanaka's position of outreach versus rejection. In May of 2016, the association hosted a forum centered on a two-pronged strategy for shrines to preserve traditional culture while strengthening participation among the general public. Echoing Tanaka, Kokugakuin professor of Japanese religions Ishii Kenji argued in his keynote address that while power spots and the "spiritual boom" may be misguided, they provide an initial draw for visitors. Taking into account the instability of regional shrines, he recognized that many of them have viewed the power spot phenomenon and other current trends as an opportunity to reconnect with their communities and the broader public. Ishii closed by urging Jinja Honchō to cooperate with its member shrines in finding a viable path forward. The fact that these comments were summarized in the *Jinja shinpō* (23 May 2016) shows some level of receptivity to his message on the part of Jinja Honchō.

### *The Case of Ise*

Tensions over the meaning and application of power spots play out nowhere greater than the Ise Shrines. Ise is, by no means, an ordinary shrine complex. Enshrining Amaterasu Ōmikami, the site is treated as the ancestral mausoleum of her alleged descendants, the imperial family (SHIMAZONO 2007, 703). Taking the well-being of the emperor as the primary function of Shinto, Jinja Honchō places Ise at the center of the religion. While other shrines are assigned a rank, Ise's exceptionality places it outside of the ranking system altogether. Instead, it nominally operates as *de facto* head shrine (*honsō* 本宗) to the nation's shrines—a relationship demanding both the spiritual and economic support of all shrines affiliated with Jinja Honchō. As one example, regional priests have been compelled in recent years to offer Ise amulets (*jingū taima* 神宮大麻) for sale alongside their own amulets, often at a financial loss. Such a program promotes the worship of Ise across the country while simultaneously reminding the Shinto community of its supreme status (BREEN 2010b).

While the social, economic, and political complexities of Ise exceed the current article (see instead TEEUWEN and BREEN 2017, chapter 10), the case of power spots sheds light on the tricky balance of interests represented among the shrine itself, Jinja Honchō, and the public. While Jinja Honchō deploys Ise as an abstract national symbol, on a popular level, the shrines have drawn waves of



FIGURE 5. People raising their palms toward the three stones (*mitsuishi* 三石) beside the Daijingu of Gekū (Ise's Outer Shrine). This enclosure of stones has been reputed to be a power spot in recent years. (Photograph by author.)

pilgrims dating back to the Edo period. Currently, the site has enjoyed ascendant enthusiasm amid overlapping interests in the Ancient Shinto trend, nature worship, spiritual care, and power spots. In recent years, annual visitors to Ise have consistently topped eight million.<sup>13</sup>

Much of this popularity is owed to Ise's reputation as Japan's premier power spot. During my visit to its two main shrines—Naikū 内宮 (Inner Shrine) and Gekū 外宮 (Outer Shrine)—in July of 2017, I encountered multiple signs of this status. Visitors I spoke with referred to power spots within the dual shrine premises through a variety of interpretations: the trees, the Isuzu River (bordering Naikū), the air itself, the two concealed inner sanctuaries (Kōtai Jingū 皇大神宮 of Naikū and Daijingu 大神宮 of Gekū), and the entire shrine precincts. Treatment of its great cedars, planted along the pathways, attest to this phenomenon. On my way to Aramatsuri no Miya 荒祭宮 (an auxiliary shrine of Naikū), for example, I noticed that the thick, variegated bark on one great tree had been reduced to a smooth sheen. As with other purported power spots, I observed multiple people pressing their hands against the trunk, several of whom exclaimed that

13. Statistics on tourism data for Ise can be found on the city's official website under "Ise-shi kankō tōkei" 伊勢市観光統計. See <http://www.city.ise.mie.jp/3025.htm> (accessed 15 September 2017).

it was indeed a power spot (*Yappari pawāsupotto dayo!*). Most of the trees along the pathways to Naikū and Gekū have been sheathed in bamboo casing in order to prevent further rubbing, which I was told can injure them (I have not looked into the evidence behind this claim). Similar to what I learned at Togakushi, several elderly workers (security personnel and a tour guide) informed me that the practice of touching these trees predates the power spot phenomenon at Ise but has risen dramatically in its wake.

A triad of three stones at Gekū arguably receives the most attention among the places thought to be power spots at Ise. Roped off by a thin *shimenawa* rope on four sides, the stones protrude from an otherwise flat pathway leading to Daijingu. During the twenty-year ritual rebuilding of the Ise Shrines (*shikinensengū* 式年遷宮) (last performed in 2013), the site serves as the location for a purification ceremony known as the *kawara ōharai* 川原大祓. Nonetheless, this lofty role has become overshadowed by the site's popular renown as a power spot. Numerous websites attest to its special qualities. "By raising hands towards the stones, one will feel warm energy radiating outward from them," claims one.<sup>14</sup>

During approximately thirty minutes of observation on a fair summer weekend, I witnessed scores of people visiting the stones on their way to and from Daijingu. In ebbs and flows, couples, young families, friends, elders, and tour groups approached. The stones evoked a mixture of reactions: quiet reverence with palms outward, curiosity, skepticism, and plenty of photo opportunities. One man in his sixties joked to his comrades that the site had drawn crowds ever since its appearance on television as a power spot. Another man of similar age later explained to his friends that the stones have been popular since at least the postwar period: people used to line up, toss coins, and pray for mental and physical purification (perhaps an offshoot of the *ōharai* ceremony). Now, he remarked, they raise their palms and call them "power stones." If this oral history is true, then the religious goals of purification and healing between the two generations are not far apart. What has changed is the terminology, practice, and underlying logic. Perhaps giving the stones nomenclature (*pawāsupotto*) with an accompanying set of ideas simply lends materiality and language to what has long been believed in the abstract—that there is an uncanny power embodied in them. Incidentally, no one I chatted with spoke of their ritual use in the *shikinensengū*.

Despite the widespread appeal of the stones and other parts of Ise as power spots, the shrines have dismissed the movement. The term *pawāsupotto* thus does not appear anywhere on the Ise official website. This reticence contrasts with the cacophony of testimonies voiced in websites, guidebooks, tours, and private conversations on site that describe it as such. The website does provide a

14. This is on the website *Fūsui Pawāsupotto Kensaku* 風水パワースポット検索. See <http://powerspot.crap.jp/s/2756.html> (accessed 30 August 2017).

photograph of the three stones at Gekū that includes a description of their function in the *kawara ōharai*. Noting the gravity of the ritual, however, it warns people against “the recent practice of raising their palms toward the stones.”<sup>15</sup> This disapproval appears to be consistent with the opinions of clergy and residents. When asked, one priest outside of the *goshuin* 御朱印 (stamp book) window at Naikū kindly but affirmatively informed me that Ise was not a power spot. I learned from the Ise Shrine Office (*Jingū shichō* 神宮司庁) that this view is common among the priests at Ise. This position extends to the broader nonclerical community too, as I noted from similar responses by residents in the area.

Not all trends in Shinto have been excluded from the official stance of Ise and Jinja Honchō. The recent coupling of Shinto and nature offers one example. To promote this relationship, Jinja Honchō selected Ise to host an international conference in June of 2014 titled, “Tradition for the Future: Culture, Faith and Values for a Sustainable Plan.” Leaders representing major world religions spoke at Naikū on the need for their institutions to take action against current environmental threats. Amid the forested pathways, green hilltops, and clear rivers encompassing the site, Ise was held up as the paradigm of symbiosis between religion and nature, despite its questionable record of environmentally sustainable practices (ROTS 2015, 206–208). To some extent, this alignment of Ise and nature suggests a political agenda. Abe Shinzō, who is closely allied with Jinja Honchō, has made regular public visits to the site—unprecedented for a prime minister since the ostensive separation of government and religion in 1946. As TEEUWEN and BREEN (2017, 241) note, “turning Ise into a timeless symbol of Japanese harmony with nature depoliticizes the site and thus, paradoxically, makes it more attractive as a stage for political gestures.” To this point, we might add that the contingent idea of Shinto as a form of nature worship (*shizen sūhai* 自然崇拜) has long been used in reference to the early history of the Japanese archipelago. Such a classification allows Shinto to fit easily into the rhetoric of Japanese tradition and timelessness. Power spots clearly fall short of this requirement.

Dismissal of the power spot phenomenon at Ise notably contrasts with the accommodative positions I encountered at regional shrines. Needless to say, Ise priests generally take a more conservative position on Shinto, conforming more closely to the stance of Jinja Honchō. More so than anywhere else, they proudly serve the spiritual well-being of the imperial family. In addition, Ise does not face the same economic challenges faced by most other shrines around the country. With or without its recognition as a power spot, the site will continue to enjoy widespread popularity, indicating little imperative for priests to alter their views.

Despite resistance from its priests, there is some indication that, like Jinja Honchō, the administrators of Ise may soften their stance. I gathered this impression

15. See <http://www.isejingu.or.jp/about/geku/others.html> (accessed 30 August 2017).

from an interview in July of 2017 with Otowa Satoru 音羽 悟, general spokesman for the Ise Shrines. Otowa reiterated Jinja Honchō's position that the idea of the power spot misrepresents Shinto and as such, the Ise Shrines had officially opposed it in the past. He informed me, however, that this position has shifted in the last few years. Noting that visitors come to Ise under numerous motivations (power spots included), Otowa commented that the shrines are adopting a more conciliatory approach. This would allow its priests to teach the public about the "essence" (*honshitsu* 本質) of Ise (as defined by its administrators and priests). Dedicated power spot enthusiasts, he claimed, often visit annually or even monthly—a frequency that allows for greater opportunity to reach them.

The question then becomes, who will implement this new didactic orientation? Such a shift would mean an entirely new approach to the public for a clerical community that has up until now primarily served on behalf of the emperor. If Ise's administration makes an earnest effort to implement this direction, it remains to be seen whether or not its priests will swiftly adapt, serving not simply the imperial house but also what they may deem to be their most aberrant patrons.

### *Conclusion*

As a popular phenomenon, the theories and practices concerning power spots have been guided by a diffuse arena of interpretations, patterns of behavior, and discursive trends. Its circulation has been through word of mouth, family relations, media attention, celebrity personalities, and independent spiritual counselors. This diversity of actors and influences stands in contrast with the univocal stance of the Shinto establishment. While the longevity of the phenomenon is unclear, the immersion of power spots into the Shinto landscape highlights both obstacles and opportunities for Jinja Honchō and its national system of shrines.

From Japan's imperial past up through the present, Shinto has been regularly deployed as a matrix of unifying symbols for the country. The implications of any shift in this ideology are profound. If Shinto were no longer to stand as a signifier for Japan, the emperor, and the public, how would its tens of thousands of shrines identify themselves? Were the authority of Jinja Honchō to diminish or cease, would a collective, national community of Shinto continue to exist? Would lowering, or reassessing, the ideological priorities of the association open up new opportunities for individual shrines in terms of practice and economics? These questions might be negligible so long as the present structure endures, but asking them draws attention to what has been assumed to be a national religion (if not always legally classified as such) since the Meiji period. This privileging of national identity ahead of regional interests has left Jinja Honchō on less than amicable terms with its clerical ranks (BREEN 2010b, 309–12).



While this ideological role has been the mission of Jinja Honchō, it may become increasingly abstract for priests struggling to maintain the future viability of their own shrines. Some have found innovative ways to draw visitors: promoting sacred groves (*chinju no mori*) and proximity to nature, fostering associations with ancient mythology, engaging patrons remotely through the internet, and even establishing ties with popular anime characters.<sup>16</sup> The power spot phenomenon joins this direction, though it is not a universal fix (nor are the other innovations). Identification as a power spot is often bestowed from outside sources and limited to a minority of the vast number of shrines in the country. That said, Jinja Honchō might take a cue from the implicit endorsement that power spots have received by many priests. Some steps in this direction may be underway. How far this reconciliation will continue remains to be seen, but the outcome may be a harbinger for how effectively the Shinto establishment can represent the interests of its priests, and ultimately maintain a national community, in the years to come.

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