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Crossing Boundaries

Rethinking “Japanese Religion” in the Anthropocene

This article uses the fiftieth anniversary of the *JJRS* as an occasion to re-examine the field, consider challenges and opportunities, and offer suggestions for how to bring Japanese religious studies more in tune with developments in adjacent academic fields and wider societal concerns. I argue that scholars of Japanese religion must engage more with the most pressing issues of our time and that they can do so by applying insights from the environmental humanities to their studies. This project should involve reflection upon the adjective “Japanese” and a critical awareness of processes of Japan-making in academia, with greater attention to diversity within the Japanese isles, focusing on migrants, Indigenous communities, and other minoritized groups, and with a transnational comparative approach that moves beyond nation-states as analytical units and acknowledges cross-border flows and commonalities. These conceptual and methodological interventions directly align with the core concerns and objectives of the environmental humanities.

KEYWORDS: environmental humanities—Indigeneity—Japan-making—methodological nationalism—more-than-human relations—ritual

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OVER THE last fifty years, the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* (JJRS) has contributed significantly to the establishment, consolidation, professionalization, and growth of “Japanese religion” as a scholarly subdiscipline. This subdiscipline is located at the intersection of two larger fields: Japanese studies and religious studies. In addition to specialist journals, the study of Japanese religion has its own research centers, units or sections at major conferences, and university positions.¹ As a result, the last decades have seen a stable supply of historical and ethnographic case studies providing in-depth analyses of selected places of worship, philosophical and mythological texts, ritual traditions, and individual founders and ideologues. This is an impressive collective achievement. The subdiscipline appears robust, at least for the time being.

But will it stay that way? The consolidation of the subdiscipline has led to increasing specialization and knowledge production, but also to fragmentation, insularity, and methodological conservatism. One of the main debates in our field, which came to the fore at the JJRS anniversary symposium held in 2023, is whether scholars of Japanese religion should continue “business as usual,” publishing in specialized journals and developing fine-grained historical case studies of specific texts or temples, or whether they should try to reach out to and engage more actively with other fields and disciplines—and even beyond academia. This article argues for the latter, not because specialized knowledge is not valuable, but because scholars of Japanese religion possess knowledge and skills that deserve to reach a wider audience, and because they can contribute to larger academic and societal debates. Put differently: much of what we study can be applied productively in more comparative projects, to understand or contextualize similar cases and processes elsewhere, and to develop new theoretical or methodological interventions (McLAUGHLIN, ROTS, THOMAS, and WATANABE 2020).

This article is grounded in the conviction that academic practices—research, teaching, and public outreach—are inevitably shaped by, and must respond to, wider social, political, and ecological contexts. Today, we live in a time of multi-

1. In addition to the JJRS, there are two other English-language peer-reviewed academic journals devoted to the same themes: *Japanese Religions* and the *Journal of Religion in Japan*. Overseas research centers include the Centre for the Study of Japanese Religions at SOAS, University of London, and the Shinso Ito Center for Japanese Religions and Culture at the University of Southern California. There is a “Japanese Religions” unit at the annual AAR meeting and a section on religion at the triannual EAJS conference.

ple crises. These crises are interconnected. The global environmental crises that we are all facing—climate change, biodiversity loss, toxic pollution, and mass extinction—exacerbate fear and inequality, feeding into other crises such as wars, human rights violations, and the erosion of democracies worldwide. And these crises of democracy, in turn, affect academia. It is no exaggeration to state that academia in general and the humanities in particular are under immense pressure globally as governments worldwide, including in the supposedly free West, cut research funding and seek to limit academic freedom.² In the short term, this trend may affect public universities more than privately funded institutions. But in the long run, there is no guarantee that private donors will continue investing in humanities research either. The subdiscipline of “Japanese studies” depends at least partly on the endowments and other types of funding provided by religious and corporate sponsors, which makes it vulnerable to economic downturns and ideological whims.

Thus, like other relatively small fields within the humanities, it is uncertain whether the study of “Japanese religion” will be able to survive in its current shape and uphold the same level of activity. This is *not* an argument for trying to justify the relevance of our field in economic-utilitarian or political-strategic terms. But it *is* an argument for overcoming insularity and building bridges with other academic disciplines, adjacent as well as more distant ones. In this article, I focus specifically on the environmental humanities, arguing that it constitutes a promising emerging field and that engagement with some of the concepts and methods developed within this field can enrich the study of Japanese religion. Ideally, this should be a two-way process: insights from our subdiscipline can also inform other areas of study within the environmental humanities. One of the strengths of this new field, I suggest, is that it is *not* a discipline in the classical sense, but that it provides a conceptual, social, and sometimes physical space for conversations *across* disciplines, as well as between academics and non-academics such as artists and policymakers. These conversations may take different shapes, but they are typically centered around a shared concern for social and environmental justice. And while they do not always lead to the desired outcomes, they are helpful for questioning and potentially overcoming established epistemic and political boundaries.

2. In 2025, the Trump administration launched an unprecedented attack on research and higher education. But the United States is not the only democratic state where academic freedom is under threat. Other clear examples of this trend are the Hungarian president Viktor Orbán, who forced Central European University out of Hungary in 2019 because he disapproved of its liberal progressive politics, and the current far-right Dutch government that has announced massive cuts in higher education, prompting the universities of Leiden and Utrecht to discontinue or merge several language and area studies programs. Japanese universities, too, are facing significant budget cuts (MAINICHI SHINBUN 2024). For more examples, see ROTS (2023, 30 n. 4).

This article is not a case study. It is a programmatic statement. The fiftieth anniversary of the *JJRS* is a perfect occasion to apply a bird's-eye view to the field, consider challenges and opportunities, and make some suggestions for how to bring it more in tune with developments in adjacent academic fields. In this article, I focus especially on themes and interventions from the environmental humanities, but these relate directly to some of the other concerns of our time: globalization on an unprecedented scale; the rapid transformation of digital technologies and media; widespread resource extraction and economic inequality; the global resurgence of nationalism and authoritarianism; the growth of disaster capitalism; and increasing militarization worldwide. These issues all affect academic practices in one way or another.

The remainder of this article is divided into five sections. First, I provide a brief overview of the environmental humanities, discussing some of its main foci and interventions and introducing one of its core concepts, the “Anthropocene.” This section also discusses some previous attempts to bring the environmental humanities into productive dialogue with Asian studies. In the second part, I move on to discuss notions of “Japanese religion” as a unified tradition, arguing that methodological nationalism is a lingering problem in the field. By contrast, I suggest we adopt a different perspective that demystifies the notion of “Japanese” and instead focuses on processes by which certain practices come to be classified as Japanese, while others are excluded from this category. In the following section, then, I argue that there is a need to acknowledge the plurality of practices and perspectives within the Japanese archipelago, proposing that we “recenter the periphery” by placing migrant and Indigenous perspectives at the center of our analysis, which includes an awareness of problems such as environmental degradation and social inequalities. Likewise, I suggest in the fourth part that it is important to consider commonalities and connections across national borders, not as a means to reconfirm nation-states as analytical units but as a tactic for overcoming them, which aligns with some of the main concerns of the environmental humanities. Finally, I provide more concrete examples of ways in which a conceptual framework in dialogue with the environmental humanities can inform the study of Japanese religion, and vice versa. I focus here on notions of more-than-human agency and relationality, arguing for a renewed awareness of the role played by natural phenomena, nonhuman animals and other organisms, and climate events in shaping historical processes and ritual practices. This is but one of several potentially fruitful research directions. I conclude by suggesting that there can be a future for the subdiscipline—but that we must build bridges, not reify boundaries.

Environmental Humanities, the Anthropocene, and Asian Studies

The humanities are undergoing a paradigm shift. The modern epistemic nature-culture dichotomy is crumbling apart, and corresponding notions of human exceptionalism and the autonomy of the individual subject are under increasing intellectual scrutiny. Against this background, the environmental humanities have emerged as a new, global, transdisciplinary field of study concerned with the various interactions between humans, nonhuman companion species, and physical environments (EMMETT and NYE 2017; HUBBELL and RYAN 2022). The environmental humanities draw upon much earlier scholarship, and the topics they address are not necessarily new. What is new is the institutional support and its consolidation internationally as a field, with its own research institutes, university programs, book series, scholarship programs, and flagship journal (*Environmental Humanities*, published by Duke University Press since 2012).

To be clear: the environmental humanities do not represent a single methodology or conceptual framework. Their value lies in the fact that they provide a space for different epistemological cultures to interact, allowing for encounters between different sets of methods and concepts, centered around a shared concern for environmental justice and a growing awareness that no discipline can tackle the formidable challenges of our time on its own. These encounters are not always successful; translating specialized scientific knowledge into a common language can be difficult, and cross-disciplinary collaboration faces numerous challenges. In many ways, then, environmental humanities spaces such as seminars, conference panels, workshops, journal debates, and edited volumes are spaces of *friction* in the Tsingian sense (TSING 2005)—confusing and frustrating at times, but also fertile ground for the emergence of new ideas and creative interventions.

One of the main contributions of the environmental humanities is that they have provided a space to reconsider the question of what it means to study humans in relation to nonhuman others. The establishment and acceptance of the environmental humanities as an academic field has provided legitimacy to the study of more-than-human relations in history and today.³ It has encouraged humanities scholars to overcome their anthropocentric disciplinary training and consider nonhuman animals, plants, landscapes, microbes, fungi, and toxins as historical, social, and literary actors. As a result, scholarship on such topics has become less scattered, more widespread, and more robust than several decades ago. This development is significant not only because it has given rise to new insights within disciplines such as history and literature studies, but also because

3. For an insightful discussion of the concepts “more-than-human,” “multispecies,” and related terminology, see PRICE and CHAO (2023).

it provides a new space for dialogue and collaborations between humanities scholars on the one hand and social scientists, natural scientists, artists, and policymakers on the other. And although some environmental humanities scholarship has been rightly criticized for its conceptual fuzziness and lack of practical and political applicability (HORNBOG 2017), there have been numerous attempts by researchers in the field to ask how their work can contribute to solving real-life problems and to propose concrete methodological interventions (for example, BUBANDT, ANDERSEN, and CYPHER 2023).

An important moment for the recognition of the environmental humanities as a relevant field for Asian studies was the roundtable discussion “Asian Studies and Human Engagement with the Environment,” which took place at the 2014 annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies (AAS). Several papers presented at this roundtable were published in a thematic section of *The Journal of Asian Studies* later that year (ELVERSKOG 2014; HUDSON 2014; PHILIP 2014; THORNER 2014). They raise relevant questions about methodological triangulation, geographical demarcation, and multiple temporalities. The authors discuss the tendency of area studies to fence off its field of study and shy away from larger transnational issues, but they also suggest that Asian studies has the potential to make relevant contributions to the environmental humanities as a whole. Ten years later, the body of scholarship on environmental change in Asia has indeed become much larger—not least within Japanese studies, which has seen a growing interest in environmental history (MILLER 2013; MILLER, THOMAS, and WALKER 2013; ARCH 2018; AVENELL 2017; HOLM 2023) anthropology (KIMURA 2016; WATANABE 2019; CLAUS 2020), and philosophy (MIYAMOTO 2021; HONDA 2023)—but many of the suggestions and arguments made by the contributors to the AAS roundtable still stand.

Here, I focus specifically on Mark Hudson’s article, as it raises some important questions that have implications for my overall argument. As HUDSON (2014, 942) states, “placing Asia in the Anthropocene requires us to consider at least three topics: the role of Asia in histories of the Anthropocene, the social-ecological vulnerabilities generated by and experienced in Anthropocene Asia today, and the question of how the Asian experience might be used to build responses to the Anthropocene.” The first point is related to the question of the role of Asian societies in global environmental history and pertains to debates about periodization and nomenclature. Ten years later, these issues remain unresolved. Although the term “Anthropocene” has by now become commonplace not only in academia but also in wider society, scientists still strongly disagree about the question of when it started, as illustrated by the recent controversy surrounding a proposal to date its beginning as late as the mid-twentieth century (SULLIVAN 2024). Others have objected to the term itself, pointing out that the Anthropocene is not the fault of *anthropos* in general, but rather of a relatively small

group of humans who have grown rich by exploiting the planet and their fellow humans (MOORE 2016). These are important considerations, and I agree with Moore that the globally dominant ideology of extractivist capitalism is one of the main drivers behind our current composite crisis. I am also convinced by Max LIBOIRON's (2021) argument that this ideology and the practices into which it translates are grounded in a persistent colonial logic. But the fact remains that "Anthropocene" has become the paradigmatic term to refer to the present age and our collective ecological predicament, acknowledging the fact that "without planning or intention, humans have made a mess of our planet" (TSING 2015, 19).

The value of the concept then arguably lies not in its historical precision, but in its ability to provide scholars and scientists across disciplines with a common language. The term "Anthropocene" has come to indicate a time in which no single part of the atmosphere or oceans is unaffected by fossil fuel emissions, no human or animal body is free of microplastics and other anthropogenic toxins, the globe is covered with vulnerable for-profit monoculture plantations, species are going extinct at an alarmingly fast rate, and more such crises. That is, it functions as a shorthand both within academia and beyond. As such, its value lies primarily in the fact that it travels well across disciplines, even if it may not be helpful for purposes of historical or geological periodization.

This brings us to HUDSON's (2014, 948) second objective: situating Asia "in the history and geography of the proposed new epoch." How has the Anthropocene affected Asian societies, and how have Asian societies shaped the Anthropocene? It is a well-known fact that affluent nations in the Global North have a significantly higher ecological footprint than so-called "developing" countries in the Global South, while the latter, ironically, are hit hardest by climate change and often lack the financial resources for major infrastructural adaptations (LEVY and PATZ 2015). Such north-south inequalities are also at work in Asia. Wealthy countries like Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and China have used their economic power to export polluting industries to and extract natural and human resources from lower-income countries in South and Southeast Asia (DAUVERGNE 1997; AVENELL 2017). Seen in this light, voters and consumers in Japan are as complicit in the current crisis as upper- and middle-class people in North America, Europe, and Australia. That does not mean, however, that people in Japan and neighboring countries are not also at risk, as "uncanny and improbable events" (GHOSH 2021) are becoming increasingly possible. While the tsunami of 2011 can hardly be contributed to the Anthropocene—earthquakes and tidal waves have always been a fact of life in the Japanese archipelago—the destruction of coastal communities and nuclear disaster that followed it were largely the consequence of human infrastructural decisions and, as such, illustrative of our current predicament. As we are approaching the tipping point, the impact of climate change and biodiversity loss will only get worse, leading

to unprecedented weather events and “natural” disasters for which we can only partially prepare. Humans respond to such uncertainty not only through costly infrastructural projects and training in “disaster preparedness” (WATANABE and HANSON 2023), but also through ritual practices, visual art, and storytelling. I will return to this topic in the last section of this article.

Third, Hudson addresses the same question as many others before and after him have: do Asian societies possess cultural, ethical, or practical knowledge that can help tackle and perhaps even solve environmental problems today? Hudson appears cautiously optimistic about this, but he rightly acknowledges the fact that previous attempts to answer this question have often given rise to cultural essentialist, nationalist, and green Orientalist narratives that contain lofty promises but few practical suggestions. This debate remains highly relevant today. It is beyond the scope of this article to address it at length; I have done so before, in this journal and elsewhere (ROTS 2015; 2017; ROTS and LU ROTS 2023). Suffice to say here that I am skeptical of grand narratives about the purported environmental orientation of Asian “ontologies” or “civilizations,” but I do not reject the possibility of place-based ecological knowledge. Indeed, in many places, Indigenous and other local communities have developed and transmitted skills and practical knowledge that can be highly relevant today (for example, see KIMMERER 2013). Rather, my skepticism concerns attempts to appropriate and frame such knowledge in terms of national cultures (like “Japanese culture”) or other reified traditions (such as Shinto, Daoism, or “animism”). The problem of such totalizing narratives is that they often ignore, if not silence, the actual historical actors who are the bearers of knowledge. They also conceal the fact that both nation-states and powerful religious elites have been complicit in the erasure of local ecological knowledge, not its preservation. This applies to modern Japan as much as to other imperial powers, as illustrated by the way in which officials working for the colonial state transformed the landscape of occupied Ainu Mosir and attempted to eradicate the knowledge and livelihood practices of its Indigenous population in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (LEWALLEN 2016b; GRUNOW et al. 2019)—a topic to which I will return below.

In summary, the value of the environmental humanities lies in the fact that it provides a space for cross-disciplinary encounters and collaboration, which are arguably needed to confront the major challenges of our time. The field raises important questions about historical periodization and responsibility, the impact of East Asian societies on environmental crises (and vice versa), the possible significance of alternative knowledge traditions, and more. Although “Anthropocene” is one of the field’s core concepts, these questions are not only limited to the modern period or to contemporary phenomena, but also apply to historical studies. That is, while the paradigm shift that we are witnessing in the humanities may be informed by current global environmental crises, its rel-

evance is not limited to the present moment. It also shapes the questions we ask about the past, for instance by helping us consider the role of nonhuman animals, microbes, or climate change in historical processes. And it may help us question some of our field's classification models and internal boundary-making practices.

Beyond Methodological Nationalism: From “Japanese Religion” to Studying Japan-Making

Engagement with the environmental humanities will lead to new research questions and methodological approaches with potentially far-reaching implications. Japanese studies arguably still suffers from lingering methodological nationalism, which I defined elsewhere as “academic practices that take the nation-state for granted as their main unit of analysis, tacitly assume the self-evidence of naturalized national adjectives such as ‘Japanese,’ and overlook the historical and contemporary significance of transnational or regional connections” (ROTS 2023, 11). A similar argument was made recently by Akihiro OGAWA and Philip SEATON (2020) in their introduction to an edited volume that challenges the category boundaries of “Japanese studies.”

One example of such methodological nationalism is the widespread and non-reflexive use of the compound term “Japanese religion” in English- and Japanese-language academic discourse. This term is a scholarly abstraction, created and reified by scholars who have used it to refer to a singular, bounded cultural system in the Geertzian sense (GEERTZ 1993). Academic and popular texts typically present this national system as a body of beliefs, symbols, rituals, and institutional formations that are characterized by unity in diversity, which have certain common features that distinguish them from other religious traditions—especially their main discursive Others, “Western” or “Abrahamic” religions. This national “Japanese religion” does not equal Shinto, Buddhism, or any other specific tradition; it encompasses and exceeds them. The notion of “Japanese religion” as a singular tradition that transcends denominational distinctions and other historical particularities and is characterized by harmony and complementarity goes back to the early twentieth-century work of Anesaki Masaharu 姉崎正治 (1873–1949), the founding father of religious studies (*shūkyōgaku* 宗教学) as an academic discipline in Japan (see ISOMAE 2002; 2005). It is also exemplified by the works of influential postwar theorists such as Umehara Takeshi 梅原 猛 (1925–2019) and Yamaori Tetsuo 山折哲雄, who have postulated that the essence of “Japanese religion” lies in a pre-rational, communitarian, spiritual appreciation of divine nature, traces of which can still be found in various Shinto and Buddhist rituals and beliefs (UMEHARA 1995; YAMAORI 1996). The national-system

approach was also characteristic of much late-twentieth-century Anglophone scholarship (EARHART 1969; KITAGAWA 1987; READER and TANABE 1998).

Such notions continue to be prevalent in introductory and popular texts today. In scholarly literature, by contrast, it has become less common to make blanket statements about “Japanese religion” as a whole. Most monographs in the field now zoom in on the histories of individual temples, shrines, or devotional movements, avoiding generalization. Nevertheless, within these works, too, the categories “Japan” and “Japanese” continue to be used widely, often escaping critical examination.

Interestingly, in the past fifteen years, the academic study of “Japanese religion” has contributed significantly to a growing awareness of the historical formation, adaptation, and diversity of the term “religion.” In particular, scholars have made significant progress in re-historicizing the category of religion (*shūkyō* 宗教) and investigating its genealogy in relation to nineteenth-century state formation (HOSHINO 2012; JOSEPHSON 2012; MAXEY 2014; KRÄMER 2015). This body of research was spearheaded by a polemical review article written by Timothy FITZGERALD (2003), who accused scholars of “Japanese religion” of non-reflexively projecting the Western category “religion” onto Japanese practices and beliefs. What is puzzling about Fitzgerald’s critique is not so much his argument that “religion” is a historical construct that ought to be treated with caution—this is now widely accepted—but his failure to see that the adjective “Japanese” is likewise the outcome of scholarly abstraction and equally problematic. In his later work, Fitzgerald even suggests avoiding the category “religion” altogether, yet he does present “Japan” as a single, bounded entity, characterized by a unitary system of ritual and discursive practices. His “critical anthropology” of Japanese religion thus criticizes “religion” while being oblivious to the problems inherent in the adjective “Japanese” (FITZGERALD 2012). This latter monograph has received comparatively little attention, and most scholars of religion now consider Fitzgerald’s arguments outdated. My point is not that his work is representative of the field, but rather that Fitzgerald’s blind spot is illustrative of a larger problem. While the noun in “Japanese religion” has been subject to considerable scrutiny in recent years, few scholars have questioned the adjective. Yet the questions of why and how certain practices come to be seen as “Japanese” and others do not are at least as interesting and important as the question of what is or is not classified as “religious.”

My aforementioned article critiquing methodological nationalism identified three promising directions for Japanese studies (ROTS 2023), each of which can fruitfully be applied to the study of Japanese religion as well. First, I suggest that we shift our focus from the studying of “things Japanese” to studying how some things come to be classified as Japanese, while others are excluded from that category. Why and how, for instance, did whale meat become a core part

of the Japanese “traditional cuisine,” while insects did not, despite the fact that consuming insects was much more common than consuming whale prior to the modern period (MITSUHASHI 1997; ARCH 2018)? This is an important question that touches upon topics such as modern resource imperialism, economic livelihoods, nationalist ideology, and foreign relations. Similarly, my suggestion is that scholars of “Japanese religion” study not only the historical formation and competing definitions of “religion,” but also ask how certain practices and world-views have come to be classified as *Japanese* religion, while others have been excluded.

Only in the last few years have scholars of religion started asking critical questions about the ways in which the academic study of religion has been complicit not only in *religion*-making, but also in *Japan*-making processes—not only in the category’s foundational period, the late nineteenth century, but also in postwar society and today (THOMAS 2019; LARSSON 2024; McMULLEN and THOMAS 2025). This is a promising development. It is also necessary, now that classic *Nihonjinron* tropes are reemployed and consumed eagerly by global audiences. For instance, Shinto has today become what Zen was in the mid- and late twentieth century: the quintessential Japanese nature spirituality, embraced by a new generation of mostly Anglophone spiritual seekers (UGORETZ 2022). While the media of dissemination are new—social media and neo-nationalist websites like nippon.com, predominantly—the popular narrative of Shinto as an “ancient, indigenous animistic tradition” supposedly opposed to “the West” and its “monotheistic” religion is well established (ROTS 2017). They draw upon and reproduce foundational nationalist myths about “the Japanese love of nature” and corresponding notions of uniqueness and untranslatability, which obscure modern Shinto’s ideological significance and transnational history. This, incidentally, is a good example of a topic that must be discussed not only within disciplinary confines, but also where scholars of religion in Japan can make an intervention in environmental humanities debates. One example would be pointing out the ideological implications of popular narratives about “Shinto animism” or “techno-animism” that have been embraced uncritically by some STS and environmental humanities scholars (see FRUMER, ROTS, and THOMAS forthcoming). Again, I argue that for the study of Japanese religion to remain relevant, we must critically scrutinize the adjective—not only the noun—while engaging in dialogue with scholars from other disciplines.

Diversity, Indigeneity, and Environmental Justice

A second promising direction within Japanese studies is an increasing focus on diversity within the Japanese archipelago, including migrant and Indigenous perspectives, which can help us overcome assumptions about “Japanese” culture

or religion as a single system within a demarcated territory. A good example of this approach is Suma IKEUCHI's (2019) *Jesus Loves Japan*, which is an important work not only because it focuses on a minority group that has received little academic attention but also because it challenges widespread assumptions about Japanese religiosity, the connections between ethnicity, national belonging, and religious practice, and the supposed incompatibility of Christianity and Japanese culture. As the number of migrants in Japan continues to increase and the number of Japanese citizens with hyphenated identities grows accordingly, the myth of a unified Japanese culture and religion appears increasingly untenable. New forms of ritual practice and belief—whether classified as Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, or “folk religious”—are inevitably affecting the mosaic of “Japanese religion,” even if this causes friction and requires negotiation on the ground (KOJIMA 2023). In this respect, it is worth pointing out that scholars of migration are increasingly focusing on environmental degradation, climate change, resource overexploitation, or forced displacement as important factors behind migration patterns, not only today but also in the past (HUNTER, LUNA, and NORTON 2015; ARMIERO and TUCKER 2017). Although I have not yet come across any large-scale research on these communities and their backgrounds, my impression thus far is that many of the Vietnamese and Indonesian migrant workers who live in precarious conditions in Japan are from coastal provinces where people have lost livelihoods due to pollution or overfishing (LU ROTS 2018; TRAN 2020)—this, at least, is a hypothesis in need of further investigation. In any case, research on the interplay between environmental change, migration patterns, and religious practices is likely to increase in importance in years to come.

The subdiscipline of “Japanese religion” has long struggled to make sense of traditions that do not fit easily within the paradigm of a single national religious culture characterized by unity in diversity. This applies not only to so-called migrant religions but is also clearly visible in the academic treatment of the ritual practices of the Indigenous minority cultures of modern Japan, that is, Ainu and Ryukuan traditions, both of which were forcibly incorporated into the Japanese empire in the nineteenth century. Religious traditions of the Ryukyu Islands and especially the Ainu have long been a blind spot within the study of “Japanese religion,” receiving considerably less attention than mainland traditions, as exemplified by their exclusion from most introductory texts, handbooks, and anthologies (ROTS 2024). There may be several reasons for this. It may be due to lingering Kansai- and Kanto-centrism in the field, which is illustrated by the fact that many scholars focus on myths and institutions linked to historic centers of power rather than “peripheral” popular traditions. It may also be related to the predominance of text-based historical research, combined with methodological challenges in studying traditions that lack written sources. More importantly, some scholars may deliberately exclude Ainu and Ryukyuan prac-

tices from handbooks or textbooks because they are aware of the problematic legacies of imperialism and social evolutionism and therefore do not want to classify those practices as “Japanese”—unlike the classical *minzokugaku* 民俗学 scholarship of Yanagita Kunio 柳田國男 (1875–1962) and Orikuchi Shinobu 折口信夫 (1887–1953), which framed those practices as remnants of a primitive, original “Japanese” culture and religion (MORRIS-SUZUKI 1998, 30–32). This is understandable, but the fact remains that, in modern times, these cultures *are* part of the country of Japan. Excluding them from the picture inadvertently confirms notions of “Japanese culture” as a singular, unified system.⁴

In fact, recentring the periphery by foregrounding analysis of Ainu and Ryukyuan cases may help us gain new, important insights into the different ways in which ritual, mythology, and the modern category of “religion” have functioned in the Japanese archipelago and wider East Asian region. For instance, in a recent analysis of the Naha Confucius temple court case, Ernils LARSSON (2024) has demonstrated how larger political and ideological conflicts surrounding public support for ritual practices and the role of “religion” in the Japanese constitution impacted a minoritized group and its place of worship. This case shows that religion-making is not always something that happens in centers of power; in fact, some of the most impactful negotiations take place in the periphery and affect minoritized groups. Likewise, attempts to create, consolidate, and demarcate the nation are often the most pronounced and contested in frontier zones with minority populations (TAYLOR 2004). It is no coincidence, therefore, that Tessa MORRIS-SUZUKI (1998, 9–34) began her groundbreaking study of historical processes of Japan-making with a discussion of ways in which Ainu and Okinawans have been discursively assimilated within the framework of the nation-state; as Others within, their very existence constituted—and perhaps still constitutes—a threat to modern nationalist fantasies of ethnic, cultural, and linguistic oneness.

So where do the environmental humanities come into the picture? Research on minoritized communities and Indigenous cultures need not focus on environmental issues. However, as numerous geographers and political ecologists have demonstrated, these groups are often the most vulnerable and the most

4. There are some exceptions. Historians like AKAMINE Mamoru (2017), Gregory SMITS (2018), and Tze LOO (2023), who have written about the establishment, development, and demise of the Ryukyu Kingdom, have all discussed cosmology and ritual transformations. In the 1990s and early 2000s, there was a wave of ethnographic research on the role of women in Okinawan Indigenous religion (KAWAHASHI 1992; RØKKUM 1998; SERED 1999; WACKER 2003). Anthropologists doing research with Ainu communities recently have referred to cosmology and ritual transformations in passing, but without taking it as their main topic of inquiry (WATSON 2014; LEWALLEN 2016b; SWANSON 2022). However, none of this scholarship has affected thematic foci and dominant ideas within the “Japanese religion” subdiscipline.

severely affected by climate change, waste problems, and biodiversity decline (DOVE 2006; LI 2010). Japan is no exception. In Ainu Mosir/Hokkaido, colonial exploitation and genocidal violence by the early modern Matsumae clan and imperial Japanese state went hand in hand with the remaking of landscapes, overexploitation of resources, and (near) extinction of species that carry cultural and spiritual significance for the Indigenous population (WALKER 2001; STRONG 2009; GRUNOW et al. 2019). Such colonial violence still takes place today, as the state denies Indigenous Ainu populations' tenure rights (MORRIS-SUZUKI 2018), constructs dams that destroy local ecologies and livelihoods (MARUYAMA 2013), and erases Ainu knowledge and history from nature conservation projects (LEWALLEN 2016a). Interestingly, however, it is precisely within the societal space of Indigenous religion—or, more precisely, in ritual ceremonies known as *kamuy-nomi*—that Ainu actors can reclaim some of their lost culture and reestablish relationships with nonhuman Others such as salmon (IWASAKI-GOODMAN and NOMOTO 2001; KOSAKA 2018) or with the willow trees that are used for making ritual *inaw* sticks (fieldwork observations, 2022). More research on the interplay between environmental change, Indigenous rights, ritual innovation, and other types of cultural performance is urgently needed.

Like Hokkaido, Okinawa and the western Ryukyu archipelago were incorporated into the modern Japanese empire in the 1860s and 1870s. Unlike Hokkaido, these islands constituted a semi-independent kingdom, governed from the capital Shuri on Okinawa Island. These islands were integrated into the East Asian cultural sphere culturally, politically, and religiously, but they did have their own distinctive local practices, including a ritual system centered on priestesses conducting community rituals at sacred groves. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Okinawans have suffered from wartime atrocities, land-grabbing, militarization, economic and political marginalization, and systemic gendered violence (ALLEN 2002; HEIN and SELDEN 2003; MCCORMACK and NORIMATSU 2018). Here, too, such “slow violence” (NIXON 2011) often translates into environmental degradation, toxic pollution, the deliberate destruction of ecosystems by the US military and Japanese state, and the loss of companion species and landscapes (MITCHELL 2020; PALZ 2023). And here, too, religion offers a space for creative resistance, as some Buddhist and Christian priests and Indigenous ritual practitioners (*kaminchu*) are active in anti-base protest movements (fieldwork observations, 2017–2018). In Okinawa, as elsewhere in Asia, minority and Indigenous ritual practices and religious identities are often shaped by issues of social and environmental justice, and they may mobilize people to negotiate or resist oppressive structures. More in-depth research on this and related topics, by scholars of religion as well as others, is needed.

Transnational Perspectives

Third, I argue that Japanese studies, including the study of “Japanese religion,” needs to adopt a more explicitly transnational comparative approach (ROTS 2023).⁵ Unfortunately, the word “transnational” has become a bit of a buzzword in recent years, to the point that some scholars who conduct excellent transnational research no longer want to use it, while much of what passes as “transnational” research today does not in fact transcend the nation. Such research merely juxtaposes “things Japanese” with data from other countries and ends up reconfirming modern nation-states as units of comparison.⁶ Just like “internationalization” (*kokusaika* 国際化) discourse in the 1990s and early 2000s served to naturalize nations (ROBERTSON 1997), recent area studies scholarship still struggles to think beyond the nation-state as its main analytical and organizational unit. By contrast, I advocate a multisited, cross-border comparative approach that considers formations of the nation-state on the ground but does not take them for granted; in other words, research that *transcends* nation-states, not reconfirms them. This approach is informed by recent arguments put forward by two anthropologists of Asia, Laurel KENDALL (2021) and Peter VAN DER VEER (2016), both of whom moved from being single-country experts (South Korea and India, respectively) to conducting comparative research in different parts of the continent, which generated new questions and insights.

Here, too, the environmental humanities offer some useful suggestions for how to proceed. More engagement with environmental issues can be helpful for overcoming methodological nationalism for the simple reason that climatological phenomena, nonhuman animals, and pollution do not respect borders. Bodies, landscapes, ecosystems, and cultures are porous and interconnected. They are all shaped and transformed by human and nonhuman actions and by anthropogenic matter created in different times and places. One of the strengths of the environmental humanities is precisely that they force scholars to look beyond

5. Interestingly, in the 1970s, the *JJRS* did have such a comparative orientation, as illustrated by the 1976 special issues on the secularization debate, which included theoretical interventions by sociologists Bryan WILSON (1976) and Thomas LUCKMANN (1976). In later decades, however, it focused primarily on Japanese cases, only rarely publishing articles that apply a cross-border perspective. Perhaps *JJRS* can once again take up such larger debates and invite scholars working in other parts of the world to contribute to special issues, engaging in dialogue with scholars who focus on Japanese cases.

6. A good example of this approach is the keynote lecture of the last conference of the European Association of Japanese Studies in 2023, held by University of Tokyo professor SONODA Shigeto (2023). Titled “Asianization of Asian Studies and Its Impact on Japanese Studies,” one might expect a lecture with a strongly transnational orientation. Instead, the speaker ended up reproducing common tropes about Japan, China, and Korea, taking them for granted as natural categories. Such *kokusaika*-type implicit nationalism remains widespread within Japanese higher education, as well as Japanese studies departments and funding schemes abroad.

national and disciplinary boundaries. Climate change, plastic pollution, zoonotic diseases, and mass extinction are complex and multifaceted problems that cut across national borders and scientific paradigms, which can only be tackled by international and multidisciplinary collaboration. It is no coincidence that some of the most interesting works in environmental anthropology in recent years that focus on Japanese cases have a transnational or comparative orientation (AVENELL 2017; WATANABE 2019; CLAUS 2020). The authors of these studies are aware that environmental change cannot be studied in national isolation.

This also applies to phenomena that we refer to as “religious.” Applying a cross-border comparative approach to the study of religion on the islands that today make up the country of Japan is about more than recognizing the basic fact that the deities, myths, rituals, and institutional formations on these islands have all been shaped by continental influences. This latter fact is widely accepted in the field today, fortunately (except for some staunch neo-*Nihonjinron* Shinto scholars, perhaps), but acknowledging foreign influences alone is not sufficient for overcoming the nation-state paradigm. Similarly, recent years have seen attempts by Japanese scholars to universalize the Japanese term *shinbutsu yūgō* 神仏融合 and project it onto other parts of Asia, but so long as such scholarship reproduces notions of “Japan” as the model for practices in other Asian countries, it does not transcend the nation-state as the main unit of comparison (YOSHIDA 2021). As Tessa MORRIS-SUZUKI (2000) and Peter VAN DER VEER (2016) have both argued, the point of transnational comparison is *not* to universalize and deny cultural differences; rather, the goal is to zoom in on *particulars* that are not framed in terms of national adjectives (or other large-scale totalizing categories, such as “world religions”) and to compare particulars in different places and times in order to achieve a better understanding of larger patterns, similarities, and interactions.

Such an approach implies an acknowledgment of the constant interplay and tensions between local place-making and story-telling practices, nationalist imagination, state involvement on different levels, and cross-border comparison by the actors involved. As Heather SWANSON (2022, 11–21) has rightly pointed out, academics are not the only ones who think comparatively; so do the people we study. Comparison is a world-making practice. Thus, as Fabio RAMBELLI (2014) has demonstrated, perceptions of “India” and “China” were central to the medieval Japanese Buddhist imagery and served to justify particular ritual innovations or power structures. Similarly, in postwar Japan, notions of “Christianity” and “monotheism” have been central to efforts to redefine Shinto (ROTS 2017; THOMAS 2019). For twentieth-century self- and world-cultivation movements belonging to the Ōmoto lineage (for example, Church of World Messianity, OISCA, and Aikidō) and *Lotus Sūtra*-centric lay Buddhist movements focusing on world peace (for example, Soka Gakkai and SGI), cross-border com-

parison and outreach are not merely a pastime; they are at the core of members' self-definitions and aspirations (McLAUGHLIN 2019; WATANABE 2019). People define themselves in comparison with multiple others, real or imaginary, at home or in faraway locales.

Thinking transnationally also means that we should question the ways in which conferences, edited volumes, study programs, and journals such as the *JJRS* compartmentalize the generic category of "Asian religion" into different country-shaped units (Japan, Korea, China, Tibet, India, Vietnam, and so on). This compartmentalization has led scholars and students to place too much weight on the nation as the defining variable for religious action and too little on cross-regional flows and commonalities. It has taken me a while to realize this. When I was a graduate student, I mostly focused on cases from Japan, but since then, I have had the opportunity to conduct research not only in Okinawa but also further south, in coastal areas of central and southern Vietnam. My experiences in Vietnam and elsewhere in East and Southeast Asia have made me see that many phenomena commonly framed as "Japanese" in academic and popular literature—*kuyō* 供養-type pacification rituals, sacred trees and rocks, bodhisattvas manifesting themselves as local deities (or the other way around), a focus on this-worldly benefits (*genze riyaku* 現世利益) in ritual practices, *kami* 神 residing in nature, and more—are not uniquely Japanese at all, but common across the region. There is a shared ritual logic. There is also considerable diversity when it comes to the exact shape of rituals and identity of deities, of course, but this diversity also exists *within* nation-states. Classifying everyday ritual practices into reified and nationalized categories such as "Japanese Shinto," "Chinese popular religion," "Korean shamanism," and "Vietnamese spirit worship" obscures cross-border regional commonalities *and* local particularities.

Studying Religion in Japan from an Environmental Humanities Perspective

In the previous sections, I have given several examples of ways in which the environmental humanities can inform, challenge, and redirect the study of religion in Japan—as well as, potentially, vice versa. In this final section, I give three further suggestions. This list is meant to give an indication of the field's rich potential, but it is by no means exclusive, and I trust that others will explore additional themes and methodological approaches. For now, my suggestion is that the environmental humanities can enrich the study of religion in Japan in the following three ways:

- 1) Rethink rituals as techniques for mediation between humans and nonhuman others and consider ritual responses to environmental change;
2. Overcome anthropocentric biases in the study of religion and consider the agency of nonhuman animals, plants, microbes, and other natural phenomena;

3. Establish and cultivate more in-depth dialogues and collaboration between fields like environmental history, sociology, literature studies, and ethics on the one hand, and religious studies on the other.

First, on a fundamental level, thinking of environmental change, more-than-human relationality, and ritual practices in conjunction can be fruitful as it may help us to remember *what rituals actually do*. As DONOVAN SCHAEFER (2015, 4–10) has pointed out, one of the unfortunate consequences of the linguistic turn in the humanities in the last few decades is that scholars of religion and ritual have predominantly focused on questions of ideology, symbolism, and power relations between humans, while overlooking the importance of ritual for cultivating and maintaining affective relationships between human and nonhuman actors such as plants, animals, weather events, and bodies of water. But rituals are not merely reflections of human power structures and social relations; they are also techniques for mediating human-nature relationships. Through rituals, people summon the gods to bring rain, pacify the waves, or bring an end to pandemics; they try to navigate a dangerous world full of forces that are difficult to control. Indeed, it is precisely here, in the shared ritual logic, understandings of more-than-human relationality, and notions of enchanted physical environments, that we witness the fundamental similarities between practices taking place in Japan and elsewhere in the Asia-Pacific region, regardless of the practitioners' "ism" or citizenship (ANDAYA 2017; ROTS 2024).

Rituals are practices of care. Through rituals, people establish, cultivate, maintain, transform, and sometimes end affective relationships with other persons, human and non-human. Many of these actors are immanent (SAHLINS 2022). They live in our houses, in the rivers, seas, and trees around us, or on the side of the road. Some are powerful; they can make beaches erode, storms change direction, fish or game appear or disappear, and viruses lose strength. But they are not omnipotent, and some of them are suffering, too—for instance, when humans take their dwelling place away from them. What happens to deities and spirits of the seas and rivers when the waters in which they live become polluted and their fish is no longer safe to eat? What happens to forest gods and tree spirits when the trees are all felled, as happened in Cambodia, one of the most deforested countries on this planet (SWIFT and COCK 2015)? Do they simply disappear, do they undergo transformations, or do they start wandering and cause trouble to people? Similarly, what happens to the rituals that focus on mediating relationships between humans and species central to their livelihoods and environments, when these animals gradually disappear or even go extinct?⁷

7. See JOHNSON (2020) on the loss of species and ritual transformations on the Mekong River; SAKAKIBARA (2020) on Iñupiat responses to the decline of the bowhead whale population; and DARMANTO and PERSON (2026) on crocodiles spirits causing havoc in western Indonesia.

A related and equally timely question is how rituals help people give meaning to, mourn, and prepare for natural disasters. If catastrophe and religion are often co-constitutive and formed in tandem, as Levi McLAUGHLIN (2025, 13) argues, what does this bode for the coming decades, in which climate change-induced disasters will occur with increasing frequency? Can we expect new waves of ritual innovation and revival? These questions are becoming increasingly urgent for many people worldwide, and Japan is no exception. Bringing environmental perspectives into the study of religion will help us stop considering Japanese cases in isolation.

Second, learning from the environmental humanities can help us overcome lingering anthropocentric biases in the field. The question of nonhuman agency remains a thorny one in most of the humanities, including the study of religion.⁸ Non-confessional religious studies tend to focus primarily on human actors, while bypassing questions of divine agency—an epistemological position generally referred to as methodological agnosticism. Perhaps as a consequence, few scholars of religion have addressed questions about animal or other nonhuman agencies in their research, although this may gradually be changing. Animals do feature in the study of religion, but mostly as human-made symbols, objects of worship, totems, and taboos or as passive victims or recipients of human moral actions. Only recently have some scholars of religion started taking animals seriously as historical actors, who have co-shaped the world together with humans.⁹

Likewise, there is some excellent scholarship on the role of trees, statues, and natural landscapes in Japanese religion (MOERMAN 2005; RAMBELLI 2007), but these works mostly focus on the meanings attributed by human actors, not on the ways in which these trees, objects, and landscapes themselves have *made* history. My own earlier research on sacred groves at Shinto shrines, too, focused mostly on human meanings and practices, without seriously considering trees, insects, or deities as actors (ROTS 2015; 2017). A multispecies approach can potentially help us look beyond discourse and consider the ways in which trees, animals, or microbes have shaped ritual practices and institutional histories. This is not a radical idea: environmental historians have long known that changes in ecosystems affect the human societies that depend on companion species and plants for their livelihoods (TOTMAN 1989; WALKER 2001; ARCH 2018). We can shelve philosophical and biological questions about nonhuman volition and cognition while still asking how nonhuman beings have shaped historical developments through their actions.

8. For insightful discussions of nonhuman agency, see NASH (2005) and ARONSSON, HOLM, and KAUL (2020).

9. For a more detailed discussion of this topic, including examples and an overview of the academic literature on the topic, see ROTS, DURNÉY, and ÅMAN (2026).

This brings me to the third and final point of this section: the potential for cross-disciplinary collaboration. As should be clear by now, the trend towards increasing specialization in the humanities and area studies has been a double-edged sword; while it has led to more knowledge in certain fields, it has also given rise to blind spots, disciplinary siloing, and mistaken assumptions of uniqueness. By contrast, the environmental humanities have emerged as a space for intellectual exchange in which people with different backgrounds and methodological toolkits can join forces. This provides some interesting opportunities for scholars of religion in Japan and beyond. Environmental history and anthropology are obvious examples: until recently, most studies in this field had a decidedly “secular” character, focusing on resource use, multispecies interactions, and ecological change but largely bypassing questions of religious engagement with the natural environment (FERNANDO 2022). This applies to Japanese environmental history as well. But there are some promising attempts to bridge the fields; for instance, two recent studies of Japanese whaling history have included religious perspectives into their analyses (ARCH 2018; HOLM 2023). Likewise, scholars of religion could focus more on environmental change when delving into the histories of their chosen temples and shrines, as the availability of natural resources, unforeseen climate events, erosion, droughts, extinctions, and industrial pollution may have all given rise to ritual and institutional transformations at different times in premodern and modern history.

In a similar vein, other fields that have engaged with environmental issues in recent years, such as anthropology, ethics, literature and popular culture studies, sociology, and STS would do well to engage with critical religious studies. For example, Heather SWANSON’s (2022) recent study of salmon hatcheries in Hokkaido and Chile is an excellent transnational multispecies ethnography, but it overlooks the importance of religious ideology in colonial-extractivist projects and does not pay sufficient attention to the significance of ritual in Indigenous environmental activism. Yuki MIYAMOTO’s (2021) study of philosophical and ritual responses to the Minamata crisis likewise touches upon religion yet shies away from fully exploring the multiple meanings and societal significance of the mnemonic sites and ritual performances developed by survivors. More problematically, several recent works by sociologists and literature scholars reproduce ahistorical and essentialist stereotypes about an imaginary, intrinsically Japanese “Shinto animism,” overlooking most of the recent scholarship on Shinto (JENSEN and BLOK 2013; YONEYAMA 2019).¹⁰ It is an illusion to think that we can prevent

10. I share a thematic interest and environmental agenda with these scholars, but I disagree with them on conceptual and ideological grounds. This type of academic “animism talk” reproduces methodological nationalism, mistakenly frames elements of a reified national culture as solutions to environmental crises, and obscures the economic and political structures that prevent necessary systemic change (FRUMER, THOMAS, and ROTS forthcoming).

such ideas from circulating and gaining academic currency altogether, but I do believe that scholars of religion in Japan can do more to reach across disciplinary divides and seek to establish a constructive dialogue with colleagues in other fields. Environmental humanities networks, conferences, journals, book series, and study programs may just be the right spaces for this.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued against insularity. I suggested that scholars of Japanese religion need to engage more with other fields of study and that journals such as this one must seek to include more perspectives from other academic disciplines and geographical regions. Such engagement matters not only intellectually, but also politically. Humanities and area studies are under pressure worldwide, and funding sources or academic freedom cannot be taken for granted. Like other humanities researchers, scholars of religion in Japan need to engage with some of the most pressing environmental and political issues of our time, regardless of the historical period(s) on which they focus in their research.

Recent years have seen the establishment and consolidation of the environmental humanities, not as a new discipline but as a space for cross-disciplinary dialogue and collaboration. More in-depth engagement with some of the theories and questions put forward by scholars within this space can help scholars of Japanese religion overcome some of their field's blind spots and limitations. This is a two-way process: scholars of Japanese religion can contribute to more nuanced and informed academic debates about, say, the relationship between ritual and environmental change or the purported influence of Japanese religion on present-day technology and popular culture.

This article has argued that scholars of Japanese religion should reflect more upon the adjective "Japanese" and study processes of Japan-making, rather than taking Japan for granted as a core variable. It has also argued for more awareness of diversity within the Japanese isles and for recentring the periphery by focusing on migrants, Indigenous communities, and other minoritized groups. And it has called for a more explicitly transnational comparative approach that moves beyond nation-states as analytical units and acknowledges cross-border, regional flows and commonalities. A more extensive engagement with the environmental humanities can be helpful for achieving these three objectives.

Throughout, I have applied a meta-perspective and outlined a programmatic statement, rather than analyzing one or several case studies. I am convinced that ritual practices and religious storytelling matter in the Anthropocene, as they help humans cultivate and mediate relationships with nonhuman others such as companion species, deities, landscapes, and climate events. I am also convinced that a mono-national approach to such practices and stories leads to serious

oversights, distortions, and potentially even to epistemic violence. We must study borders, not build them. There is no such thing as self-contained, demarcated “Japanese religion,” other than as a discursive construct.¹¹

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