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Matthew Keller

Inari Origin Stories

Crafting Narrative in Medieval Japan

By the fifteenth century, Inari worshipers had created a vast mythology for their kami that carefully navigated the shifting religious landscape of Japan. *Engi*, or "origin stories," from the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries show that authors of such stories were intent on crafting relationships for Inari that carved out an independent identity while curating associations with prominent institutions of the time. In this article, I analyze how medieval proponents of Inari Jinja crafted new narratives of the deity's origins and deeds in a concerted effort to forge an independent identity for the deity while maintaining vital ties with both Buddhist and Shinto institutions. What provided the Inari tradition with renewed coherence and relevance was not the unification and clarification of these narratives and relationships, but rather their fundamental diversity and ambiguity.

keywords: Inari—*engi*—kami—Shinto—mythmaking—*honji suijaku*

Matthew Keller is the Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Buddhism Public Scholar at the Detroit Institute of Arts.

Composed in 1474, the *Inari Daimyōjin engi* tells how the now ubiquitous kami known as Inari assumed residence on Mt. Inari, a mountain at the edge of Kyoto. According to this story, Inari and Kōbō Daishi 弘法大師 (the posthumous title for Kūkai 空海 [774–835]) had previously met in a past life, while they were both disciples of the Buddha in India. In the story, Kōbō Daishi proclaims to Inari, "I will be born in the land of the east and spread the Dharma. At that time, you should come and be invested as a guardian deity of secret teachings." The story goes on to explain that they met again in Japan, where Kōbō Daishi directs Inari, in the form of an old man carrying rice, to visit Tōji 東寺, "a sacred place where esoteric teachings for the protection of the state should be established." Upon agreeing to be a guardian of the teachings at the temple, the old man took up residence in a nearby mountain known as Mt. Inari (IS, 51–54).

The Inari Jinja 稲荷神社 origin story (*engi* 縁起) reflects how the shrine understood its own history within a Buddhist framework. The relationship between Inari and Kūkai in the story exhibited the historical conditions in which the tale was composed. Inari Jinja was destroyed during the Ōnin War (1467–1477) (Kawashima 1998). In the wake of its destruction, a monk named Fukuami 福阿彌 (d.u.) solicited support to rebuild the shrine, specifically requesting help from Tōji. Since the majority of the shrine's documents had been lost to fire, Tōji gave a copy of the *Inari Daimyōjin engi* to Fukuami (IS *kaisetsu*, 24–25).

Although the *Inari Daimyōjin engi* clearly paints Buddhism, and Tōji in particular, in a favorable light, the origin stories of Inari also problematize the Buddhist paradigm that dominated medieval Japan. *Honji suijaku* 本地垂迹 thought identified kami as local, trace manifestations (*suijaku*) of transcendent Buddhist deities' original grounds (*honji*). This Buddhist combinatory paradigm was challenged by a movement in early Shinto traditions, which devised inverted models (*han honji suijaku* 反本地垂迹) that posited Amaterasu (the divine ancestor of the imperial family) and related kami as the fundamental source of enlightenment and, in turn, the buddhas and bodhisattvas as their emanations (Tyler 1989; Teeuwen and Rambelli 2003, 1–53; Andreeva 2017, 16–24; Park 2020, 81–89). Inari worship existed within this context, and yet medieval authors created the kami's origin story by weaving together Buddhist teachings and local legends to find a middle ground between rival combinatory paradigms.

This article reassesses how kami and Buddhist traditions negotiated their place in the competitive religious landscape of medieval Japan. Accounts of

medieval Japanese religion emphasize the dominance of combinatory paradigms that theorized hierarchical relationships between kami and buddhas. These paradigms asserted the originality, and thus superiority, of one category of deities relative to the other, thus providing a basis for the preeminent category's religious efficacy. However, during the period of its active reconstruction at the close of the fifteenth century, the Inari cult resisted pressures to join the movements arguing for the superiority of either Buddhist divinities or local kami. Rather, the proponents of Inari Jinja crafted new narratives of the deity's origins and deeds in a concerted effort to forge an independent identity for the deity while maintaining vital ties with both Buddhist and Shinto institutions. It was the fundamental diversity and ambiguity of these narratives and relationships, rather than their unification and clarification, which granted the Inari tradition renewed coherence and relevance.

Reimagining Inari: Alliances with Kūkai

Numerous changes to shrines dedicated to kami veneration beginning in the thirteenth century resulted in an increased composition of origin stories (Blair and Kawasaki 2015). These changes often required reassessing the relationships between a shrine, the central court, and other sources of authority. In the case of Inari, there was a need to account for its place in the twenty-two shrine-temple multiplexes grouping and its close relationship with Tōji and the Shingon tradition.[1] Elaboration on Inari's origins was especially necessary because, despite early attestations of the kami's popularity, extant works from before the thirteenth century provide only sparse accounts of the deity. To fill this void, authors produced a wave of new narratives about Inari comprised of a wide variety of genres beginning in the thirteenth century. Some, like the *Inari Daimyōjin engi*, are standalone texts, while others come in the form of *saimon* 祭文—that is, liturgical texts embedded within ritual instructions—and Buddhist compendia. The similarities in narrative across genres indicate that the ritual, liturgical, and vernacular facets of Inari worship were tightly interwoven. Furthermore, these sources come from multiple institutions and traditions. Inari Jinja, the Shingon centers of Tōji and Mt. Kōya, the Tendai tradition, and Shōmyōji 称名寺 in the Kanto region feature prominently in Inari origin texts composed from the beginning of the fourteenth century. This wide range of sources from separate nodes in the Inari network indicate how the kami's traditions spread broadly through multiple actors.

1. On the importance and general characteristics of the twenty-two shrine-temple multiplexes, see Grapard (1988). Tōji is well known as one of the original institutions of Shingon Buddhism and a temple of imperial sponsorship.

The name of Inari appears in court histories dating back to the early eighth century, with increasing frequency from the early ninth century. However, only three remaining texts present stories centered on the Inari deity; the references are limited to a few lines in length and preserved in compiled works dedicated to broader subjects. For example, an excerpt from the eighth-century *Yamashiro no kuni fudoki* tells of a piece of mochi transforming into a bird and then into new rice plants on top of what would become Mt. Inari. Trees from the area were then taken by members of the Hata 秦 family who wished to venerate the divine spirit. The *Tenryaku Jingikan kanmon*, an official opinion presented to the government ministry dedicated to overseeing kami-related affairs (Jingikan 神祇官) in the tenth century, recounts an abbreviated form of this same tale and seems intended to confirm the Hata family's role as priests of Inari Jinja (ST 44: 3–5). Finally, a section of the ninth-century *Ruiju kokushi* records the first documented encounter between Inari Jinja and Tōji, as well as between the shrine and the imperial court. According to the story, Emperor Junna 淳和 (786–840) fell ill before the New Year's ceremonies in 827, and an oracle determined the illness was caused by a curse inflicted by Inari. Sometime earlier, Tōji had taken trees from Inari's mountain on the outskirts of the capital to use as lumber, and the emperor was afflicted ostensibly in response to this trespass. To assuage the kami's anger, the court granted Inari an official court rank of Junior Fifth Lower (*jugo ige* 従五位下). The offering apparently worked: Junna's illness was alleviated, and Inari happily integrated into the court rituals from that time forward (*Ruiju kokushi*, 312–313; KURE 2018; KONDŌ 1983, 96–97).

This story recorded in the *Ruiju kokushi* suggests that the initial relationship between Inari Jinja and Tōji involved conflict, but over the centuries the two developed a semi-symbiotic cooperation.[2] By the eleventh century, priests annually brought the portable shrine used in the popular Inari Festival to the temple compound so that the monks could propitiate the kami. The storehouse for the portable shrine is still located near the temple. Additionally, beginning from at least the fourteenth century, Tōji also assisted in the administration of Inari's estates (*shōen* 荘園). During the seventeenth century, Tōji established a branch temple named Aizenji 愛染寺 within the shrine's precincts, although it was removed at the end of the nineteenth century as part of the Meiji government's policy separating Shinto and Buddhist institutions (GORAI 1985, 36; ŌMORI 1994, 378).

Though the surge of stories written in the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries came long after the initial development of the cooperative relationship

2. Numerous records related to Inari's estates have been preserved in the *Tōji hyakugōmonjo* 東寺百合文書. I have relied on the versions of these documents reproduced in *Inari Jinja shiryō*. Tōji's landholdings were already substantial, and integrating the shrine's estates into these may have allowed Inari Jinja to benefit from the temple's network.

between Inari Jinja and Tōji, they likely represent written forms of earlier oral explanations for why the two institutions were so closely related. The initial incursion of Tōji into Inari's mountain domain in the ninth century should have been hard to forget; however, authors of medieval sources thoroughly rewrote the shrine's history to avoid this controversy, such as stating that Inari took up residence on the mountain at Kūkai's direction. The *Inariki* provides an early example of reimagining how the Inari deity took up residence on the mountain:

> The Daimyōjin met face to face with Kōbō Daishi (Kūkai). In the records of their august agreement, it is stated that in the third year of Enryaku [784], a wood-rat year, when the god came to Japan from China, as they had no residence of their own, they wandered around the Otagi district of Yamashiro. Since the god was carrying rice on their shoulders, the people named the god as the kami of Inari. In the twenty-second year of the same era [806], a water-goat year, as [Inari] Daimyōjin was returning from Mt. Kumano, Kōbō Daishi (in the record book, there is his true name [Kūkai]) was traveling to Kumano. At the shrine of the Tanabe 田辺 prince,[3] he met the divine manifestation face to face. [Inari] Daimyōjin said, "I went to see the sacred mountain." When Kōbō Daishi approved of this, the deity said, "I am a lord of China. However, I have come to this kingdom so that I might save sentient beings in the Land of the Sun who have no seeds of blessings. As I wish to be called the 'Kami of Love for the Dharma' (Aihōjin 愛法神), how should I conduct myself?" The teacher approved of this divine and subtle aspiration. Afterwards, there were various promises between them.… Then, after the teacher had returned, he invited Inari to Tōji.… Inari told their story, and, after a while, the divine manifestation said, "I will stay and dwell here. Tell me someplace where I could provide benefits for sentient beings." The abbot responded, "To the southeast, there is the timber mountain (*somayama* 杣山) of this temple. Put down your traces there and again perform deeds to benefit living beings." The abbot then instructed, "Follow the road from the east gate of Tōji, and it is as I have indicated to you." (IS, 3–4)

The *Inariki*'s account is similar to that of the *Inari Daimyōjin engi*, *Yamashiro no kuni fudoki*, and *Tenryaku Jingikan kanmon* in that these sources all tell of a roving kami, a mountain with trees of vital significance, and the meaning behind that kami taking up residence on the mountain (ST 44: 3–5). However, the author of this legend adeptly altered the narrative of the two earlier works, changed the characters involved, and inverted the power dynamic between Inari Jinja and Tōji. In this version, the kami only appears after Kūkai is already active

3. The shrine of the Tanabe prince refers to one of several auxiliary shrines of Kumano, brought under the title of the ninety-nine princes of Kumano. Tanabe refers to a place to the southwest of Kyoto, in the old district of Tsuzuki.

and constructing Tōji. The mountain is specifically identified as a "timber mountain" from which people take lumber for building projects. Most importantly, the deity takes up position on Mt. Inari because they were instructed to do so by Kūkai in his capacity as the abbot of the temple. The story does not leave any room to suppose that the shrine might be a rival or opponent of Tōji. Instead, the Inari kami is clearly allied with the temple, and the god's myths could be understood by Buddhists as just another part of the larger Shingon corpus of legends about Kūkai and his activities.

The *Inariki* and the *Inari Daimyōjin engi* further agree on several important facts. Inari and Kūkai came across each other near the Tanabe shrine of Kii Province in Japan. The two meet again at Tōji, and Inari takes up residence on Mt. Inari to serve as a protector of the Shingon teachings. Notably, the timelines do not match. The *Inari Daimyōjin engi* records that the meetings between deity and founder happened in 816 and 823, whereas the *Inariki* sets their meeting a couple of decades earlier. The 823 date places the events prior to the 827 encounter with Emperor Junna and so invokes that precedent while also asserting that the agreement between Inari and Tōji precedes it. Neither the *Inari Daimyōjin engi* nor the *Inariki* directly acknowledge the kami's assault on Emperor Junna. Yet, the *Inari Daimyōjin engi*'s new timeline does more than this. The *Inariki* had already asserted that the kami was previously a lord of China. This is a claim that is repeated in the *Inari Daimyōjin engi*. However, the later text takes the deity's origins and their alliance with Kūkai back even further in time. The relationship between Inari and Kūkai now extended back to a past lifetime where the two listened to a sermon by Śākyamuni Buddha in India. The two are equals in the gathering, and while Kūkai initiates the conversation, they are companions in the beginning, with Inari catching up to Kūkai in mythic time after multiple rebirths. It is a subtle difference, but the authors of the fifteenth-century *Inari Daimyōjin engi* thus elevated Inari to be a partner with Kūkai in the service of Buddhist teachings.

Other versions of the story of Kūkai directing the Inari deity to the mountain are found in numerous works, such as: the *Kōbō Daishi den* 弘法大師伝, the *Inari Daimyōjin ryūki* 稲荷大明神流記, the *Kōbō Daishi gyōjōki* 弘法大師行状記, the *Kuji kongen* 公事根源, the *Fujimorisha engi* 藤森社縁起, and the *Jinten'ai nōshō* 塵添壒嚢鈔 (Gorai 1985, 15; Watanabe 1994, 46; Kondō 1997, 32; Yamanaka 1997, 88; Nakamura 2009, 81–82; Ueda 2011, 95–99). Each of these texts includes additional details that expand the narrative in slightly different ways. Most of these stories likewise state that the Inari kami moved to the mountain from elsewhere. However, even with further additions, the fundamental structure of the plot as seen in the *Inari Daimyōjin engi* and *Inariki* versions remains consistent. These medieval Inari origin narratives served to reinforce the relationship between Tōji and Inari Jinja. The authors taught their audiences that

the Inari deity and Kūkai were on good terms from the beginning and that the two agreed to cooperate in the past. The authors presented Inari as a kami of Japan that could base its position primarily on the prestige and importance of the temple. Nevertheless, the compilers of Inari origin stories made careful use of Buddhist lore not to subjugate Inari to Buddhist deities or hierarchies, but to give this distinctly Japanese god a specific and prominent place in the Japanese religious landscape. This subtle effort to tie Inari to Kūkai and Tōji without subordinating the kami as a simple manifestation of some greater Buddhist deity was a key strategy by which the shrine's supporters successfully maintained the kami's independence and individual authority.

This new origin story of Inari Jinja quickly spread beyond Shingon circles, as authors from different traditions adapted it to their particular needs. Stories of Inari and Kūkai became so ubiquitous that Tendai authors needed to contend with it in their own works. For instance, the *Nijūnisha hon'en* records a similar legend, but the author claims that the Inari kami first met with Saichō 最澄 (767–822), the founder of the Tendai school, who then sent the deity on to Kūkai (ZGR 2: 200). In this way, the Tendai authors sought to coopt the Kūkai narrative, implement the same discursive technique, and change the story for their own advantage.

The presence of the Inari-Kūkai story in texts like the mid-fourteenth-century *Nijūisshaki* (65–66) and the late sixteenth-century *Nijūnisha chūshiki* (ZGR 2: 224–225) is particularly important. These two compilations were works intended to describe the nature and history of the twenty-two shrine-temple multiplexes. The leaders of multiple Shinto movements treated the texts as formative and normative well into the nineteenth century. The inclusion of the Inari-Kūkai story in these works indicates that it was asserted or accepted as standard by the Shinto authors and their associates. While the story has no precedent prior to the fourteenth century, it effectively supplanted previous narratives of Inari's appearance on the mountain. This story's successful dissemination demonstrates the dominance of the cooperative relationship between the shrine and Tōji. The alliance with Kūkai raised Inari's prestige by association, while it also promoted and stabilized connections between Inari Jinja and the Shingon tradition. This explains why so many Inari-related documents are found today at both Tōji and Mt. Kōya. Furthermore, the alliance with Kūkai became the basis for understanding Inari's role as a guardian of esoteric Buddhist teachings.

Bodhisattva from Afar

Forging alliances with Kūkai was only one element of the medieval project to empower the Inari cult. Authors needed to elaborate on the kami's relationship with other Buddhist deities to establish how exactly Inari fit into a Buddhist

hierarchy. One method through which authors accomplished this is the identification of Inari as a deity that had come from beyond Japan. For example, the *Inariki* states that Inari was previously a lord of China, and the *Inari Daimyōjin engi* describes the kami as a ruler of various lands before the rebirth that brought the deity and Kūkai to the archipelago. Inari thus was refashioned as a member of the broad class of kami that scholars today classify as *yorikuru kami* 帰り来る神, deities that have come from other lands and across the sea to settle in the Japanese islands (Gorai 1985, 142–145; Hinonishi 1996, 138–139).[4] Moreover, the deity's travels from the continent to Japan mirrored the movement of Buddhist teachings and emphasized that while Inari may be localized to Japan, the kami was fully a part of the foundations of the Buddhist tradition. Accounts varied: sometimes Inari met Kūkai in India first; in other versions, the kami arrived in Japan via the sea in unconventional ways. This journey from afar is important because it showed that the Inari deity, their mythos, and their efficacy were not limited to Mt. Inari. Instead, such accounts attested to the active and important role Inari played throughout the religious world.

There is, for instance, the following legend from the early fourteenth-century *Ototari shingu saimon*. The story concerns Hata Ototari, an ancestor of the Inari Jinja Hata priest family, a clan that had immigrated to the archipelago from Korea. The author of the text claims that Ototari rescued the deity that would become the Inari kami. Inari's arrival from across the sea follows a very different narrative than that of the previous two stories:

> The deity is a manifest trace of Monju. To provide benefits to sentient beings, they sometimes appear as the Celestial Fox and bestow love and respect to people. At other times, they incarnate as Tamonten to provide fortune and merit to people.… It has been said about the Celestial Fox that long ago in the Land of the Great Tang, during the time of *Ōnanji Konanji* 大汝小汝,[5] the Celestial Fox became an envoy and set out for the country of Japan [with the Yahashira no miko no inochi 八柱御子命].[6] While crossing the difficult waves, they were swallowed by a giant catfish. Their lives were in danger. Then Hata no Ototari

4. For a discussion of the prominence and importance of immigrant deities in early Japan, see Como (2009, 1–24).

5. Also known as the *Banji Banzaburō monogatari* 磐司磐三郎物語, this folktale was once popular among hunters, such as the Matagi of the Tohoku region, and also known on the Korean Peninsula. It tells the story of the eponymous siblings and their encounter with a mountain goddess as she is in the midst of childbirth and in need of aid. One brother avoids her according to ritual pollution taboos, the other assists her regardless. The one who aided her was blessed. There is no indication of when this legend is set. It may be appropriately referenced here because Ototari also decides to assist a goddess in need.

6. There are multiple Yahashira shrines in Ibaraki, Aichi, and Nara prefectures. This story's connection to these shrines, if there is one, is unclear. The identities of the divinities in question also vary between the different shrines.

> caught that catfish and saved the divinities' lives. Each was overjoyed to be alive and with one voice they promised: "We will become the servants of Ototari and follow the descendants of his children. Crossing mountains and rivers, from this time and ever after, we will fulfill any desire without fail. If we irresponsibly forget the debt of today and do not fulfill the wishes of the descendants of Ototari, then for many years we will lose great benefits and not attain Correct Awakening." This is the same as an Original Vow—who could question the benefits it will bring to sentient beings? These divinities of long ago are the Celestial Fox King. (*Ototari shingu saimon*)[7]

While the Hata clan does not appear in the *Inariki*, they were the original shrine priests for Inari and feature prominently in the *Yamashiro no kuni fudoki* excerpt and *Tenryaku Jingikan kanmon*. The author reinforces the associations of Inari and the narrative with the shrine's historic conditions by referencing the Hata, thereby striking a balance between the classic Inari myths and the overlaid concept of Inari as a continental deity. In other words, through the inclusion of a member of the Hata family, the author supports this unusual account of the god arriving after being swallowed by a catfish without entirely disconnecting the deity from otherwise more common stories of Inari's origins.

This origin story appears in the middle of a *saimon* designed to propitiate the main deities of a ritual ceremony by explaining their qualities and the praiseworthiness of their efficacy. On the one hand, a *saimon* is a technical, liturgical text that should be recited or intoned, requiring an expert priest or ritualist. On the other hand, they are read in vernacular Japanese and intended to be understood by lay devotees. *Saimon* thus provide a bridge between esoteric rituals and lay audiences. The inclusion of this Inari origin story in a *saimon* indicates an effort to establish and disseminate the ritual identity of the kami beyond the composers and readers of esoteric texts to reach lay traditions as well.

The *Ototari shingu saimon* was copied down by the monk Kenna 釵阿 (1261–1338). Kenna was the second abbot of Shōmyōji near Kamakura, and he received support from the Kanazawa Hōjō 北条 family.[8] The document also includes a comment in the hand of his disciple Shūhan 秀範 (b. 1276). Shūhan states that when the *saimon* is performed, an offering of white rice should be made and an offering wand of one *shaku* 尺 and two *sun* 寸 (36 cm) in length should be used. A second version of this legend can be found in the *Inari ichiryū daiji*. This text was produced on Mt. Kōya in 1408 by a monk named Jōjun 成純 (d.u.), who

7. This document is kept in the Shōmyōji collection of the Kanazawa Bunko archive, case number 317, document number 7. For the *Inari ichiryū daiji* version of the story, see IS (94–95).

8. Kenna collected texts for Shingon royal accession rituals (*sokui kanjō* 即位灌頂) on behalf of the Hōjō (NISHIOKA 2014). Because Inari is sometimes connected to these rituals through an association with Dakiniten, the *saimon* is likely related to Kenna's activities for the Hōjō.

was recording the dreams and interpretations of another monk named Echibō 恵智房 (d.u.) (IS *kaisetsu*, 32–33). That version of the *saimon* states that Echibō declared the story a strict secret and passed it down among his disciples. In addition to the *saimon*, the *Inari ichiryū daiji* includes instructions for venerating Inari via rituals for the Celestial Fox King and the goddess Dakiniten.

In both versions, the *saimon* begins with an explanation that anyone who performs this sort of rite, even if they were born into a poor and destitute house, will surely manifest a mind for enlightenment and achieve awakening in their next rebirth. The author further prefaces the story by stating that the main deity for the rituals is a temporary manifestation of Monju. Like the *Inariki*, the *Ototari shingu saimon* and *Inari ichiryū daiji* pointedly make use of specific Buddhist terminology to characterize the deity's activities. A similar text, the *Inari shingyō*, uses familiar Buddhist language to express that the deity was moved by compassion to provide benefits to sentient beings (IS, 91–92). In reminiscent language, the *Inariki* adds that the kami will help particularly those "who have no seeds of blessings," that is, those who are without good karma from previous lives.

The narrative in these *saimon* elevates the status of Inari in Buddhist terms by indicating that they are a manifestation of Monju, the bodhisattva of wisdom. However, the text also makes clear that Inari maintains their own identity as a being on the Buddhist path. This dual aspect of Inari expanded on the idea that kami are in the process of actualizing enlightenment (*shikaku* 始覚) found in the twelfth-century *Nakatomi harae kunge* 中臣祓訓解 (RAMBELLI 2009, 245–246). Here, Inari is both on a search for enlightenment and takes a vow to save other sentient beings.

Throughout the medieval period, authors found many ways to associate kami and shrines with Buddhist teachings. Often this process involved the above-mentioned *honji suijaku* paradigm and its Shinto-leaning reverse, which raises the question of hierarchy: do the local kami or the Buddhist deities take priority? The authors of the medieval Inari origins stories were able to strategically avoid the trap of either subordinating the shrine's kami to Buddhist deities or vice versa by casting the Inari deity as a bodhisattva from distant lands that was on an equal footing with other bodhisattvas. Like in the story of Ototari, Inari was reimagined to have taken a vow to support the Dharma somewhere else and then come to Japan to fulfill that vow, becoming simultaneously local and transcendent.

Indeterminacy and Original Grounds

Authors of Inari origin texts presented the complexity of Inari's relationship with other Buddhist deities in ways that promoted the kami's individuality. Imaginations of Inari as a manifest trace of a single Buddhist divinity could fit nicely within

the classical *honji suijaku* paradigm. For instance, the *Ototari shingu saimon* states that the main deity of the ritual is a manifestation of Monju. However, preceding rituals in the *Inari ichiryū daiji* claim that the Inari deity is also a manifestation of the Thousand-Armed Kannon, Nyoirin Kannon, and the Eleven-Headed Kannon, while the deities of the Shi no Ōkami, Tanaka, and Myōbu sub-shrines are embodiments of Tamonten, Fudō, and Monju, respectively. Suddenly, each of the sub-shrines of Inari is a trace manifestation of independent Buddhist deities, and together they create a mandalic image of Inari. But what about the main Inari deity itself? In a complex case like this, Inari's status as a manifest trace is more difficult to parse. The lack of consensus across prominent texts generated ambiguity, and authors deployed this indeterminate nature of Inari to great effect.

Scholars have observed that in practice Inari's position as a manifestation of any particular bodhisattva or buddha is weak. For example, Yamaori Tetsuō (1991, 172–173) asserted that in comparison to a deity such as Hachiman, who medieval sources generally agree was the manifestation of Daijizaiten, Inari instead often took the place of the "original ground" and would temporarily manifest as either an old man or a maid. In other words, since authors did not consistently identify Inari with only one of the more well-known bodhisattvas, the kami would act as an original ground in place of those bodhisattvas. In turn, the versions of Inari that act in origin narratives, such as the old man carrying rice or the Yahashira Divinities, serve as provisional manifestations of the true form of the god. This is one of the peculiarities of a kami whose shrine complex consists of multiple significant shrines: while the kami is a composite deity wherein each major shrine's enshrined god is considered an aspect of one, singular deity, each individual shrine also has its own identity. If one attempts to comprehend the composite deity in relation to the separate shrines, then the result is that the composite deity is a multivalent and ambiguous entity. That is, the multiplicity of bodhisattva original grounds for each separate shrine in the Inari multiplex makes it unclear if the composite Inari kami actually is a trace manifestation and has a separate, distinct original ground.

This opacity regarding the kami's status as an original ground or trace manifestation provided an opportunity for authors to assert a superior status for Inari. For example, the authors of the mid-thirteenth-century *Kada kōshiki*, a liturgical text produced by a branch shrine family, stated that the Inari deity "while expressing the meaning of the twin mandalas… conceals the true form of the god's original ground… and is the true body (*shinjin* 眞身) of Monju" (Is, 25–26). The true body is juxtaposed with a transformation body (*keshin* 化身) or the temporal body that a buddha or bodhisattva would assume in the physical world to save human beings. The true body is instead the Dharma and perfected body of a buddha or bodhisattva. *Suijaku* or *gongen* 権現, which are provisional

bodies, are often understood as transformation bodies rather than true bodies and therefore only mediate encounters with a buddha (Mochizuki 1960, 2042). According to this explanation, the many shrines around Mt. Inari and their possible bodhisattvas resemble the composition of the womb realm and diamond realm mandalas, and the multiplex and the composite deity taken together constitute the true body of a Buddhist deity, not merely a provisional one. It is clear that there were some, such as the authors of the *Kada kōshiki*, who did not view Inari as a trace manifestation or as inferior to the original ground of Monju.

In the 1340s, the Tendai monk Jihen 慈遍 (d.u.) first introduced an inverted *honji suijaku* hierarchy in which kami constituted the original grounds, and bodhisattvas were cast as their traces (Teeuwen and Rambelli 2003, 31–37). Fabio Rambelli (2009, 247–250) has posited that Ryōbu and Ise Shintō thinkers like Yoshida Kanetomo 吉田兼倶 (1435–1511) also sought to reverse the *honji suijaku* paradigm in order to refute the idea that kami were only trace manifestations and assert that primordial, fundamental enlightenment originated in the Japanese islands with Amaterasu. For Jihen and Kanetomo, this transposition was vital to establish Shinto schools of thought—the Ryōbu and Yuiitsu traditions, respectively—that transformed the basis for their ritual efficacy. We see this approach spread outward from Ise to other cultic sites, such as Mt. Miwa where, by the sixteenth century, Amaterasu was posited as the origin and Dainichi Nyōrai as manifestation (Andreeva 2017, 276–297).

However, this is not the approach that compilers of medieval origin narratives took to promote Inari. They instead opted for a third strategy that did not fully embrace a *honji suijaku* paradigm, nor reverse it. Inari acted as an original ground and provided devotees with the same sort of direct access to the benefits of the Dharma that any other original ground would. However, the kami was not directly juxtaposed or put into opposition with Buddhist deities. This lack of juxtaposition, combined with the ambiguity that prevented the kami from being subsumed by another deity, enabled Inari to act alongside other bodhisattvas and buddhas while retaining its independence.

Inari proponents were able to claim originary status for the kami by characterizing Inari as bodhisattva-like, yet resisting the deity's collapse into any single bodhisattva. Presenting a kami as an original ground emphasized the deity's efficacy, as propitiators would not be worshiping Inari or performing the god's rituals with the hope that the kami would intercede on their behalf with some more powerful Buddhist deity. Instead, Inari would help directly and without mediation. Moreover, the identification of Inari as an original ground meant that the kami was not dependent on any other deity or bodhisattva for their own divine efficacy. The prevalence and persistence of traditions of indeterminacy meant that Inari could not be cleanly subsumed under any other Buddhist deity, nor refute the validity of the original enlightenment of any of those deities. In

this way, the supporters of Inari assembled a local kami tradition that eschewed the inverted *honji suijaku* rhetoric of the Ise movements and found leverage at other peripheral sites such as Mt. Miwa at the time.

The Names of Inari

The authors of medieval origin narratives thus established Inari's distinct position in the Japanese religious landscape while also affirming various connections with bodhisattvas, Kūkai, and Tōji. Authors then continued to curate Inari's identity as an original ground through the careful naming of Inari's trace manifestations. The *Inariki* and similar sources assert that the name "Inari" was bestowed by the people of the land, namely the citizens of Otagi, because the kami carried (*ninau* 荷) rice (*ine* 稲) in bags on its shoulders. The *Inariki* provides little description of the deity's form beyond this, although most other texts state that the deity had the appearance of a mysterious old man (*okina* 翁) when they appeared before Kūkai.[9] This depiction of Inari is common today, because they are easily associated with the kanji that are used for the kami's name. However, the earlier *Yamashiro no kuni fudoki* provides a different story for the Inari etymology, and it is possible that the current kanji were assigned to the kami after its name had already been established.

The *Inariki* states that the deity called "Inari" was also known as the Aramatsuri 荒祭 of Ise, the Shiratōme 白嫸女 of Kibune, and the Hitokotonushi 一言主 of Isagawa in Nara (IS, 6). The association of Inari with the names of other deities and ritual sites connected the kami to new places. Moreover, this associative strategy denotes Inari Jinja's participation in the mythologies being promoted by agents of the Ise cult during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (TEEUWEN and BREEN 2017, 83–111). The same approach was used at other sites around Japan, such as Miwa and Izumo, to enliven the kami of those shrines with Ise ritual thought (ZHONG 2016, 17–47; ANDREEVA 2017).

The author of the *Inariki* claimed that the Inari deity had one distinct name that the kami preferred: Aihōjin, the "Kami of Love for the Dharma." The use of this name brought together two types of local associations with Inari into one title. Cultivation of love for the Dharma is an orthodox practice intended to sustain focus on the Buddha's teachings expounded upon in major Buddhist treatises such as the *Mohezhiguan* (T 1911, 46.46b10), the *Four-Part Vinaya* (T 1428, 22.682b14), and the *Yogācārabhūmi śāstra* (T 1579, 30.383a6). However, the characters for *aihō* can be understood literally to mean the "rites of love." Works such as Fujiwara Akihira's 藤原明衡 (989–1066) eleventh-century *Shinsarugakuki* describe *aihō* rituals performed around Kyoto and associated with Inari

9. See the *Inari Daimyōjin engi* or the *Inari ryūki*, wherein the author labels the deity as the "old man of strange aspect" (*isō rōō* 異相老翁; IS, 39).

wherein people prayed to kami for help in finding romantic partners or giving birth to children (*Shinsarugakuki*, 36; Abe 1998, 280–315). The name Aihōjin is likely wordplay intended to cause the audience to recollect both associations with the Inari kami. Yet, the *Inariki* does not expand on the issue other than to state that if people revere the kami, then they will develop the right sort of love for the Dharma and also obtain worldly blessings. This well-chosen but ambiguous moniker allowed the authors of Inari origin stories to emphasize both Inari's powers in this world and the power to escape it.

In the context of kami in medieval Japan, the issuing of names is complex and has several peculiarities. This is especially the case for composite deities like Inari with their multiple prominent sub-shrines, each with their own host of names, that are fundamental to their reputation. According to the *Engishiki* (514–515), Inari was known to have three main shrines from the tenth century, but they are given no definite names besides "Upper," "Middle," and "Lower" Shrine in most medieval texts. Today, they are identified with Ōmiya no Me no Ōkami 大宮能売大神, Satahiko no Ōkami 佐田彦大神, and Uka no Mitama no Ōkami 宇迦之御魂大神, all gods prevalent in the imperial myths of the *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀 or the *Kojiki* 古事記. These names did not become commonplace until after the construction of a new main shrine at the foot of Mt. Inari in 1499. As of the compilation of the *Ryōjin hishō* 梁塵秘抄 around 1171, two more shrines had risen to prominence, and Inari was then referred to as a deity with five enshrined aspects (Ueda 2011, 16). The additional two shrines were the Tanaka and Shi no Ōkami shrines, but there is further debate as to the individual names of the kami enshrined in these places as well.

Authors made good use of the potential contained within Inari's multiple names as they constructed discourses for the god and the shrine complex. The *Inariki* reorients and re-identifies the existing shrines to create a mandala, explaining the nature of the mountain topography and its deities:

> This place is the secret place that now universally illuminates and pacifies the land. In the past it was a ground on which buddhas became enlightened. This mountain is a mountain of five peaks. This place is a place of eight leaves. The assembly where Birushana 毗盧遮那 expounded the dharma was here. At the west peak, Aizenō Benzaiten manifested and bestowed fortune unto sentient beings without seeds of fortune (it is named the Peak of Bestowal). In the north, Fudō Sandaijin manifested and punished those people of no belief. In the east, Daiitoku Tenshōdai Daten manifested and took pity on all sentient beings. In the south, Kōzanzetan no Myōjin Kariteimo 降三世丹ノ明神訶利帝母 manifested and took pity on those people bound by affection towards others. In the middle is Inari Amida Shinkoō. (Is, 12)

This reimagining overlayed esoteric Buddhist discourses of Inari onto the landscape and ritual sites of the mountain. In fact, the text lists these peaks in accordance with the order that most pilgrims would have encountered them as they ascended the mountain from the southwest slope and circled around the sites clockwise. Elsewhere, the *Inari Daimyōjin engi* and *Inari ichiryū daiji* identify the shrines and their deities as three forms of Kannon, along with Fudō and Tamonten. The five deities are identified in the same way on a fifteenth-century map of the mountain dating from shortly before the Ōnin War, indicating that this series of names gained some level of acceptance. Thus, the many names and of manifestations of Inari added to the indeterminacy of Inari's role as original ground or manifest trace.

Myōbu and Localization

The *Inariki* added another persona to Inari's repertoire: Myōbu 命婦, a local kami and protector of Japan. Following the origin story of Inari taking up residence on the mountain, the author recounts the many ways in which the deity assisted the local people and protected the imperial court. In these legends, the author calls the kami Myōbu, a term originally referring to a woman above the fifth rank who served at the court in an official capacity. Even today, *myōbu* is sometimes used to refer to the foxes that serve Inari (Kitahara 2004; Yamamoto 2018, 344–349). Yet, it is clear that the author of the *Inariki* used the title of Myōbu to refer not to a messenger of Inari, but instead to the deity itself, as did other sources. The identification of Inari with Myōbu provides a fundamental example of how authors added to the bodhisattva-like imagination of Inari and localized the kami to relate them to significant events and concerns in Japan.

The authors of the *Inariki* asserted that Inari, in the guise of Myōbu, was exceptionally active behind the scenes of Japanese history. They present Myōbu as a kami to whom people could direct rites of veneration and prayers for assistance. This goddess form of Inari in particular was a supporter of the Fujiwara family and royal authority (IS, 5–7). At the same time, sources provide accounts that show Myōbu Inari will defend all worshipers, not only the Fujiwara family, from all dangers out of the god's own sense of obligation. The climax of the *Inariki* comes when Myōbu acts to defend Emperor Daigo 醍醐 (884–930) from the onslaught of a wrathful Kitano Tenman Tenjin. The fantastic story of Inari turning back the might of a wrathful thunder god like Tenjin demonstrates that the kami is able to protect someone from the fiercest of dangers:

> [Myōbū] also made the bitter enemy of this realm retreat and gave the fortune of peace to the land. One day, they peered through the obstructions of the Māra Realm and decided to become a protector of the safety of the Jeweled Body.… When Tenman Daijizai Tenjin was exiled to Dazaifu, he harbored wrath and

> became angry. He turned into Daishō Itokuten and gathered together 168,000 evil deities, appeared as a god of thunder, and fell upon the royal palace. He harmed retainers and intended to kill the ruler. When the sovereign asked who the deity on guard duty that day was, the guardian unwaveringly announced themselves as Inari Daimyōjin, came to the palace hall, and covered [Emperor Daigo] with their robes. Even the awesome Tenjin Daijizaiten feared the divine might of Inari, and as he would not look upon the kami, great disaster did not befall the Jeweled Body. It was a wonderful event. At that time, the deity came flying in the form of a woman of the court and concealed the ruler. She paid respect to the minister [Fujiwara Tokihira] and then an image of the form of Myōbu was reflected in the long sword that had been drawn by the minister.[10] People thought this greatly wonderful, and it is said that now that long sword has been passed on as a protective amulet of the Royal Household Guards. According to this, it is because of Inari Daimyōjin that Tenjin was not able to kill the ruler. (IS, 7–9)

The story of Sugawara Michizane and his deification as Kitano Tenman Tenjin is well known (Borgen 1994). The misfortunes that befell the capital and the Fujiwara following his death and exile led to the Kitano shrine's swift rise to fame. The Kitano shrine is counted among the twenty-two shrine-temple multiplexes alongside Inari. Despite both being included in this prestigious grouping, the author of the *Inariki* wrote that "even the awesome Tenjin Daijizaiten feared the divine might of Inari." This is a clear statement of the superiority of one kami over another. Introducing Kitano Tenjin into Inari's legends simultaneously confirmed Inari's role as a protector of the state, connected the deity to the popular legends of Kitano, and asserted its superiority to the undoubtedly powerful Tenman Tenjin. Whereas the other stories recorded in the *Inariki* allude to Myōbu's ability to assist individuals, here the author reinforces the kami's position as a deity that protects the wellbeing of the whole country, and the sovereign—the foremost member of that state—in particular.

This story of the conflict between Inari and Kitano Tenjin was not limited to the *Inariki*. The legend had enough social currency to achieve cross-pollination and escape out into the imaginations of other authors. For comparison, the author of the fourteenth-century Buddhist compendium known as the *Keiran shūyōshū* retells the story in the following way:

10. The grammar of the original Japanese is particularly oblique here and so the episode is left open to some interpretation; however, it appears that the Inari deity possessed a regular woman of the court and used her body to physically defend Daigo from Tenjin's attack. Yet, while she may have appeared plain, the blade of Tokihira's sword reflected the divine form of the personality of Inari known as Myōbu, a form that was more spectacular than the mortal woman before them. This may draw on the notion that a mirror, or a sword polished well enough to serve as a mirror, reflects only the true form of reality.

> One story says that when Kitano Tenjin became a thunder deity and wanted to violently enter the palace and become a hindrance to the court, there was a meeting of the senior council. It was asked who of the thirty guardian deities was appointed for that day. At that time, Inari Daimyōjin mounted a cloud and appeared. Because Inari opposed their divine authority to Tenjin, he did not become a hindrance. There is ill will between Kitano and Inari. Therefore, on the day that one journeys to Kitano, they should not travel to Inari.
>
> (T 2410, 76.512c15–21)

Succinct in comparison, the *Keiran shūyōshū* tells the same story as the *Inariki*, disagreeing only on one crucial point. While the *Inariki* claims that the relationship between the two gods has been healed and that the former travel restriction is no more, the *Keiran shūyōshū* asserts that one does not travel to Kitano and Mt. Inari on the same day due to lingering ill will. The title of the section in the *Keiran shūyōshū*—"On the Matter of Ill Will between Inari and Kitano"—and its inclusion in the encyclopedic work suggest that this story may have been of broad interest to the medieval esoteric world.

In contrast to the *Inariki*, which is clearly influenced by the Shingon tradition as expected from a text associated with Tōji and Mt. Kōya, the *Keiran shūyōshū* is a work produced from within the Tendai school (Matsumoto 1996). In part, this difference is apparent from the way in which Inari's court duty is referred to across the texts. The *Inariki* simply refers to Inari as a "deity on guard duty" (*tonoi no kami* 宿直ノ神), whereas the *Keiran shūyōshū* calls Inari one of the thirty guardian deities (*sanjū banjin* 三十番神). The thirty guardian deities were a group of kami established as protectors of the *Lotus Sūtra* and the imperial court within Tendai circles, before being adopted in the Nichiren tradition as well.[11] This difference in tradition may be related to the difference of opinion about the state of the relationship between the kami. Some version of the story must have served as a seed to affect the imagined identity of Inari for the authors of both works.

These are not the only stories that describe Inari's capacity to protect people from evil spirits. The first scroll of the mid-thirteenth-century *Kokon chomonjū* includes a tale about an early Heian monk named Teisū 貞崇 (866–944) (KT 15: 3). One day Teisū was chanting the *Greater Wisdom Sūtra* and the *Diamond Sūtra* in one of the emperor's dwelling places in the Imperial Palace. He heard the footfalls of a large person and then those of a small person but did not see to whom they belonged. Afterwards, a small person appeared to Teisū and informed him that evil spirits caused the first set of footfalls, but they were

11. This grouping is established in Japan, but is based on the Chinese precedent of the thirty guardian buddhas (*sanjūnichi butsumyō* 三十日仏名). The permutations of which kami were included in this grouping varied some, although Inari was usually responsible for the sixth or twenty-second days (Mihashi 1997).

repelled when the small person interceded on account of Teisū's chanting. The small figure then identified themself as Inari. In the same regard, the author of the *Kada kōshiki* presents an account, similar to that found in the *Inariki*, which associates Inari and Shichijō'in 七條院 (also known as Fujiwara Shokushi 藤原殖子, 1157–1228), demonstrating that the origin story was also circulating among multiple centers of production for the Inari cult's literature (IS, 28). Examined together, these stories illustrate how Inari's localized repertoire of abilities and legends of the kami's deeds in Japan extended beyond the boundaries of genre and reached multiple audiences.

Conclusion

The *Inari Daimyōjin engi* represents the culmination of the techniques used to imagine the Inari tradition throughout the medieval period. Inari and Kūkai were brought together as allies and partners for the benefit of Japan, and Inari Jinja formed a close relationship with Tōji. By extending this partnership beyond the borders of the archipelago, the kami was identified as a bodhisattva in their own right, and the traditions of Inari Jinja were elevated to be on equal footing with the temple. The multifaceted nature of Inari manifested as the original bodies and manifest traces of the kami maintained the delicate tension necessary for authors to continue that partnership, even among the shifting landscape of Buddhist and Shinto traditions in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Inari was tied to Tōji but constructed as both an independent bodhisattva and their own original ground. Inari as Myōbu and Aihōjin was active in both the foreground and background of Japanese history. Kenna at Shōmyōji in the east, Echibō on Mt. Kōya in the west, and Kōshū in the *Keiran shūyōshū* all made use of different ritual programs, but their descriptions of the nature of Inari were remarkably consistent. Together these agents were able to spread a new form of Inari, reimagined from earlier sources, that set the kami in a careful balance between common Shingon and Tendai ideologies and the growing concerns of Shinto movements.

Today, Inari worship across Japan encompasses considerable diversity across the thousands of shrines that bear the kami's name. Karen SMYERS (1998, 144–149) has argued that this diversity is seemingly supported by the equally considerable autonomy among the worshipers of the various Inari institutions. The centers of Inari worship, such as Fushimi Inari Taisha 伏見稲荷大社 and Toyokawa Inari 豊川稲荷 at Myōgonji 妙厳寺, are silent about the meanings of the fox and jewel symbols of Inari, thereby allowing devotees to make individualized connections with the kami according to their personal interpretations. In comparison, the center of Inari worship in the medieval period was relatively loud. The authors working to promote the kami were clearly in conversation with

one another. There seems to have been a concerted effort to dictate how the Inari kami was viewed by devotees and practitioners, and proponents of Inari disseminated explicit details about the origins of the god and the shrine. The authors of texts like the *Inariki* and the *Inari Daimyōjin engi* worked to determine how the practitioners of Inari-related rituals understood the personality and efficacy of the kami, and they were much in agreement as to the deity's nature, even as they promoted different rituals or specified different steps for the rites.

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ABBREVIATIONS

IS *Inari Taisha yuishoki shūsei: Shinkōcho sakuhen* 稲荷大社由緒記集成—信仰著作篇. Fushimi Inari Taisha. Fushimi Inari Taisha Shamusho, 1957.

KT *Kokushi taikei* 国史大系. 17 vols. Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1998–2002.

ST *Shintō taikei* 神道大系. 123 vols. Shintō Taikei Hensankai, 1977–1994.

T *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新修大蔵経. 85 volumes. Ed. Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 and Watanabe Kaigyōku 渡邊海旭. Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai, 1924–1932.

ZGR *Zoku gunsho ruijū* 続群書類従. 30 vols. Ed. Hanawa Hokiichi 塙保己一. Zoku Gunsho Ruijū Kanseikai, 1928–1934.

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Inari ryūki 稲荷流記. IS, 39–48.

Inari shingyō 稲荷心経. IS, 91–92.

Kada kōshiki 荷田講式. IS, 23–29.

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