

Shintoism and Rituals — The Combination of Japanese Culture and History

Xinyu Yang^{1,a,*}

¹*Department of Asian Studies, Temple University Japan Campus, Tokyo, 154-0004, Japan
a. 3324567752@qq.com*

**corresponding author*

Abstract: In this essay, Shintoism will be the main topic to introduce and discuss. Including the origin of Shintoism, the worship of the believers, and the ways it represents Japanese people's daily lives. According to the research, Shintoism has many branches, and the rituals ("Matsuri" in Japanese) are the main section to introduce. That is why visiting some rituals in person is necessary during the research. From the research, two main shrines will be introduced in the essay and there is a separate part to talk about the real circumstances of what have been seen during the rituals in those two shrines. Nowadays, Shintoism has already become an important thing in this country. Especially those shrines—not only do foreigners choose to visit them, but some local people will also go into shrines to pray or get an "Omamori" to earn good luck.

Keywords: Shintoism, Shrines, Rituals (Matsuri), Traditional Cultures

1. Introduction

Religion is one of the most important parts of a country. During the ancient periods, religion was used for people to rule their territories or their residences. In some countries, religion is not only a tool for rulers to govern their countries, but it is also a symbol of people's beliefs and cultural ideology. Nowadays, religious culture already become one of the methods for researchers to find out the core of a civilization. What will people think about if they mention the religions in Japan? There is no doubt that the two most famous Japanese religions are Shintoism and Buddhism, and Shintoism will be the main topic. The main research questions are: What is Shintoism like nowadays? And how does it affect Japanese people's lives? The main research methods are visiting in person and searching academic materials in libraries.

Initially, the reason for choosing this topic is based on personal experience. After arriving in Japan to study abroad in April 2022, I will sometimes visit shrines in Japan, and learn an interesting hobby—in Japanese it named "Goshuin (御朱印)". This is a signet for visitors to commemorate they have visited this shrine or make a wish; it is collected by a specific blank pamphlet. Many people choose this hobby if they also love collections. Besides, during some special festivals or different seasons, large numbers of shrines will have limited signets for visitors. From a visitor's point of view, having new and beautiful signets may attract them to visit this shrine and get this signet. Based on the shrine's view, attracting more visitors by limited signets not only increases their income but also pushes them continuously and keeps this religion still "alive" in people's minds forever. Shintoism nowadays has

already integrated into people's lives deeply. When I walk through a shrine, there are always some children playing in there, and there are also many people who have the same purposes —go into shrines and get signets or amulet (in Japanese, it is called “Omamori”). Nowadays, they have already become a part of Japanese people's daily lives. That is the reason why I chose Shintoism for this essay because I think it can show people about the passing of culture and beliefs. During my research progress, I have visited a ritual during the summer called “Summer Grand Purification Ritual,” which is held every year on June 30th. In my opinion as a visitor and the author, I watch them join the rituals happily, just like I have seen people who also attended this ritual a few hundred years ago. This is a magical feeling.

2. The History of Shintoism and Rituals

Shintoism is the native religion of Japan, but the history of this religion is not as peaceful as its status in nowadays. It also went through a long history and various fluctuations. According to the summary of Helen Hardacre's book *Shinto: A History*, Peter Knacht indicates that many people will get familiar with Shintoism if they want to research Japanese culture [1]. If students wish to learn about Shintoism, their methods are different. In this book, Helen writes the methods of learning different religions, including learning about Buddhism and Christianity. For example, Peter points out students can read or try to analyze many academic sources about those two religions and get more understanding. However, if researchers want to research Shintoism, it is harder than other religions because they may need to visit shrines in person. Whether it's a shrine or a deity's palace (in Japanese is “Jingu 神宮”), all the buildings of Shintoism can be useful material to learn. Helen also visited the Izumo Shrine (出雲大社) in Shimane-ken with some Christian missionaries, which is one of the oldest shrines in Japan. This can explain why visiting shrines in person is significant—except for the basic materials, these shrines can be knowledgeable enough for researchers to study there. On the other hand, the main building of Shintoism is worth introducing in this essay. There are almost 80,000 shrines in Japan; this is another example to reflect the importance of Shintoism. In traditional concepts of Shintoism, shrines are used to consecrate the deities and for people to make their worship. Britannica also says there is an institution for gathering 80,000 shrines called the Association of Shinto Shrines (Jinja Honcho). This institution is not supported by the Japanese government, their economic source is from the money of residents who live beside these shrines or some worshippers who come to these shrines to make a wish [2]. According to my experience of visiting shrines, the deities they are consecrating are various. From Japanese people's traditional concepts, anything from the natural world can be the deities for them to consecrate in their shrines, like rivers, mountains, winds, or even rains and storms. The reason why Japanese people try to put anything into the classification of deities is because of the three main worships of Shintoism: nature worship, ancestor worship, and Tenno worship. This is the main theory of Shintoism—the “Animism”: in Japanese culture, they believe everything in this natural world has its own spirit.

Shintoism had already appeared before Buddhism came to Japan from North Korea during the sixth century. According to Helen's book, she divided her research of Shintoism into four parts by historical periods. The first part of Shinto's history is from the Yayoi Period (400 B.C.E) to the twelfth century; the name “Shinto” still did not exist clearly during these centuries, so this period is named the “ancient period.” The author also put different centuries into other sections, the thirteenth century to the sixteenth century is called the “medieval period”, and the “early modern period” is from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth century.

Shintoism has many different branches to talk about. The main part of this essay focuses on the rituals of Shintoism — “Matsuri”. The origin of rituals comes from the ancient period, in the chapter

Festivals in Japan, Takamitsu Jimura introduces that the earliest record of this religious activity is from two books—*Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* [3]. These are the oldest and second-oldest extant chronicles in Japan. Based on observations, not only native Japanese people will come to the shrine's rituals, but many foreign tourists will also go in person. In the article *Matsuri—Essence of Japanese Spirituality*, Angela Hondru mentions in her article: "Matsuri can be looked upon as the art through which the human—deity relationship is preserved lively and harmonious, their long tradition resulting in a unique cultural model [4]." This quotation indicates rituals in Shintoism are the main form for Japanese people to contact deities.

The worship of the natural world is the first stage. The other two are ancestors and Tenno. From this article, the purposes of rituals are also a channel for Japanese people to get in touch with their ancestors and even show their respectful attitude toward the emperor. Furthermore, becoming a special cultural pattern is another aspect that rituals can bring to people. In some cases, there is a small question that can be my inspiration: what is the name of rituals today? Because during the past, rituals of Shintoism were a religious activity, it did not have too much routinization things in it. However, during the Edo Period, the social situation was stabilized, and everybody lived peacefully. This is another factor that pushed rituals into various activities and pushed them into people's daily lives. Jimura points out that most entertainment, interesting rituals or even eating foods all first appeared during the Edo Period because people's lives will be better if they live in a well-developed society. In Jimura's article, the writer says the name of rituals nowadays can be "festivals", not only because people's living quality during the Edo Period was getting better, but also because although this is a festival with a short history and without clear tradition, people also used to call it "festival" by using English words [3].

As the content mentioned by Peter Knacht's summary, Helen Hardacre believes visiting shrines is much better than reading academic materials when students want to learn about Shintoism [1]. During my research experience, I choose two shrines to visit: Kanda Shrine (神田神社) and Yushima Tenmangu (湯島天満宮) [5]. Before visiting them in person, their history and background from their official websites are important. The Kanda Shrine was first founded in 730 A.D by Mankada Omi from the Izumo family, and the location of this shrine was in Shibasaki Village, Toshima County of Musashi Province—the Chiyoda-ku in today's Tokyo. There are three main deities that this shrine is consecrating:

Onamuchi—the deity of marriage, land management, and martial harmony, and this deity can protect the world or afterworld in ancestral spirits. Another name of this god is the Daikoku deity, the deity has been the earliest consecrated in Kanda Shrine.

Sukunahikona—an alternate name for Ebisu, the god of commercial prosperity, also manages medical health and good luck. In Japanese myths, Ebisu is one of the first gods born in Japan.

Tairano Masakado—the famous general during the Heian Period, and he is also the god of scattering disaster. This deity has been consecrated in Kanda Shrine in 1309 A.D. During the Sengoku Period, many famous warriors revered him respectfully, such as Ota Dokan (1432-1486) and Hojo Ujitsuna (1487-1541).

In 1600 A.D., before the Battle of Sekigahara, Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543-1616) once made a wish in Kanda Shrine before the Kanda Ritual. Then, the Tokugawa family ordered that this ritual should held every year to celebrate the victory of Ieyasu. With the raising of Tokugawa Shogun's status, Kanda Shrine also became the main guardian of Edo in 1616 A.D. In ancient Japan, if a shrine became the main guardian of an area, the status of this shrine would be much higher than before because this was a kind of approvement toward its history and ability to let people set their faith. The Kanda Shrine can be an example, before it became the main guardian of Edo, many famous people had worshipped in this shrine. That is another reason why it is designated as the guardian of the city—the experience

of the past is the most convincing. With the changing of periods, everything in this city should also be changed. Some prosperous shopping streets in an urban area, it's hard to connect them with the worshipping paths of some famous shrines. For example, the shopping streets of Harajuku—Omotesando were once the worshipping path of the Meiji Jingu Shrine during the Meiji Period. The paths that lie in front of Tomioka Hachimangu (富岡八幡宮), were also the worshipping paths of this deity palace during its period. During the Meiji Period, this shrine changed its name from “Kanda Myojin” to “Kanda Shrine”, and it was destined as the main guardian deity of Tokyo, Meiji Tenno once worshipped in this shrine in 1874 A.D. However, this shrine also has a chaotic past. It was first damaged by The Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923 A.D, and the next damage was in World War II, it was destroyed by The Bombing of Tokyo from the United States. After the war, Kanda Shrine began to rebuild, and it was completed during 1995-2000.

Yushima Tenmangu was built by the twenty-first emperor—Yuryaku Tenno (456-479) in 458 A.D, and the original name was “Yushima Tenjin (湯島天神)” [6], and changed its name to “Yushima Tenmangu” in 2000 A.D. The deities that are consecrated in this shrine are Ameno-tajikaraono and Sugawara Michizane (845-903).

Ame no Tajikaraono—a deity that appears in Japanese myths. The earliest record of this god is from the book *Kojiki*.

Sugawara Michizane—a famous scholar during the middle Heian Period, and he once assisted Uda Tenno (867-931) and Daigo Tenno (885-930), the fifty-ninth emperor and the sixtieth emperor of Japan. Sugawara is also one of the four ferocious ghosts from ancient Japan. After Sugawara died, worshippers decided to consecrate him in Yushima Tenmangu as the god of knowledge. Nowadays, large numbers of students will go to this shrine and make a wish for academic work, including test grades, or applying for a new college.

If somebody wants to ask for the most famous thing in Yushima Tenmangu, there is no doubt that the answer will be the apricot. During February and March, the period of apricot blossom, many people will come to this shrine and attend the Ritual of Apricot (梅祭り).

The ritual this essay focuses on is called the Summer Grand Purification Ritual (夏越し大祓). Written by Peter in the summary of Helen's book: “The most significant public ritual, the Ōharae (court ritual), the Great Purification, becomes more and more a private means used by non-imperial clans to protect themselves against kami that have increasingly become imagined as endowed with a moral character.” This ritual is for people to exorcise bad luck or impurity from January to June. In the past, this ritual was only held for the emperor. But nowadays, it already become one of the important rituals in many shrines for civilians. This purification ritual will be held twice a year. The first time is in June. 30th, and the other one is in December. 31st—which represents summer and winter. During the purification ritual, people will use a paper doll to scrub their hands and arms. They believe this action will scatter the bad luck and be absorbed by this little doll. Another step of purification is called “Chinowa Kuguri (茅の輪潜り)” by Japanese. The process is to walk through a big hoop made of kaya grass for three times. Then, visitors can pass the hoop and make a wish in front of the main hall. Besides, they will eat a traditional food called “Minazuki”. This is a kind of dessert made of Azuki beans and sweet sticky rice. In Japanese people's concepts, Azuki beans have the power to cast evils away. That is why they eat these beans to protect themselves and keep off diseases.

It is not strange to find a group of people attending rituals after entering a shrine. Based on my experience, I have met people who joined summer rituals almost three times. The special place is—that there are always lots of people who will come to these rituals; without propagating widely, everybody will come, including residents who live surrounding the shrine or even somebody interested in this ritual. That is why there is a derived question: why do Japanese people love to attend

rituals? What kinds of meaning do rituals bring to Japanese people's daily lives? The Gion Festival is one of the most famous rituals in Japan, it can be a useful example to introduce rituals from Shinto. The summary text by Professor James. McClain talks about the origin of the Gion Festival [7]. From the recording of *the Japanese Chronicles of Three Generations* (日本三代実録), this festival appeared during the middle of the ninth century. In the beginning, full avenging spirits were wandering on the streets and bringing illness and death to civilians, so the emperor decided to hold rites for scattering these avenging spirits. In the next century, the worshippers in the Yasaka area of Kyoto treated Gozu Tenno as their guardian deity. The earliest record of the word "Gion" came from the earliest religious record—"Gion Shaki (祇園尺)", then people from the religious institution of Kansai constructed the Gion Tenjindou (祇園天神堂) in 926 A.D. In 934, a priest from the Kasaga Shrine built a new altar for Gozu Tenno. Until the end of the tenth century, this shrine changed its name to Gion Shrine (祇園神社).

In the article written by Angela Hondru, she describes the rituals of Shintoism like this: "They display a large variety of both Japanese and foreign paintings and traditional tapestries, turning into a genuine movable museum. [4]" This sentence comes from the paragraph that talks about the Gion Festival in Kyoto; Angela uses the word "movable museum" as a metaphor to illustrate the meaning of rituals in Shintoism: this is not only an activity, but it also can be a way to express their own culture and traditional aesthetics. If watching a ritual closely, it may have many discoveries easily that every detail may be a treasure handed down by people from a few hundred years ago. That is why many people love to attend rituals because this activity can reflect the passing of traditional culture and convey beauty to the audiences. When I was traveling in Kyoto, it was true that I had seen many people attending rituals from the shrine. Although that was not the Gion Festival, but I still felt the meaning conveyed to its audiences.

Compare the difference of the word "matsuri" between the past and nowadays, the biggest difference is the meaning of it is changed. Back to Angela's article, she explains this word in the beginning: "Though some people say that matsuri ("traditional festivals") seem sometimes frayed at the edges, especially in big cities, they are deeply ingrained in the Japanese soul." According to the description of other rituals in the essay, most people during the ancient period always treated them like a significant rite, like scattering, avenging ghosts and diseases, or keeping illness away from this place and its residents. However, in this quotation, the author uses "traditional festival" to explain "matsuri", which means it already become a daily activity to convey Japanese traditional culture. In other words, the difference between the meaning of it during the past and nowadays is only differentiated by people's attitude towards it. It is true that everybody has tired moments and they need to relieve their pressure or fatigue, so the shrines and rituals in Shintoism can be another place for people to entrust their souls.

3. Observations

I attended on June 30, 2024—the Summer Grand Purification Ritual in Kanda Shrine and Yushima Tenmangu. In Shintoism, if this is a shrine with a long history, then it will not be only one shrine in this place. It will have other small shrines surrounding the main hall of it. For example, there are eight small shrines surrounding the main hall of the Kanda Shrine. The main theory of Shintoism can be reflected obviously in their names: Mizu Shrine (水神社), Yakumo Shrine (八雲神社), Urayasu Inari Shrine (浦安稲荷神社), Edo Shrine (江戸神社), etc. In Yushima Tenmangu, there are also two shrines inside of it: Sasadzuka Inari Shrine (笹塚稲荷神社) and Togakushi Shrine (戸隠神社).

The beginning of the purification ritual is done by the priests of the shrine. They will read an opening remark, and then the whole ritual will begin. The whole process is almost the same as the introduction of this ritual, but the route of passing the big hoop should be attention when you want to pass: the first round turns to the left after you pass the hoop, the second round turns to right, and the third round turns to left again, then you can finish the “Chinowa Kuguri”, and come into the main hall to make a wish. After making a wish at the main hall, I started to walk around in the shrine and saw a lovely and interesting thing: Kanda Shrine not only has a hoop for visitors to pass, but it also has a smaller hoop for pets to walk! There are also some booths at the front of the shrine store; some workers will sell some foods or drinks to visitors, most of them are traditional Japanese snacks or wine. To relieve the uncomfortable swelter is the first reason, but another reason is keeping with the atmosphere of the festival.

Besides, getting Omamori is the next step when going into a shrine. Especially Kanda Shrine. One of the most popular souvenirs of that place is the Omamori of flowers. During each special season with flower blossoms, Kanda Shrine will launch a new Omamori with flower patterns on it. I got one in March last year with the patterns of cherry blossom; this time, I got a new one with sunflowers on it. Except for the limited Omamori, this shrine also launches something special commodities about the Summer Purification Ritual, like the bracelet with the shape of a kaya grass hoop and the bell Omamori in golden color. While saying that these details are interesting and lovely, I also think it is another reason to attract visitors—there will be no improvement without innovation. Traditional culture and customs are worth passing on continuously, but it will be better to have some new ideas or designs because nothing is unchanged, especially beauty. From the content of this section, the reason why people want to come to shrines and rituals is obvious.

4. Conclusion

This essay introduced the historical background of Shintoism with two shrines, and the origin of rituals with one ritual which I have been in person. Back to the main question: Why Shintoism is still important in Japan? There are two statements to answer this question. The first one is standing on a religious perspective—Shinto keeps alive in tradition; it is obvious if visit some shrines in person or attend some rituals with large groups of people. Shintoism has already blended into people’s lives deeply, no matter the deity palaces besides some tall buildings, or some shrines in museums and hotels, like there are many Inari Shrines in Ginza of Tokyo. Shrines are also a new way for people to relax their mind. For example, the young generation in China prefers to go to museums and temples because they need to relieve the pressure and fatigue from daily life—it is like Japanese people. Those shrines are the place for them to have a rest, the ritual of the shrine is also a method for them to feel life at a slow pace.

Like the description from Jimura: “Nowadays, the majority of both matsuri and festivals of Japan are recognized as significant tourism resources.” With tourism in Japan becoming prosperous, the popularity of shrines is getting more, too. In today’s Japanese society, Shintoism can also attract tourists and improve tourism in Japan. For example, many famous shrines in different cities have become famous traveling spots for foreigners, like Sensoji Temple and Kanda Shrine in Tokyo or the Yasaka Shrine (八坂神社) and Shimogamo Shrine (下鴨神社) in Kyoto. The things that shrines can bring to tourists are not only pretty buildings or interesting rituals, but the real treasure brought to them is the Japanese traditional culture and aesthetics, although they have passed for thousands of years.

With the passing of time, only these shrines still stand in this place. They will watch visitors come and leave, just like this religion—keeping alive and carrying on with their stories forever.

References

- [1] Knacht, Peter. *Shinto: A History*, written by Helen Hardacre, published by Nanzan University, 2019-spring, Vol. 78, Issue 1, pp. 239-243. Temple University Japan Online Library.
- [2] "Shrine Shintō", *Encyclopedia Britannica*. 9 May. 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Shirne-Shinto>. Accessed 12 July 2024.
- [3] Jimura, Takamitsu. "Festivals in Japan". *Cultural Heritage and Tourism in Japan*, imprinted by Routledge, August 16 2021, 1st ed., Chapter 3, pp. 48-67. Temple University Japan Online Library.
- [4] Hondru, Angela. "Matsuri-Essence of Japanese Spirituality." *Romanian Economic and Business Review*, Edited by Brasov, 2014-10, Vol.9 (3), pp.47-55. Temple University Japan Online Library.
- [5] "What is kanda myojin?" "Edo sochinju Kanda myojin shrine, www.kandamyoujin.or.jp/profile/. Accessed 12 July 2024.
- [6] Yuryaku Tenno. *Yushima Tenmangu*. 458 A.D., Bunkyou-ku, Tokyo.
- [7] McClain, James. L. "The Gion Festival." *Brown University*. Viewed 13 July 2024.