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Worldwide Kami, Global Shinto: the Invention and Spread of a “Nature Religion”

Abstract | Shinto is generally perceived as a uniquely Japanese affair, intimately connected with the Japanese nation and physical environment. In recent years, however, Shinto has been reinvented as some sort of Eastern “nature spirituality” with global significance, and acquired popularity outside Japan. Shinto shrines have been established in several countries, and communities of self-declared Shinto practitioners have become active in Facebook groups and on other social media. Meanwhile in Japan, there are several developments suggesting an increasing “internationalization” of Shinto. This article provides an overview of the invention of Shinto as a “nature religion” and, correspondingly, its international popularization. It consists of four parts: a discussion of the emergence and development of the “Shinto environmentalist paradigm”; a short historical sketch of earlier universalistic tendencies within Shinto; an overview of existing Shinto shrines outside Japan; and an explorative discussion of certain online “Shinto” communities. The article concludes by suggesting that the international popularization of Shinto has been made possible by the reinvention of Shinto as a “nature religion”, which has led to its discursive depoliticization, as well as by associations with Japanese popular culture. Thus far, “global Shinto” remains limited in scope; nevertheless, it constitutes an interesting new phenomenon, which may lead to transformations in the tradition as a whole.

Keywords | Shinto – globalization – Japanese religions abroad – Shinto environmentalist paradigm – online religiosity

1 Introduction

Often described as Japan’s “indigenous” worship tradition, Shinto is generally perceived as a uniquely Japanese affair. According to most Shinto scholars and priests, their tradition is a foundational aspect of Japanese culture, closely intertwined with the country’s physical landscape, social structures, morality, agricultural traditions and, perhaps most importantly, its imperial family. Thus, they typically describe Shinto as the “ethnic religion” (minzoku shūkyō) of the Japanese nation, which took shape in tandem with the ancient Japanese state and has continued to influence national history ever since.¹ The unique national character of Shinto is often asserted in introductory textbooks, works of a popular-scientific nature, and mass media texts. Here one regularly comes across the statement that Shinto is fundamentally different from so-called “world religions”, as it is said to have “no dogma, no sacred scripture, and no founder”; likewise, it is

¹ E.g. Minoru Sonoda, Dare demo no shintō: Shūkyō no Nihonteki kanōsei (Tokyo: Kōbundō, 1998).
usually argued that the term used to refer to Shinto deities, kami, is untranslatable. Accordingly, some priests refer to Shinto as an “intuitive religion” (chokkan shūkyō), the essence of which can only be grasped experientially, something which most “rational” Westerners supposedly are not capable of. Others evade the term “religion” altogether, suggesting that Shinto is the essence of Japan’s “traditional culture” (dentō bunka), which functions to establish and maintain local as well as national community bonds – and, as such, has a profoundly public character. In sum, in most emic discourse Shinto and the Japanese nation are seen as deeply interconnected, and Shinto is described as a unique Japanese tradition that is difficult to comprehend for foreigners coming from different cultural and religious backgrounds.

To many Shinto actors, therefore, the idea of a “global Shinto” would appear as an oxymoron. Likewise, until recently few non-Japanese took part in shrine rituals or professed a personal interest in Shinto spirituality; there were few (if any) non-Japanese practitioners. Correspondingly, Shinto received little international scholarly attention. In recent years, however, this has changed. Outside Japan, Shinto practices and beliefs are increasingly dissociated from their imperialist past, and reinvented as some sort of Eastern “nature spirituality” with global significance. Non-Japanese priests have established Shinto shrines in the United States and the Netherlands, and similar initiatives are undertaken elsewhere. Moreover, in recent years, communities of self-declared Shinto practitioners have become active in Facebook groups and on other social media, where they discuss their personal interpretations and adaptations of Shinto. Meanwhile, in Japan, there are several developments apparently pointing to an increasing “internationalisation” of Shinto, ranging from institutional cooperation to international shrine tourism, and even the organisation of spiritual trainings such as misogi (an ascetic practice, consisting of purification by standing under a cold waterfall) for visitors from abroad. Although still strongly associated with Japanese culture – arguably, this Japanese character is part of its current global appeal – Shinto is gradually “opening up”, to the point that more and more non-Japanese people are expressing an interest in studying and/or practising it. Thus, although by no means a “world religion” (yet), the notion of Shinto as a worship tradition only practiced and comprehended by Japanese people no longer corresponds to reality.

In this article, I will discuss the development of something we might tentatively call “global Shinto”: the recent popularization of Shinto (or aspects thereof) outside Japan, as well as the increasing influence of global trends on shrine Shinto within the country. I will provide an overview of this development, giving several examples of ways in which Shinto is appropriated by non-Japanese actors, focusing primarily on developments outside Japan. As I will argue, there are four factors which have contributed to Shinto’s recent international popularization: the proliferation of the “Shinto environmentalist paradigm” (see below) both in Japan and the West, which has led to the reinvention of Shinto as an idealized Eastern “nature spirituality”; Shinto’s discursive depoliticization, and its dissociation (for better or worse) from wartime imperialism; the prevalence of pseudo-religious elements in manga and anime, which have acquired significant popularity among young people worldwide; and, last but not least, the spread of social media, which has facilitated the emergence of new transnational networks of religious practitioners, neither controlled nor sanctioned by clergy or missionaries.

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3 Tsuneiyo Tanaka, Shintō no chikara (Tokyo: Gakken publishing, 2011).
Following the above, this article consists of four parts. First, I will briefly discuss the emergence of the “Shinto environmentalist paradigm” in recent years, as I believe this is crucial for understanding contemporary interpretations and adaptations of Shinto. The second part then provides a short historical overview of universalistic tendencies within Shinto, showing that although contemporary practices are innovative, they are not altogether unprecedented. Third, I will move on to describe some Shinto shrines outside Japan, and discuss their possible significance. In particular, I will look at San Marino Jinja, the Japanese Dutch Shinzen Foundation, and the Tsubaki Grand Shrine of America. The last section explores the topic of “worldwide kami”; the emergence of networks of self-declared Shinto practitioners and other Shinto aficionados on the Internet. Thus, as mentioned, in this article the focus lies primarily on the spread of Shinto outside Japan. It should be pointed out that shrine Shinto within Japan has also undergone some significant transformations in recent years, which have been influenced by transnational connections and global trends as much as domestic issues, but a discussion of these is beyond the scope of the present text.

2 The Shinto environmentalist paradigm

The question “what is Shinto” is notoriously difficult to answer. In emic discourse, it is commonly conceptualised as “Japan’s indigenous worship tradition”, supposedly going back to prehistorical times, during which it arose “spontaneously” in response to the physical environment of the Japanese isles. The notion that Shinto is “indigenous” Japanese – in contrast to Buddhism, Confucianism and Christianity, which are perceived as “foreign”, despite their long histories of acculturation and transformation in Japan – and predates the introduction of any “foreign” elements is persistent, despite the fact that it is historically problematic. As recent research has shown, Shinto is shaped by Buddhist and Daoist elements as much as by local traditions of kami worship. Moreover, contrary to popular understanding, Shinto is not an ancient religion. Although some shrines go back to pre-Buddhist times, there was no such thing as a unified “Shinto” (conceptualized as a single tradition, differentiated from other ritual traditions both discursively and institutionally) until early modern times. Despite such recent insights, however, the notion of continuity from prehistorical times to the present remains a central part of Shinto self-definitions and historical narratives, which typically assert the transhistorical and existential intertwining of shrine worship, Japanese “traditional culture”, and the physical environment of the Japanese archipelago.

Yet even among those who adhere to the notion of Shinto as the primordial indigenous worship tradition of Japan, there is significant disagreement concerning its core essence, purpose,
and defining features. As I have outlined elsewhere, in the course of modern Japanese history, different paradigms have emerged according to which Shinto has been conceptualized. I have distinguished between the imperial paradigm, which goes back to the Meiji period and lingers today, and which stipulates that Shinto is a non-religious ritual tradition fundamentally concerned with the continuity of the divine imperial institution; the ethnic paradigm, which was the dominant conservative view in the post-war period, and which is based on a belief in the fundamental intertwinement between Shinto and the Japanese nation (as described in the introduction); the local paradigm, which draws on Romantic notions of nationhood as best preserved in rural “folk” traditions, and which is based on notions of Shinto as a tradition characterized by diverse local matsuri, myths and popular beliefs; the universal paradigm, which conceives of Shinto as a potential world religion (see below); and the spiritual paradigm, represented by a number of popular post-war public intellectuals with a strong nationalist orientation, who argue that the essence of Shinto lies in its unique Japanese spirituality.

Drawing on these earlier conceptualizations, as well as the global trend to associate religion with environmental issues, a new paradigm emerged in the 1990s. I have referred to this as the “Shinto environmentalist paradigm”. Today, Shinto is increasingly conceptualized as, essentially, an ancient tradition of nature worship (sometimes referred to as “animistic”), supposedly grounded in an awareness of the interdependence between human and non-human beings, and a corresponding gratitude to nature. Proponents of this view often assert that Shinto offers valuable suggestions for human–nature coexistence, which provide solutions for the environmental problems of today. This view has been put forward by contemporary Shinto scholars such as Sonoda Minoru and Ueda Masaaki, and advocated by organizations such as the International Shinto Foundation and Shasō Gakkai (“Sacred Forest Study Association”). Central to their discourse is the notion of chinju no mori: the sacred groves surrounding many shrines in Japan, which are said to be of ecological importance, and which have come to represent physical as well as cultural continuity between the present and the ancient past. In recent years, the symbolic significance of these chinju no mori has come to be extended beyond environmental issues: the National Association of Shinto Shrines (Jinja Honchō) has embraced the notion, reframing it as a core symbol of Japanese community life and “harmony with nature”. Thus, although still

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15 Masaaki Ueda and Atsushi Ueda, eds., Chinju no mori wa yomigaeru: Shasō gaku koto hajime (Kyoto: Shihunkaku shuppan, 2001).
17 E.g. Tanaka, Shin’to no chikara.
associated with conservative nationalist politics (and justifiably so), Jinja Honchō has jumped on the environmental bandwagon: not only has it appropriated natural symbols and expressed an interest in nature conservation, it also collaborates with international organizations such as the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC).

It should be pointed out, however, that the formation and popularization of the Shinto environmentalist paradigm has not been a solely Japanese affair. Japanese authors advocating notions of Shinto as a tradition concerned with the environment often draw on the work of Western authors such as Lynn White, Jr., who was one of the first to contribute environmental destruction to the Judeo-Christian world-view stipulating the domination of nature by man. In addition, there are many English-language texts on Shinto that assert the fundamental intertwining of Shinto and “nature”, suggesting that Shinto offers useful ecological insights. Such ideas have spread beyond academia, and are often found in popular texts and online media, as I will illustrate below. As a result, the idea that Shinto is some sort of Japanese “nature spirituality” has become commonplace, perhaps even more so outside Japan than within the country.

In summary, the Shinto environmentalist paradigm has significantly altered understandings of Shinto, in Japan as well as internationally. Shinto has by no means lost its imperialist and nationalist elements, but it is no longer primarily associated with such ideologies. Despite the ongoing controversy surrounding Yasukuni Jinja, it appears as if Shinto as a whole is increasingly associated with positive things such as respect for the environment, natural beauty, notions of “sacred nature” and so on. As we shall see, it is precisely this association that has facilitated the popularization of Shinto outside Japan – even though, paradoxically, the Shinto environmentalist paradigm is grounded in notions of sacred Japanese land, rather than a universalistic understanding of nature as intrinsically sacred. Such nuances, however, are not necessarily understood by non-Japanese Shinto practitioners, who selectively adopt those elements from the tradition to

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19 Kōshitsu henshūbu, ed., *Chinju no mori ga sekai o sukuu* (Tokyo: Fusōsha, 2014); Rots, “Sacred Forests, Sacred Nation.” The ARC defines itself as “a secular body that helps the major religions of the world to develop their own environmental programmes, based on their own core teachings, beliefs and practices” (“About ARC,” accessed June 23, 2015, http://www.arcworld.org/about_ARC.asp). Among other things, Jinja Honchō has been involved with the establishment of a global, interreligious “Green Pilgrimage Network,” which has been set up with the purpose of “helping pilgrim places and routes become cleaner and greener” (“Green Pilgrimage Network,” accessed June 26, 2015, http://greenpilgrimage.net/).


22 See for instance the (highly informative) blog *Green Shinto* by John Dougill, which is “dedicated to the promotion of an open, international and environmental Shinto” (John Dougill, “Green Shinto. About,” *Green Shinto*, accessed June 24, 2015, http://www.greenshinto.com/wp/about/).


24 Rots, “Sacred Forests, Sacred Nation.”
which they can personally relate. I will say more about this process of selective adaptation shortly; first, however, I will provide a brief historical overview of earlier attempts to globalize Shinto.

3 “Global Shinto”: historical precedents

As pointed out previously, the notion that Shinto is Japan’s “indigenous” worship tradition is problematic, if only because shrine practices have been influenced by continental elements throughout history. As a consequence, in modern Shinto, one can find traces of Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, Christianity and even Hinduism. Unlike Buddhism or Christianity, however, Shinto has never been a truly transnational religion: it has not spread widely, and it has not been adapted to different cultural contexts, at least not on a large scale. Nor has it ever evolved into a religion with large and prominent diaspora communities, such as Judaism or Hinduism. Nevertheless, as pointed out previously, there have been some attempts at universalizing Shinto and spreading it outside Japan. Roughly speaking, we can divide “global Shinto” into six different categories: overseas imperial Shinto (the establishment of imperial shrines outside Japan during the first half of the 20th century); diaspora Shinto (the construction of shrines by Japanese migrants abroad); “Shinto-derived new religions” establishing sites of worship abroad; non-Japanese actors establishing shrines outside the country; transnational networks of Shinto practitioners, communicating online and worshipping at home; and, last but not least, the “internationalization” of shrine Shinto inside Japan – as illustrated by increasing numbers of foreign visitors, international PR activities, the impact of transnational trends on Japanese practices, and even the emergence of non-Japanese shrine priests. Although this article is primarily concerned with categories four and five, I will briefly describe the first three in order to provide some historical context.

In the pre-war period, a significant number of shrines were built in overseas occupied areas, in particular Korea and Taiwan. Generally speaking, these were closely associated with imperial rule and ideology; i.e., with the ritual-ideological system conventionally known as “State Shinto.” According to historian Nakajima Michio, between the 1890s and 1945 a total of 1640 so-called “overseas shrines” (kaigai jinja) were built outside mainland Japan. Most of these were in Korea (995), followed by Manchuria (243), Taiwan (184) and Sakhalin (128). Although most kaigai jinja were intertwined with the imperial system, and constructed for performing the obligatory rituals associated with the imperial cult, there were also attempts to develop Shinto into a “world religion” by accommodating various non-Japanese ritual traditions. This, for example, was the intention of Shinto scholar and missionary Ogasawara Shōzō (1892–1970), whose ideas on the universal applicability of Shinto world-views echoed contemporary notions of Japan’s “civilizing mission”.

Nevertheless, after the war, Shinto virtually disappeared from Japan’s former colonies; the vast majority of these shrines were either demolished or converted into temples for other deities. Today, there is hardly any Shinto presence left in either Taiwan or Korea. 

27 Ibid., 27–28.
Not all *kaigai jinja* were built in the colonies, however. In the Meiji period (1868–1912), sizeable groups of migrants left Japan to settle in Hawaii, North America and South America. Several shrines were built in those areas, some of which are still used today. Hawaii, for instance, has a number of functioning shrines.\(^{30}\) It has been argued that “Shinto in Hawaii requires consideration as a new American religion rather than as Japanese Shinto in diaspora”;\(^{31}\) but the fact remains that most of these shrine communities self-identify as Shinto. In any case, the boundaries between “Shinto” and “new religions” are blurred, not only in Hawaii but also in Brazil. Perhaps the most prominent shrine in this country, Hokkoku Dai Jingū (also known as Iwato Jinja), is officially a branch shrine of Ise Jingū; however, it also contains elements typical of Japanese new religions, including neo-shamanistic medium practices and other so-called “syncretistic” elements (e.g., subshrines devoted to popular Brazilian saints).\(^{32}\) Considering the difficulty of establishing an authoritative definition of “Shinto” and the normativity inherent in any such attempt, I suggest that the primary criterion for classifying groups should be self-definition. Hence, in my opinion these shrines all deserve to be called “Shinto”, if that is how they define themselves.

This is not necessarily the case for all Japanese new religious movements active overseas, despite the fact that some of them do retain elements of *kami* worship and are sometimes classified as “Shinto”. Indeed, well-known groups such as Tenrikyō, Konkōkyō, Kurozumikyō and Ōmoto – all of which are active in missions abroad, to varying degrees – are (or were) classified as “Sect Shinto”: Edo- or Meiji-period religious groups which incorporated elements of shrine worship, yet have never been involved with “State Shinto” or affiliated with Jinja Honchō.\(^{33}\) In addition to these older movements, there are several new religions established in the post-war period which have also incorporated some elements of Shinto; hence, they are sometimes referred to by scholars as “Shinto-derived new religions” (*shintōkei shinshūkyō*).\(^{34}\) Most of these belong to the “Ōmoto lineage”: a diffuse group of post-war religions drawing upon the beliefs and practices of Ōmoto. Several of these groups claim to possess secret knowledge going back to ancient times, referred to as *koshintō* (“old Shinto”). They typically combine promises of spiritual salvation and millenarian regeneration with a variety of praying and healing practices, as well as social activism (e.g., development projects carried out in the global South), organic agriculture, investment in “traditional” Japanese arts, and outspoken opposition to organ transplantation. Examples include Sekai Kyüseikyō, Seichō no Ie, Ananaikyō and Worldmate. Whether or not all these movements should be categorized as “Shinto” may be subject to debate; in any case, there is a large, diffuse variety of organizations that, while being significantly different from “standard” shrines (but then, who decides the standard), lay claim to the “true” Shinto tradition as much as Jinja Honchō does. In summary, the boundaries of the category Shinto remain as unclear and contested as ever.

to get married at a Shinto shrine did not associate it with the imperial past. I have not (yet) come across other reports of non-Japanese Asian couples getting married at Shinto shrines, however.


It is precisely in these “borderlands” of Shinto, among these religious movements, that the universal paradigm has been at its most pronounced. Already in the pre-war period, some of them established overseas mission activities and founded shrines. “Sect Shinto” movement Izumo Ōyashirokōyō, for instance, founded a shrine and mission organization in Hawaii in 1906. Religions such as Tenrikyō, Konkōkyō, Ōmoto, Seichō no Ie and Sekai Kyōseikyō have all employed foreign mission activities. The latter two groups are well-known for having attracted significant numbers of followers in Brazil; others have been active in Europe, the US, Australia, Southeast Asia and Africa, with varying degrees of success.35 Significantly, some of them have also been active in disseminating knowledge about Shinto abroad. The International Shinto Foundation, for instance, was founded and financed by Fukami Tōshū, leader of the “Shinto-derived new religion” Worldmate.36 Among its various activities, this organisation has sponsored international conferences, Shinto essay contests, and an academic chair in Shinto studies. Significantly, it has also actively promoted the image of Shinto as a religion with a strong environmental orientation.37

4 San Marino Jinja

As we have seen, the vast majority of pre-war shrines constructed in the Asia-Pacific region and the Americas were founded by Japanese people (colonial administrators, migrants and/or missionaries). Likewise, most shrines in Hawaii and Brazil cater to the descendants of Japanese migrants, even though a handful of non-Japanese may occasionally visit the shrine and take part in rituals.38 There are also shrines founded by non-Japanese people, however. Few in number though they are, they have drawn the attention of Shinto practitioners and aficionados worldwide, and may well have set a precedent that will be followed by others. Not counting ordinary kamidana house altars (which no doubt have found their way to many different countries), I have come across reports of Shinto shrines established in France, San Marino, the Netherlands, the US and Canada.39 The shrine in France, Wako Jinja, is fairly small, consisting of a hokora (a miniature shrine) and a wooden torii (shrine gate). It is associated with a Shingon Buddhist temple named Kōmyō-in near the city of Auxerre (Bourgogne), and was donated by Mizuya Jinja, a shrine in Matsusaka (Mie prefecture). The shrine is dedicated to the sun goddess Amaterasu, who is seen by Shingon Buddhists as an incarnation of the cosmic Buddha Mahāvairocana (J. Dainichi Nyōrai).40 Thus, this is an interesting and rare case of shinbutsu shūgō (Shinto-Buddhist combinatory beliefs and practices) that has been transplanted into a European country.

The Shinto shrine in San Marino, San Marino Jinja, is slightly bigger. It consists of a small wooden shrine building placed on a large stone, inside which is the jewel that serves as shintai (“divine body”: the physical object seen as manifestation of the kami).41 The shrine is surrounded by a large torii gate, stone lanterns, and cherry trees, and was inaugurated in the spring of 2014. Like other Shinto shrines, it appears to have a ritual function, reportedly offering Shinto wed-
dings. In addition, it also serves as a memorial monument for the victims of the earthquake and tsunami that hit the Tōhoku region in 2011. San Marino Jinja is served by shrine priest Francesco Brigante, a former hotel manager who apparently has been approved by Jinja Honchō. Not surprisingly, Brigante describes Shinto as an ecological tradition, whose way of thinking has to be “exported” outside Japan.

In local media, San Marino Jinja has been described as “the first Shinto shrine in Europe”, which is not technically correct since there has been a shrine in Amsterdam for many years (see below). In contrast to the Dutch shrine, however, San Marino Jinja is officially sanctioned by Jinja Honchō – an indication of the latter organisation’s increasing international orientation, but also of the shrine’s conservative profile. Significantly, one of the main people involved with the project of constructing the shrine is Kase Hideaki, founder of the Japan-San Marino Friendship Society (Associazione di Amicizia Nippo-Sammarinese), which goes back to 2001 and counts over 1000 members today. The website of San Marino Jinja contains a short essay by Kase, in which he argues that “Shinto is the world’s new religion of ecology” – thus, Kase is clearly aware of the legitimacy provided by the Shinto environmentalist paradigm. However, he is also one of the most outspoken right-wing intellectuals in contemporary Japan: a prominent member of the ultra-nationalist organization Nippon Kaigi as well as chairman of the “Society for the Dissemination of Historical Fact”, he has spent his entire career denying the historical reality of Japanese war crimes such as the Nanking Massacre, and supporting the production of historical revisionist films.

Apparently, this did not deter the San Marinese authorities from allowing and supporting the construction of a shrine in San Marino by this organization. Quite the contrary: the ambassador of San Marino to Japan, Manlio Cadelo, has long been interested in Japan and its culture, and has been one of the driving forces behind the establishment of the shrine (not surprisingly, he is also a personal friend of Brigante). The fact that San Marino Jinja has been sanctioned by conservative circles in Japan – the first foreign shrine to have been granted that honor since the end of World War II, apparently – is illustrated by the fact that the inauguration ceremony was attended by the mothers of both Prime Minister Abe Shinzō (a proud member of Nippon Kaigi, who is actively trying to amend the post-war democratic Constitution) and Jinja Honchō president Tanaka Tsunekiyo, in addition to many members of the Japan-San Marino Friendship Society.

There are still many questions about this shrine that have to be answered in order to get a complete picture of its history, political involvement, and ritual practices. Why is it, for instance, that Jinja Honchō has chosen to approve this shrine, contrary to other shrines abroad – even allowing a foreign shrine priest to conduct rituals, despite the fact that he (presumably) has not

44 I have not yet been able to find out what sort of training Brigante has received, and what sort of rituals he conducts at the shrine. This will be subject to further research conducted at the shrine itself, including personal interviews with the priest and other actors involved.
46 E.g. “San Marino: inaugurato il primo tempio shintoista d’Europa.”
47 See “Japan – San Marino friendship society.”
49 “San Marino: inaugurato il primo tempio shintoista d’Europa.”
followed the official Jinja Honchō-approved study programme for shrine priests at one of the two Japanese Shinto universities? Who are the people worshipping at the shrine: local people interested in Shinto, Japanese tourists, or nobody at all? What exactly is the involvement of the historical revisionist Kase, and why is it that nationalist ideologues associated with Nippon Kaigi suddenly have become interested in promoting the image of “ecological Shinto” internationally? These are all questions that will hopefully be addressed in a future study. For now, let me point out that the significance of San Marino Jinja lies not primarily in the fact that it is located outside Japan – as we have seen, this is not unprecedented – but that it is the first foreign shrine since 1945 that has received the blessing (no pun intended) of the conservative shrine establishment. Until recently, Jinja Honchō was not interested in advocating Shinto internationally, let alone endorsing the construction of a shrine in Europe; in this respect, it has changed completely.

5 A Dutch kami

In contrast to San Marino Jinja, Jinja Honchō most certainly has not supported or endorsed the Japanese Dutch Shinzen Foundation, a Shinto organisation and shrine located in Amsterdam. Founded as early as 1981, the Japanese Dutch Shinzen Foundation defines itself as “the home of Shinto in Europe”, offering “practical wisdom for the modern world.” It is run by Paul de Leeuw, a former actor who received his religious training at the Yamakage Shinto centre in Aichi prefecture, where he was inaugurated as the first non-Japanese Yamakage priest. Yamakage Shinto is considered by scholars as one of the so-called “Shinto-derived new religions”, but it claims to possess esoteric knowledge said to have been transmitted orally since ancient times. Indeed, as Paul de Leeuw confirmed, Yamakage believes that in medieval times its priests served as secret advisors to the Emperor, a position they lost in modern times as a result of the political machinations resulting in the construction of “State Shinto”. There are no historical sources suggesting that Yamakage priests were indeed imperial advisors – but then, the argument goes, they were “secret”, so no sources could have mentioned them. In any case, small though the group is (it reportedly has a membership of 9,300) it has gained some wider recognition, mainly because of the work of the former leader, Yamakage Motohisa, who was a prolific writer.

Yamakage is also known outside Japan, thanks to the fact that his best-known book, Shintō no Shinpi (“The Mysteries of Shinto”), has been adapted and translated into four languages, including English. Reportedly, it has also been translated into Portuguese, French and Arabic. The English version is entitled The Essence of Shinto, and was published partly thanks to Paul de Leeuw’s efforts. Interestingly, if you go to Amazon.com and search for a book on “Shinto”, this is the second title on the list. The book contains general information on shrine practices and kami, but also esoteric spiritual theories and a treatise on spirit healing, which have little to do with common shrine practices. More problematic is Yamakage’s conviction that there is a large

52 Paul de Leeuw, interview by Aike P. Rots, Amsterdam, September 12, 2014.
53 Tsushiro, “Yamakage Shinto.”
54 Yamakage, “The Essence of Shinto.”
55 Paul de Leeuw, “Japanese Dutch Shinzen Foundation electronic newsletter” (e-mail newsletter), June 2015.
56 Yamakage, “The Essence of Shinto.”
Jewish conspiracy for world domination, as outlined in his anti-Semitic writings — perhaps unsurprisingly, those ideas have not been translated in English. When I asked Paul de Leeuw about this aspect of Yamakage Motohisa’s thought, he answered that he did not approve of it, but that this was Yamakage’s “personal opinion”, completely independent from his knowledge of spiritual matters. Still, the association of Yamakage with anti-Semitism reportedly was one of the reasons why De Leeuw initially did not refer to his own centre by that name. Now that Yamakage Motohisa has passed away, however, it has been renamed Holland Yamakage Shinto Shrine.

Not surprisingly, considering the global appeal of the Shinto environmentalist paradigm, Yamakage’s work also asserts the relevance of Shinto for environmental issues. Thus, he suggests that the practical task of responding to the ecological crisis is given an ethical underpinning by Shinto, which from ancient times has seen it as the principal duty of human beings to care for and preserve their environment – to live within nature rather than attempting to dominate or destroy it. (...) From earliest times, Japan has endeavoured to preserve and nurture its abundant forests. Yet at times of upheaval and change, the forests have been damaged recklessly. Whenever this has happened, Shinto leaders have been at the forefront of campaigns to restore the forests, recognizing that they are the lungs of the nation and indeed the world.

Whether or not Shinto leaders have always been “at the forefront of campaigns” to save and restore forests is questionable. Japan has experienced periods of large-scale deforestation – including, significantly, at Ise, the “sacred heart” of the nation supposedly characterized by a unique nature-cultural equilibrium but in fact characterized by centuries of resource depletion due to mass pilgrimages, logging for shrine buildings, and poor forest management. Thus, some historians have nuanced the image of Shinto as a religion concerned with nature preservation, showing that shrines have historically been concerned with political power, with attracting paying visitors, and with controlling access to natural resources, at least as much as with preserving trees. Nevertheless, whether historically accurate or not, arguments such as the one above have no doubt contributed to the gradual popularization of Shinto outside Japan.

Paul de Leeuw refers to himself as kannushi, a Japanese term used for Shinto priests in general. He is regularly hired by Japanese companies and other Japanese organizations in Europe to perform Shinto-style purification ceremonies. For instance, in the autumn of 2014 he officiated in a tree-planting ceremony at a British boarding school, organized by a Japanese former student. He also takes part in various Japanese cultural events, in the Netherlands as well as elsewhere in Western Europe. In addition, De Leeuw regularly conducts seasonal rituals such as hatsumōde (New Year ceremony), spring and summer ceremonies and so on. These take place either at a special location (e.g., the Okura Hotel in Amsterdam) or at his shrine: a dōjō-type room with a Shinto altar, located in a house in a residential area in Amsterdam. A significant proportion of the people attending these events are Japanese expats, but there are also some non-Japanese participants.

58 Paul de Leeuw.
Furthermore, in contrast to ordinary Japanese shrine priests, De Leeuw also offers courses on “Shinto practice”: spiritual exercises involving meditation and breathing techniques, which are said to contribute to an “enhanced awareness of nature.”\(^{62}\) Reportedly, these courses mainly attract non-Japanese people. Thus, De Leeuw is a priest who not only conducts rituals, but also sees it as his mission to teach and disseminate spiritual knowledge. Not surprisingly, then, he expresses a strong interest in spiritual matters. For instance, he told me the story of how he found the location of the *kami* of Holland (reportedly, there is only one), something which he could feel intuitively.\(^{63}\) He has asked me not to disclose the location, however, as he does not want too many people to visit the place. Similarly, although certainly interested in sharing his ideas on Shinto and attracting more participants, De Leeuw was somewhat reluctant when I asked him whether he would want Shinto to spread widely internationally. The most important thing, according to him, is that people find spiritual harmony within themselves, as well as harmony with nature – more than, say, growing numbers of Shinto believers. Thus, although he wants to share information and spiritual skills, he does not seem very eager to proselytize. As a result, his organization remains small, and he does not have many “followers” in the conventional sense of the word.

### 6 Shinto and Mother Nature

Perhaps the best-known Shinto shrine outside Japan is the Tsubaki Grand Shrine of America, located in Granite Falls, Washington. It is a branch shrine of Tsubaki Ōkami Yashiro in Suzuka (Mie prefecture), and devoted to the same deities, Sarutahiko-no-Ōkami and his spouse Ame-no-Uzume-no-Mikoto. In addition, several other *kami* are enshrined here, including the popular deity Inari, the protector deity of North America, and the founder-turned-*kami* of aikido, who was deified and enshrined at Tsubaki Ōkami Yashiro after his death.\(^{64}\) Correspondingly, judging from the website and Facebook site, the Tsubaki Grand Shrine of America is particularly popular among aikido practitioners.\(^{65}\) The first Tsubaki shrine in the US was built in Stockton, California, in 1986; the shrine in Washington was built in 1992 by the current head priest, Lawrence Koichi Barrish, who called it Kannagara Jinja. Following the donation of a large piece of land, the two shrines reportedly merged in 2001, after which the shrine in Washington came to be known as Tsubaki Grand Shrine of America.\(^{66}\) Today, the shrine offers private purification rituals, coming-of-age ceremonies, wedding services and other ceremonies typical of Japanese shrine Shinto. In addition, it also offers various spiritual training programmes involving *misogi* and aikido.

As with the shrines in San Marino and Amsterdam, nature and ecology play a central part in the self-definition of the Tsubaki Grand Shrine of America, perhaps even more strongly. For instance, the website states that:

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\(^{63}\) Paul de Leeuw.


Shinto emerged and developed spontaneously as an expression of the deep intuitive connection with Divine Nature enjoyed by human beings in ancient Japan. Shinto as natural spirituality is based on this harmonious primal relationship with the ‘infinite restless movement of Great Nature’, rather than on the written or revealed teachings of human beings. Realizing that each single component within Nature possesses Divine Spirit giving us joy and benefit, we renew our close ties to Mother Nature and pray for renewal and refreshed life. (...) Shinto is simple, bright and sincere and is the practice of the philosophy of proceeding in harmony with and gratitude to Divine Nature.\(^{67}\)

Clearly, such descriptions of Shinto as a way to “renew our close ties to Mother Nature” resemble contemporary neo-pagan ideas, deep ecology and other “nature spiritualities” more than, say, classical Japanese reflections upon the role of kami.\(^{68}\) When formulated in such terms, it is not difficult to see why some non-Japanese are attracted to it, especially those who feel disillusioned with some aspects of Western culture and are looking for alternative world-views based on notions of nature as divine and enchanted. It should be pointed out, moreover, that the Tsubaki Grand Shrine is not only a physical location, visited by local people who are interested in Shinto and/or aikido; it also has a significant online presence. In particular, its Facebook group has turned into a prime tool for communication between Koichi Barrish and his followers, in the region as well as elsewhere (at the time of writing, it had as many as 3,684 members). In addition to announcements of ritual ceremonies taking place at the shrine, the Facebook site contains pictures, reflections upon “Divine Nature”, and practical tips for worshipping kami at home altars.\(^{69}\) Thus, it arguably has contributed to the spread of Shinto outside Japan, if only because it confirms the recently popular notions that Shinto worship can be carried out anywhere, not only at shrines, and that nature is divine, not only in Japan.

Finally, before moving on to discuss the proliferation of Shinto in cyberspace in more detail, let me briefly mention the shrine in Canada. Until a few years ago, there was a shrine in British Columbia known as Kinomori Jinja (part of Bright Woods Spiritual Centre), which was affiliated with the Tsubaki shrines in Japan and the US.\(^{70}\) The shrine was led by Ann Llewellyn Evans, a female priest who has published a book containing English-language Shinto prayers (norito) (2001),\(^{71}\) which is quite popular among Anglo-Saxon Shinto practitioners. Its website is no longer updated, however, and judging from the little information that is available online, it appears as if the shrine no longer exists. But the full story of Kinomori Jinja – its founding and, possibly, decline – remains to be told some other time.

7 Worldwide kami

In the last part of this article, I will discuss another recent development: the emergence of online networks of people interested in Shinto and kami, some of whom self-identify as Shinto practitioners. Before exploring this topic, let me point out that this trend is very recent indeed, dating from the last couple of years. It remains to be seen whether the practices and beliefs described by the people involved with these groups will materialize into some sort of larger transnational religious movement, or whether they will remain individual affairs. I should emphasise that the online research I have conducted so far is by no means conclusive, and has not yet been combined

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\(^{67}\) “Questions and Answers.” My emphasis.


\(^{69}\) “SHINTO/Tsubaki America Grand Shrine.”


with interviews or offline ethnographic research. But then, online networks constitute social environments that are arguably worth investigating ethnographically in their own right, as long as we bear in mind that people active on social media always have multiple identities (online as well as offline) and share information selectively, in ways that may be different from other social settings involving different ways of communication.\(^\text{72}\) While recognizing these limitations of virtual ethnography, online networks may still be considered interesting and relevant social fields, especially because they bring together people with similar interests who live in different parts of the world, thus offering new opportunities for transnational communication and cultural hybridization.\(^\text{73}\)

As mentioned above, Koichi Barrish is very active on social media, regularly posting on the Facebook page of the Tsubaki Grand Shrine of America. Without exception, his posts receive many “likes” and comments, nearly all of which are positive. Thus, the page is informative, but there is not much space for discussion or disagreement.\(^\text{74}\) By contrast, two other English-language Facebook groups have been set up for discussing Shinto belief and practice. These have a more open character, providing space for various people interested in Shinto to ask questions, share experiences, and discuss personal interpretations. The first of these is called “Shinto, Religion of the Forest” and has 1,292 members.\(^\text{75}\) Not all of these are practitioners, of course: among the members, there is undoubtedly a large number of people who may be interested in Shinto without actually worshipping \textit{kami}, and who do not actively participate in online conversations. Nevertheless, having followed this group for quite some time, it appears that the number of people who occasionally ask questions and post links is quite large, even if there is a small core group of “regulars” who answer most of the questions.

Although many group members are interested in Shinto without actively practicing it, a sizeable proportion of those involved with the group do appear to have a \textit{kamidana} (Shinto home altar), purchased either in Japan or online (or, in some cases, home-made), where they make offerings and recite \textit{norito}. Accordingly, several conversations in the group concern the proper use of \textit{kamidana}: what sort of spiritual objects can one place there (e.g., are Shinto practitioners allowed to place a Buddha statue on their altar and worship it – opinions differ, but the general attitude is one of tolerance towards this sort of combinatory worship), what sort of offerings can one make, when does one open or close the little doors, what sort of prayers does one recite in a particular situation, how does one choose which \textit{kami} to worship, and so on. Those answering the questions are group members as well; typically those who have more experience with Shinto (or present themselves as such). In addition, some people post pictures of their \textit{kamidana}, which range from the typical wooden altars found at Japanese homes to elaborate idiosyncratic constructions, in some cases including non-Shinto objects ranging from Buddha statues to neopagan objects, personal items and \textit{manga} pictures.


\(^\text{73}\) It should be pointed out that these groups are not anonymous. The first one I will discuss is a closed group, the second one is public, but this difference does not seem to affect the contents much. In both cases, people share their questions, ideas and pictures with strangers whom they have never met, based on the assumption that other group members have a similar interest in Shinto. Since Facebook encourages its users to use their real names, many of the members in these groups do so, even though some may use a pseudonym. For reasons of anonymity, therefore, this article only contains general observations; I will not discuss any individual members or comments.

\(^\text{74}\) Cf. “SHINTO/Tsubaki America Grand Shrine.”

Judging from the online conversations, not all members have a kamidana, however. Some argue that it is not necessary to have an altar in order to live in accordance with Shinto principles. Others express an interest in Shinto without self-identifying as a practitioner. Some members ask for information about offline Shinto groups in the area where they live, in order to study and practice the tradition together with others; in some cases, they set up such groups themselves. Many others simply use the Facebook group as a place where they can share their travel photos or blogposts on Japan, or ask basic questions about Shinto (“what are tengu”, “how does Shinto relate to Shugendō”, etc.). Thus, the group is used differently by different members: to some, it is a meeting place where one can get in touch with other non-Japanese who want to worship kami in their own lives, while for others it is more a convenient source of information. But then, as Shinto is not a membership-based religion (with the exception of some new religious movements), the boundaries between active practitioners and people who are merely “interested” in the tradition are not usually clear anyway.

In any case, this group appears quite egalitarian in the sense that any member can post and comment, regardless of their reasons for joining, which are quite diverse. While some members may silently disapprove of the eclectic practices of others, there are remarkably few comments of a dogmatic nature, and few people deny others the right to incorporate Shinto practices into their individual hybrid spirituality. Overall, the consensus seems to be that “Shinto is a religion without doctrine”, and, hence, nobody has the authority to tell others what to do. There are hardly any priests active in the group (indeed, few Japanese people in general); although a handful of them have joined this group, they keep a fairly low profile.

In summary, “Shinto, Religion of the Forest” is a very active Facebook group, bringing together a wide variety of people. Some of these actively practice Shinto, while others are merely interested in learning more about the tradition. The group is not affiliated with a particular religious organization (although some individual members are), and there is little missionary zeal among the members. Whereas some group members may eventually meet offline (e.g., to set up a Shinto study and prayer group), the main purpose of the group is the online exchange of information. As such, it is quite different from another active English-language Facebook group, even though many of the discussion topics are similar. This group is called “Inari Faith International” (Inari shinkō kokusai kyōkai). It is described as “a group for devotees of Inari Ōkami around the world. (…) [Its aim is] to bring about greater accessibility to the Inari tradition through education, community among fellow devotees, and support of Inari shrines internationally.”

Inari Faith International was set up in April 2014 by Gary Cox, a young American with a strong personal interest in Shinto, especially Inari worship. It currently has 273 members. As the name suggests, its main focus is the kami Inari: a popular androgynous deity going back to at least the 8th century, who is probably a combination of several older deities, historically associated with the rice harvest and, in recent times, with success in business. Inari shrines in Japan are easily recognizable because they tend to have tunnels made up of red torii gates, and are usually flanked by statues of foxes, which are believed to be the god’s messengers. Contrary to more official types of Shinto practice, Inari worship is diverse and idiosyncratic, ranging from

76 The same, incidentally, applies to more academically inclined group members (including myself) – they do not typically interfere with or challenge other members’ interpretations of Shinto, even if these do not always correspond to accounts of a more scholarly nature.
corporate ritual ceremonies to mediumship practices. Significantly, the Inari shrines constitute the largest group of shrines not affiliated with Jinja Honchō.

In contrast to “Shinto, Religion of the Forest”, the Inari Faith International Facebook group is not only an online environment where people interested in Shinto and nature worship can meet and exchange ideas. It is also a tool to spread Inari worship internationally, which should eventually lead to the establishment of various shrines devoted to this deity worldwide. As Cox explained to John Dougill, the author of the *Green Shinto* blog:

> It is our hope that Inari faith may continue to grow and become more recognized around the world. Just as Shinto as a whole is growing steadily internationally, it would be great to see Inari Ōkami sparking interest in individuals even outside of Japan. (…) I believe it's important that Shinto as a whole, not just Inari faith, develop around the world together. In this way, the whole, rich and diverse spirituality of Shinto, and the balance of Daishizen (Great Nature) as a whole, can be preserved and shared all over. So it would be wonderful to see a proliferation of international Inari shrines in 50 years' time. But truthfully, I think the wider hope should be to see Shinto shrines of all kinds, with healthy communities of believers (shinja), helping each other to develop their faith and to live in harmony with nature.80

Thus, although Inari Faith International has started as a transnational online community, it has been established with the intention to facilitate the construction of Inari shrines not only in cyberspace but also in the physical world, which is seen as part of the global spread of Shinto. For the time being, the construction of a complete shrine is not yet feasible; accordingly, initial fundraising activities have been concerned with raising money for the construction of a second torii gate at the small Inari shrine located on the complex of the Tsubaki Grand Shrine of America (following the example of Inari shrines in Japan, which are known for their long tunnels of red torii, donated by corporate and private sponsors).

Meanwhile, in the Facebook group similar topics are discussed as in the “Shinto, Religion of the Forest” group, but with a more outspoken focus on Inari. The practices discussed appear slightly less eclectic, even if they also constitute personal attempts at adopting and adapting Japanese practices in ways that would not necessarily be approved by Japanese shrine authorities. Thus, members ask each other how to set up private shrines or altars, where to purchase Inari o-fuda (amulets), what sort of norito to recite, what kind of flowers to offer to Inari, and so on. These questions are answered by fellow group members – not only by Cox, but also by a handful of other group members who are knowledgeable about the deity. While stating clearly that they are not authorities themselves, they guide newly converted Inari worshippers by sharing their own opinions and interpretations.

In addition to practical questions concerned with setting up personal worship places and conducting rituals, there are also some questions of a more spiritual nature, for instance concerning personal experiences of the kami's divine presence. However, there are perhaps not as many posts on such topics as one would expect in a group that has “faith” in its title. In fact, the majority of posts in the group are pictures and videos of Inari shrines in Japan, fox statues, matsuri and so on. Interestingly, there have also been some posts recently concerning the proposed repeal of the fox hunting ban in the UK – as foxes are considered sacred animals associated with Inari, it is perhaps not very surprising that some group members actively oppose such a repeal. Other than that, however, topics of a political nature are not normally discussed, neither here nor in the other two Shinto Facebook groups.

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79 Ibid.

8 Conclusion

Judging from the posts in these groups, one could easily get the impression that Shinto is a religion deeply connected with nature, yet utterly detached from politics and ideology – the post on the fox hunting ban in the UK constitutes a rare exception to this rule. The lack of political debate is perhaps understandable, as such discussions do not typically contribute to mutual respect and a positive atmosphere, especially in an online environment where people engage in conversation with strangers whom they have never met. But it is also remarkable, given the attention paid to issues such as the Yasukuni Jinja controversy in global media – in these online groups, by contrast, Yasukuni is barely mentioned at all. It is of course possible that posts on controversial topics are deleted by the moderators, but I have no evidence of this. The alternative explanation is that members of these groups simply are not interested in discussing such issues, as they do not correspond to their personal understandings of what “Shinto” is (or should be).

In any case, considering the increasing involvement of conservative Shinto lobby organizations in Japanese politics, images of Shinto as an apolitical nature religion are arguably misleading. It is likely, however, that the popularization of Shinto outside Japan – as illustrated by the conversations in these online communities – has been made possible by exactly this: the successful discursive depoliticization of Shinto in recent years. Through the association with “divine nature”, in the minds of many (at least in the West) Shinto has come to be detached from the issues with which it was previously associated: the imperial family, wartime revisionism, and nationalism. Thus, the Shinto environmentalist paradigm clearly has contributed to the increasing popularization of Shinto outside Japan, limited in scope though this may be.

As mentioned in the introduction, there are four factors which have contributed to Shinto’s recent international popularization: the proliferation of the Shinto environmentalist paradigm, Shinto’s discursive depoliticization, the spread of social media, and the international popularity of Japanese consumer culture. I have addressed the first three topics, but I have not discussed the fourth topic in detail. It is worth mentioning that there are some indications that many of those who become interested in Shinto are introduced to Japanese culture by means of manga and anime, which often contain pseudo-religious elements. The best-known of these are of course the films of Miyazaki Hayao (My Neighbor Totoro, Spirited Away and so on), but there are many others. Whether or not such fictional texts classify as “Shinto” or not may be subject to debate; in any case, they do appear to have contributed to an interest in “traditional” Japanese spirituality on the part of groups of young Western fans. To what extent young Shinto practitioners such as those active in the Facebook groups discussed in this article have become interested in Shinto as a result of such popular media texts will be the subject of future offline research (both qualitative and quantitative). This is certainly a hypothesis that deserves to be investigated further.

Many of the developments discussed in this article are very recent, and subject to change. It is hard to predict what will happen to some of the initiatives I have discussed. Will the emergence of online communities consisting of individual Shinto worshippers (and others interested in the tradition) lead to the establishment of more offline Shinto communities and shrines outside Japan, or will they remain restricted to cyberspace? Will Jinja Honchō support the construction of more shrines on foreign soil, as it has done in San Marino, or was this a one-time occurrence? As illustrated by the case of the Canadian shrine, not all initiatives to spread Shinto internationally are successful – in many cases, they depend upon the work of a single individual.

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81 Guthmann, Shintô et politique; Mullins, “Secularization, Deprivatization.”
Of course, setting up a shrine is no easy task, and fundraising is a perpetual challenge even for shrines that are fairly well established, such as those in the US and the Netherlands. How can a shrine assure a regular income if it does not have members, in a country where people are not used to paying a significant amount of money for, say, a car purification ceremony? And, more fundamentally, how do you attract paying visitors to a shrine that is part of a religious tradition unknown to them?

Considering these difficulties, it remains to be seen whether many new Shinto shrines will be built outside Japan in the near future. That does not mean, however, that the tradition is not achieving popularity outside Japan. Although small in number compared to other Asian religions, there is a growing, active group of individuals who engage in individual acts of kami worship, and whose main congregation hall is the Internet. Thus far, there appears to have been little interaction between them and their Japanese peers – partly because of the language barrier – and their practices are not approved or supported by Japanese Shintoists. Indeed, when asked for their opinion, many Japanese shrine priests and Shinto leaders express skepticism regarding the possibility of an “international Shinto”, stating that kami are fundamentally connected with the land of Japan. However, such nationalist understandings of Shinto do not seem to deter those who have become enchanted by its rituals, aesthetics, and views of nature as “sacred”. Although they may not follow Japanese shrine regulations, they do worship kami at personal home altars, and self-identify as Shinto practitioners. Thus, they represent the newly emerging “global Shinto”: grounded in Japanese beliefs and practices, but reshaped in a transnational context.

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