



**HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS**

**Hugvísindasvið**

**Participation and Motivations in Shinto  
Rites and Rituals in Modern Japan**

**Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs**

**Kári Vilmundarson Hansen**

**Janúar 2012**

**Háskóli Íslands**  
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**Japanskt mál og menning**

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## **Abstract**

Increased participation in Shinto rites and rituals indicate the strengthening of Shinto as a religion while religious apathy and motivations behind the participation may be interpreted the other way around. By looking at historical facts, statistics, interviews, surveys and case studies regarding the establishment of modern day Shinto, Shinto funerals, amulet distribution, Shinto festivals and shrine visits, the strength of Shinto in modern Japan will be evaluated. This will show how Shinto rites and rituals grow strong as recreational activities rather than religious practices.

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# 1. Introduction

The religious environment in Japan has undergone some major changes in modern time. Shifts in religious tolerance of the Japanese state occurred during the Meiji Restoration in 1868 and after World War II. This has had a great impact on all religions in Japan but this essay will focus on Shinto. After a brief definition of Shinto, the religious environment and the political support behind Shinto during its days as a state religion will be looked into. Then the strength of Shinto in various levels of Japanese society will be introduced through different forms of Shinto. Origins of Shinto funerals will then be covered as funeral rites can also indicate the strength of a religion. This will be followed by a chapter on the sale of Ise amulets as they are used by the Association of Shinto Shrines to evaluate the success or failure of Shinto. As an important part of Shinto as a religion and Japanese society, statistics on festival participation and motivations behind the participation of some of the leaders of Gion Festival will be looked into. Finally, as Shrine visits increase every year and indicate strengthening of Shinto, we will check out what makes a shrine, how they are visited and what motivates people into going there. By comparing these different aspects of Shinto, this essay will try to show the strength and explain the motivations behind Shinto rites and rituals in modern Japan.

## 2. Shinto's strength in Japanese society

Since many papers researching Shinto agree that defining Shinto is a problematic thing (Kuroda, 1981; Thal, 2002; Scheid, 2002; Grapard 2002; Teeuwen, 2002), the first thing to do is to explain what kind of Shinto will be focused on in this essay. Shinto as a word means “way of the gods”. It is a complex of ancient beliefs and observances that have remained relatively unchanged from ancient time. In Shinto people worship numerous deities or spirits called *kami*. Shinto is almost free of doctrines and does not go deep into moral teachings. It exists in diverse forms as folk religion and yet it has features of an organized religion such as rituals and institutions like shrines. Due to lack of doctrines and characteristics such as nature worship it is often defined as a primitive religion (Anesaki, 1930; Kuroda, 1981). It was not until the sixth century that Shinto was defined as a religion to distinguish it from Buddhism (Anesaki, 1930) and religious schools focusing purely on Shinto did not become popular until the end of the fifteenth century (Kuroda, 1981).

### 2.1. Shinto in a favorable position

To prove that Shinto remains strong in modern Japan a historical background is needed to show its strength in the past. We will begin by looking into the political support and strengthening of Shinto as it became the state religion after the Meiji restoration in 1868 until the arrival of the Allied Occupation Force in 1945 and the religious environment during that time. Then different forms of Shinto, penetrating various layers of Japanese society, will be introduced as another measurement for Shinto's strength. After that the problem of religious apathy in Japan is introduced. While Japanese people may find it difficult to associate with certain religious groups, they still show a strong belief in *kami* and spirits.

During the Edo period, 1603-1868, Buddhism had been made state religion in Japan. When the Meiji government was installed they removed Buddhism from its favored position. The new government restored imperial rule with focus on Shinto and unity of religion and state. In order to do so the government separated Shinto from Buddhism. The two religions had been mixing together for a long time and at that time Shinto institutions were under administrative control of Buddhist priests. The separation of the

two religions took an aggressive turn leading to anti-Buddhist iconoclastic outburst resulting in many Buddhist treasures and objects being destroyed (Kuroda, 1981, 1996; Thal, 2002; Rambelli, 2002; Nakajima, 2010). Despite all the effort it proved impossible to bring back the old idea of a state based on the integration of religion and government in modern times. Western nations pressured for abolition of the legal prohibition against Christianity which had been in effect since the seventeenth century. Caught in the spirit of modernization, Buddhists joined Christians in demanding freedom of religion and the separation of religion and state. All this pressured the Meiji government to move towards religious tolerance. In 1889 the Imperial Constitution of the Great Empire of Japan, better known as the Meiji constitution was established. With its establishment the freedom to worship and propagate one's faith was in effect for Christians, Buddhists and adherents of Sect Shinto, a category of Shinto further explained later. However they were under some restrictions, for example they could not interfere with the duties and actions of the Emperor (Japan, Hori & Ikado, 1972).

New religious movements were kept under strict control and even though the new groups offered something new both in ritual and doctrine, they were not recognized by the Meiji government as independent religions and therefore did not enjoy the freedom Christianity and Buddhism had. By both direct and indirect interventions these new groups were made to constrict their teachings and rites to those of State Shinto. After doing so the government permitted them to exist as Sect Shinto organizations. This kind of political pressure came to an end with the cessation of hostilities in 1945 (Japan, Hori & Ikado, 1972).

## 2.2. Shinto in various layers of Japanese society

One way of showing the strength of Shinto in Japanese society is by looking into how Shinto has been established in different layers of the society, from emperor focused State Shinto and Imperial Shinto, different religious groups gathered under the name of Sect Shinto, ritual based Shrine Shinto and to the most basic traditions in Folk Shinto.

Today, Shinto as a religious system has four main forms. These forms are called Shinto of the Imperial house, Shrine Shinto, Sect Shinto and Folk Shinto. Before the separation of religion and state there was another kind of Shinto called State Shinto. State Shinto was created in the beginning of the Meiji period. It was a combination of what exists

today as Shrine Shinto and Imperial Shinto. Dealing with widespread civil discontent, the collapse of feudalism and having to negotiate with foreign powers the Meiji government realized that it had to modernize not only in economy but also in polity. They believed that the best way to deal with these problems would be by establishing a clear sense of national and cultural identity. To do so they established an Emperor centered Shinto and integrated Shinto into the structures of power by granting its priests and institutions privileged status and support in the word of officialdom. Along with separating Shinto and Buddhism they revived the ancient Department of Shinto Affairs and appointed propaganda officials. State Shinto was classified as a government institution, not a religion, making Shinto priests government officials. Values inculcated by State Shinto were defined as moral instructions rather than religious teachings. A sense of national identity centering in devotion for the Emperor became, through State Shinto, the official foundation of the new order (Japan, Hori & Ikado, 1972).

Sect Shinto refers to thirteen religious groups formed at the end of the Edo period and the beginning of the Meiji period. As Shrine Shinto was absorbed into State Shinto, the government had to find a way to regulate new religious groups. They did not want to incorporate them into State Shinto but wanted them to conform to the doctrinal and ritual norms it had. To do so they created Sect Shinto. Most of these thirteen groups worship the same deities as traditional Shinto, for example Amaterasu, Izanagi and Izanami. As for religious practices in daily life, they had to be dedicated to benefitting the imperial house and the nation. Not only should they contribute to individual salvation but also to advancement of human life in general. Eventually all these thirteen groups adopted the rules imposed on them and were recognized as Sect Shinto. Sect Shinto is more concerned with this life than with what happens after death. Believing in coexistence of humans and the divine in the visible world and the invisible one, Sect Shinto teaches and encourages simplicity, honesty, selfless service, purity and strenuous endeavor (Japan, Hori & Ikado, 1972).

With the abolition of State Shinto by the occupation authorities at the end of World War II and the formation of Association of Shinto Shrines in February 1946, Shrine Shinto began its existence as a religious entity divorced from the state. This association, which includes most of the shrines in Japan, has attempted to formulate a summary of the



principles of Shinto faith in creedal form. As a result Shrine Shinto is characterized by general system of belief and focuses on rituals and festivals held at shrines to honor the *kami*. Shinto of the Imperial House is centered in rites for the spirits of imperial ancestors and observed at imperial institutions. It retains the most archaic styles of Shinto worship and is performed by the Emperor himself. The fourth form of modern day Shinto is Folk Shinto. It refers to the mixture of superstition, magic-like religious rites, and practices of the common people. It cannot be represented in terms of canon, membership, or doctrine. Its basis of support can be found in the popular acceptance of Shinto customs and perspectives in daily life (Japan, Hori & Ikado, 1972).

### 2.3. Difficulties facing religious groups in modern Japan

After the disestablishment of State Shinto numerous new religious groups made their appearance. Threatened by these new groups some of the more traditional groups began to seek a new role in Japanese life. Confronted by modernization and urbanization, hoping to become less dependent on habit and convention they have been trying to rationalize their doctrines and improve their organizational structures to respond to contemporary needs. However, most of the traditional groups are still searching for more effective programs and appropriate structures fit for modern Japanese life. One of the greatest problems that both traditional and new religious groups in Japan face at present time is religious apathy. According to surveys, adults who claim to believe in or belong to a religion only amount to 30-35% of the samples. Of those who admit no religious affiliation, 70% affirm that religious sentiment is important. This problem is confirmed by case studies done by Kostelnik (2010) and a research made by Nakamura (1997) where approximately 60% of the young respondents who are not affiliated with any religious sects or groups indicate that they believe in spirits, *kami*, and some kind of world after death. This indicates that many Japanese people in modern times have religious needs that cannot be satisfied by neither the traditional groups nor by the newer religious groups (Japan, Hori & Ikado, 1972).

### **3. Shinto funerals are a political creation**

Statistics show that Shinto funerals only cover a small part of the funerals performed in Japan. In this chapter the reason for why Shinto funerals are not suitable as a measurement for the strength of Shinto in modern Japan will be introduced. Origins of Shinto funerals will be looked into to show that they are a modern intervention based on old Neo-Confucian funeral manuals and Buddhist funeral rites. Information regarding apotheosis performed at Yasukuni Shrine will be introduced to show that it is a political subject rather than a religious subject.

By looking at statistics from the Japan Housewives Association from 1981 in Fuji Masao's (1983) paper on Japanese funerals it is easy to conclude that Shinto is not very strong in modern Japan. The numbers tell us that during that year only 18 Shinto funerals were performed compared to 423 Buddhist funerals. Out of all the funerals that year, only 3,9% of them were Shinto funerals. 93,8% were Buddhist funerals and the rest were Christian or other kind of funerals.

#### **3.1. Origins of Shinto funerals**

By looking back into history we will see that Shinto funerals have never been a major part of the Shinto religion. To explain this we must go back to the Edo period, when all Japanese people, including Shinto priests, had to belong to a Buddhist temple. It was not until 1785 that the government allowed Shinto funerals for Shinto priest and their male successor and even then they had to be granted approval from Yoshida Shinto officials. By receiving a Yoshida Shinto certificate a shrine would completely separate itself from Buddhism and become an official Shinto shrine (Kuroda, 1981). The certificate granted certain rights but Yoshida Shinto shrines had to follow the Yoshida house's doctrine and rituals (Maeda, 2002). In 1868, after the Meiji Restoration, family members of Shinto priests were allowed to have Shinto funerals. Five years later all Japanese people could have a Shinto funeral if they wished so. But soon after that, in 1882, new restrictions were added to certain shrines. Priests at national and imperial shrines were no longer allowed to perform Shinto funerals. It was not until after World War II that all Shinto priests were allowed to perform Shinto funerals (Kenney, 2000).

Does this mean that there were no Shinto funerals before Edo period? Two priests at Kamigamo Shrine claimed that their shrine had since the Heian period, 794-1185, continuously been performing Shinto funerals. Given that they were not legal until 1785 this has to be considered highly unlikely. Edo period Shintoist claimed that they wanted to revive a long lost performance. Yet they were aware that they were working on establishing a new ritual. Shinto funeral manuals written at that time varied much from each other and Neo-Confucian funeral manuals served as a blueprint for some of them. The oldest known Shinto funeral manual is only about four hundred years old. It was written by Yoshida Kanemi, 1535-1610, and in his diary one can find the oldest eyewitness account of a Shinto funeral. However the Shinto funeral in his diary is only a part of long series of mortuary rites, some of who are Buddhist and other Shinto. Even Shinto priests we have been criticizing Shinto funerals. Some have gone as far as rejecting Shinto funerals on the basis that they are neither traditional nor truly old (Kenney, 2000).

### 3.2. Apotheosizing spirits becomes a Shinto funeral rite

Yasukuni Shrine was created in 1869 as the Japanese state was disestablishing Buddhism. Before its construction there was already a long and differentiated tradition of venerating the dead as *kami* in Japan. During the Pacific War, 1937-1945, the Japanese government apotheosized the war dead at Yasukuni Shrine in grandiose state events (Shimazono, 2009). It was a mixture of mourning and celebration that embraced not only the dead but also the Emperor, the state and the military. Approximately 2,500,000 war dead have been apotheosized in Yasukuni Shrine. Over 2,100,000 of them died during the Pacific War. With the dismantling of State Shinto by the Allied Occupation Force these state sponsored events came to an end (Breen, 2004).

Apotheosizing spirits of the dead has its origins in ancient Japan even before the arrival of Buddhism and Confucianism. These rituals were an act of propitiating angry spirits and deifying virtuous men and women. The rituals performed at Yasukuni Shrine were not the product of popular religious consciousness but a creation of the modern state (Kuroda, 1996; Breen, 2004). Breen (2004) emphasizes on this point by saying that Yasukuni Shrine “rituals for the dead were designed to meet the modern state’s political needs: to cultivate patriotism through the promise of apotheosis for self-sacrifice.”

### 3.3. Following a tradition

From these accounts we can see that Shinto funerals have never played a big part in Shinto as a religion, but rather in politics. In Japan, Buddhism developed into a system based on the performance of funerals long before apotheosizing the dead was considered a Shinto funeral (Kuroda, 1996). Furthermore Alan S. Miller (1992) wrote that the prescribed behavior one performs after the death of a relative is commonly performed without the corresponding belief. Relatives seem to feel obligated to perform these rituals, even though they may not believe it has any effect on the well being of the spirit of the deceased. The Japanese mentality regarding funerals can be very well described by his words: “A Japanese person does not become Shintoist at some point in his or her life, or stop being a Shintoist because he or she failed to take part in some sacred ritual. Similarly, one does not become a Buddhist when a relative dies, even though a Buddhist funeral will take place and Buddhist rituals will be performed. Rather, one performs a Buddhist funeral because Japanese people do that.”

## **4. Measuring Shinto's strength with a sales campaign**

In public spaces, on trains and in bus stations one can usually see messages, announcements and advertisements of products and services offered by shrines (Nelson, 1996). It is one of those products that will be focused on next. This particular product is called an Ise amulet. The reason for why these amulets will be focused on is because the sales of these amulets are used by the Association of Shinto Shrines as a measurement to evaluate the success or failure of Shinto today (Breen, 2010). Statistics showing increase in amulet distribution will be introduced and then followed by an explanation of how they are being distributed as increased sales are due to a sales campaign, not increased interest in Shinto. This is supported by looking at interviews with Shinto priests and surveys regarding the possession of Ise amulets.

### **4.1. The purpose of Ise amulets**

The purpose of Ise amulets is that they are to be venerated by families in households across Japan and serve as a link between the common people and Ise. Ise amulets are not a modern invention but they have played a vital part in connecting early modern Japanese households to the Ise shrines. Experts from the Association of Shinto Shrines estimate that 90% of early modern Japanese households kept an Ise amulet. Until the Meiji restoration they were believed to keep away evil spirits. After the Meiji restoration they were restyled and their purpose was changed. They were now supposed to spread belief in Amaterasu as the imperial ancestor. Some said they were the symbol of the Sun Goddess but others believed that Sun Goddess was actually present in the amulet itself. After a debate in 2003 at the headquarters of the Association of Shinto Shrines regarding these different views, it was concluded that the amulets only served as a symbol of the Sun Goddess (Breen, 2010).

### **4.2. The amulet campaign**

The Association of Shinto Shrines is conducting a campaign to get Ise shrine amulets into ten million Japanese homes. They started this campaign in 1987 and it was emphasized in 2005 with an introduction of a model district system. This is a system where prefectural shrine offices selected a number of districts within their jurisdiction

and had the priests there generate new ideas to increase the distribution of Ise amulets (Breen, 2010).

The Kyoto shrine office is in charge of 1,579 shrines spread over nine shrine districts. Each district has an office dedicated to amulet distribution. The amulet distribution in Kyoto has enjoyed a modest but steady growth. It should be noted here that according to Nelson (1996), shrines do not sell amulets or any other items since that would endanger the tax exempt status they have, visitors make a donation and receive objects in return. In 2008 the Kyoto shrine office distributed 105,159 amulets, 320 more than they did the year before. In 2009 they increased their distribution even more, or by 4,520, making the total amount 109,679. Statistics suggest that the campaign is gaining quite a success. In 2009 there were 8,995,979 amulets shipped across Japan, marking an increase in amulet sales the fourth year in a row (Breen, 2010).

In Kyoto the Ise amulets are not only handed out at shrines, priests and shrine committee members walk door to door to distribute them. They have also learned from strategies used elsewhere in Japan such as distributing simplified household altars, *kamidana*, free of charge. It was done because some households did not want to get amulets because they claimed that they did not have any place to put them. Shrine visitors in Kyoto who intend to buy a local shrine amulet are offered to get an Ise amulet too. They are even encouraged to get some extra to send to relatives. The Kyoto shrine office makes no connection between the Sun Goddess and the Emperor or the sacred land of Japan. They describe the Sun Goddess as a bright, warm and kind *kami* who bestows her blessing on all mankind. This seems to have a greater appeal for modern Japanese rather than focusing on the imperial myth (Breen, 2010).

#### 4.3. Priests are hoarding the amulets

The Association of Shinto Shrines sees the campaign as being successful and by looking at the statistics one can easily see why. It put a stop to eleven years of dropping amulet sales. However there is more behind these numbers and not everyone considers it successful or beneficial for Shinto. In 2007 the Association for Shinto Shrines had a shrine survey where respondents were asked if their family possessed an Ise amulet. 81% of those who answered said that they did not acquire them or that they did not know if someone in the family did. A survey in 2005 showed that 94% of twenty years

olds did not have or did not know if their family had an Ise amulet. The Association of Shinto Shrines is aware of the younger generation's religious apathy. Their worries are supported by Miller (1992), Nakamura (1997) and Kostelnik (2010). One of the problems they are facing is that these amulets go under the name of *taima*. *Taima* is also the word for marijuana. A priest in Toyama noted that interest in *taima* amongst the younger generation withered away as they got to know that the *taima* being offered to them could not be smoked. This problem of the narcotic reference even made it to a discussion at a conference held by the Association of Shinto Shrines in 2009. As for statistics regarding the older generation they did not offer any comfort. Only 24% of respondents in their sixties were aware of ever having obtained an amulet. Then they were inquired about the reason for not getting an amulet, 60% answered that they did not feel any need for acquiring one or that they had never had one before and did not see why they should get one now (Breen, 2010).

Another and possibly more sensitive problem concerns the reliability of the statistics of Ise amulets distribution. In 2009 8,995,979 amulets may have been shipped to shrine offices and then to local shrines, but some priests say that these numbers do not speak the truth. The fact is that the amulets do not all make their way into Japanese households. In an interview conducted by Breen (2010) a priest says that "shrine priests purchase amulets from the local shrine office, and report back that they have sold them all when, in reality, they have not. They end up hoarding them." According to him priests are too proud to return the amulets to the local shrine office for refund and that everywhere priests are hoarding them. He goes on to say that "we live in an age where owning an Ise amulet and having faith in the Ise *kami* no longer connect." His allegations regarding the hoarding of amulets is supported by a priest from the Hachiman Shrine that said the "National Association for Shrines (Association of Shinto Shrines) is forcing us to sell Ise amulets and make contributions for the rebuilding of the Ise shrines, and our dissatisfaction is deepening. Many shrines charged with distributing a fixed number of amulets find them unable to sell them on, and so end up hoarding them. Hoarding the Ise amulets means we incur a significant financial loss."

## 5. The importance of Shinto Festivals

Shinto festivals are important for both Shinto as a religion and Japanese society as a whole. In this chapter the above statement is supported by introducing how some big Shinto festivals take place. This will later be further emphasized by detailed explanation of what is included in the Gion Festival. Statistics will be introduced showing an increase in shrine visits during the New Year Festival from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 3<sup>rd</sup> of January, as it shows a steady increase in Shinto festival participation and thus indicate that Shinto is growing stronger year after year. Before that statistics regarding visits to Atsuta Shrine before and after World War II will be introduced to show the impact of removing Shinto from its place as a state religion. After introducing the Gion Festival a research made by Roemer (2010) to see what motivations are behind festival participation of some of the leaders of Gion Festival will show that it has become not only a religious festival, but also socially important.

Festivals play a big and important role in Shinto practices. A Shinto festival usually includes a fair with many stalls selling food or charms and numerous side shows that draw large number of people to the shrine. The biggest and most spectacular festivals draw in visitors and sightseers from far away and are good for local trade. For festivals that reach national or international fame, accommodations are usually booked months in advance and special means of transportation are organized. Even though a shrine is permitted to hold several festivals per year, they may only have one or two festivals of special importance and they are usually held in spring or autumn (Roemer, 2010).

Takayama Festival in Hida region, the Chichibu Festival held in the mountain north-west of Tokyo, and the Gion Festival in Kyoto are all famous for their huge floats that are carried in procession. In many cases these floats are carried through the town by groups of young men. They sometime wear clothes that represent their area or part of town. When a festival is held due to some historical event like a battle, they wear costumes representing the period when the event occurred. In some cases they only wear loincloth due to the strenuousness of their work. Most of the time they are accompanied by plenty of rice wine used both for offerings at the shrine and for consumption. In many cases a portable shrine is also carried from the main shrine to various places in the area, representing the journey of the *kami*. When returning to the



main shrine, some representatives go with a priest to the worship hall and present offerings and prayers for safety and prosperity of the neighborhood (Beaver, 1982).

### 5.1. A steady increase in New Year's visits

First, second and third of January, shrines are visited by particularly many people. Some go to mountain shrines to bathe their faces in first rays of the rising sun. Others go to bigger shrines where they can buy feathered wooden arrows meant to drive off evil, protective charms and stiff paper strips with the seal and the name of the shrine. These objects are taken home and kept on a *kamidana* or if they do not possess such an altar they are put at a high place. They are kept there throughout the year. During the New Year's visit last year's objects are brought back to the shrine and burned, either by the visitor or the shrine staff (Beaver, 1982).

Statistics shown in a book review by M. E. (n.d.) of a book called *Atsuta shrine* written by Shinoda Yasuo and published in 1968, retrieved from Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, show that the number of visitors in Atsuta Shrine during the first three days of January in 1933 was 1,200,000. In 1935 this number had risen to 1,780,000. After World War II the numbers fell drastically and in 1946, the first year after the war, shrine visitors during the first three days of the year were only 400,000. The numbers began rising again year after year and nine years later, in 1955, the number had reached 1,370,000. In 1968 the total number of visitors was 1,690,000. Today the annual visitors count 9,000,000 (Atsutajingu, 2009).

An increase in the number of people visiting shrines nationwide during the first three days of the New Year has become especially noticeable since 1970. In that year the nationwide number of shrine visitors was 45,120,000. The year after the number rose drastically, up to 52,340,000. In 1972 the total number was 54,180,000 and the year after it reached 58,600,000 (Ueda, 1992). New statistics retrieved from the Religious Information Research Center tell us that in between the years 2003 and 2004 the annual shrine visitors during these first three days of the year increased by 2,670,000, reaching 88,890,000 (Nobutaka, 2004). In 2005 the total number rose by 770,000 with total visitors counting 89,660,000 (Nobutaka, 2005). In 2006 there was even a greater increase or by 4,070,000, making the total number 93,730,000 (Nobutaka, 2006).

## 5.2. Gion Festival

Gion Festival is held in July every year in Kyoto City. Originally the festival was a spirit assembly sponsored by Emperor Seiwa, 858-876, and its purpose was to drive out an epidemic in 869. Therefore it was originally referred to as the Gion Spirit Assembly. With float carts and dances at its center, it formed the basic structure of a summer shrine festival. As mentioned before these kinds of festivals now take place all around Japan. The Gion festival begins on July 1<sup>st</sup> with a meeting to determine and arrange the rites and rituals for the festival. July 2<sup>nd</sup> the order of the floats is decided. July 9<sup>th</sup> these floats are set up. On July 10<sup>th</sup> priests carry the floats to Shijo Bridge in the heart of Kyoto City where they are washed and purified with water. July 11<sup>th</sup> young boys that later on will ride the floats wear tall headdresses plus special kind of robes and are brought on a horse to a shrine where they worship. On the 13<sup>th</sup> the floats are set up at Gion and on the 14<sup>th</sup> they are drawn around the neighborhood. July 15<sup>th</sup> they have performing arts and at the evening of the 16<sup>th</sup> there is a festival where the floats are decorated with lanterns and ornaments. On the 17<sup>th</sup> the main event is held. Then numerous floats travel the streets around Gion and all sorts of performances and dances can be seen. July 24<sup>th</sup> the palanquins used at the festival are returned to their shrines. July 28<sup>th</sup> they are washed again at Shijo Bridge and July 29<sup>th</sup> marks the end of the festival with a rite of reporting to the *kami* (Sakae, 2006).

## 5.3. Motivations behind participation in Gion Festival

With participant observation and interviewing some of the leaders of Gion Festival, Michael K. Roemer (2010) found out that the main motivations for participation in the festival are that the rituals provide participants with a sense of individual and collect pride on one hand, and that they feel like they are fulfilling some social obligation to be actively engaged in their communities on the other. One of the questions presented by Roemer (2010) was whether or not they felt their involvement in the festival affected them religiously. Answers were categorized as “yes, very”, “yes” and “no”. If the respondent answered the question with emphatically positive respond and elaborated their interpretation of their experiences as religious they were marked as “yes, very”. If they answered positively without further explanation they were marked as “yes”. If they

felt that it did not affect them religiously they were marked as “no”. Average age of the respondents was sixty four.

Seven out of eleven answered positively and therefore got a mark of either “yes, very” or “yes” while four said that the festival did not affect them religiously. By looking into the interviews conducted it can be seen that respondents considered Gion Festival both culturally and historically significant. One participant said that his role in the festival was both exhausting and difficult. When asked why he continued his participation, without a hesitation he said it was due to pride, he felt that he had the responsibility of upholding Japanese tradition.

Another man involved in the festival pointed out that he did not enjoy the festival as an observer but that being an actual participant was a part of his status. One interviewee said that the festival had become a part of his life. His main enjoyment from the festival came from being seen wearing formal samurai clothes. One of the participants went as far as to say that he did not want to be a part of the festival and continued to say that there was no value in it. He claimed he had to take a part and had no choice about it because he had an obligation to his neighbors and to the traditions of the festival. Yet he admitted to taking pride in being involved. From these interviews it seems that the main motivation for people’s involvement in the Gion Festival may be that they are fulfilling a social obligation to be actively engaged in their communities, rather than being religiously motivated.

## 6. Sanctified grounds and shrine visits

Whatever reason individuals claim for their visit, in the eyes of a Shinto priest they are all worshippers due to their physical presence on sanctified grounds (Nelson, 1996). Because of this claim, these sanctified grounds will be explained. Then what counts as a correct shrine visit will be introduced and compared to activities performed on shrine grounds during Nelson's (1996) research on the modern practice of visiting a Shinto shrine. Last we will look at what motivations are behind shrine visits. Visitor's actions and motivations during shrine visits show how Shinto shrines play a big role in Japanese society as social gathering spots and how they allow people to perform various rituals to fulfill their own religious needs, thus strengthening the involvement of Shinto in Japanese people's lives.

### 6.1. Various types of shrines

Shrines can be split up to three main types. There are shrines that are of purely local significance, housing a local deity. Then there are shrines of particular recurrent type like the Inari shrines, where worshippers go and pray for success in business. These types of shrines can be found in all parts of Japan. Last there are shrines of national and sometimes political importance, like the Ise and Izumo shrines. The Meiji shrine in Tokyo, honoring the former Emperor Meiji, also falls under the last category (Beaver, 1982).

Most Shinto shrines have some common features. When visiting a shrine the first thing visitors notice is a large gate consisting of two upright and two cross bars. This gate marks the entrance of the shrine. They sometimes stand quite far away from the shrine by a busy street or at the bottom of a hill. There may be many of these gates and they lead the visitors into the shrine. Once the visitors get closer to the shrine they will find a large trough with clean water, usually sheltered with a roof and provided with some clean wooden ladles used by the worshippers to rinse their face and hands in a simple act of purification. The main shrine building consists of a worship hall and a main hall. The main hall is where the *kami* resides and is usually not entered. Sometimes the worship hall is entered by small groups of visitors but individual worshippers simply stand outside in front of the worship hall, throw a coin into an offering box, followed by

pulling a dangling rope with a bell or a clanger at the top. Then they clap their hands twice, bow briefly while in a prayer and then clap their hands twice again. The sound of the bell or the clanger, as well as the clapping of the hands, is to alert the *kami* of the visitor's presence. A thick rope and folded white paper strips are used to designate a sacred area or object. They are often in front of the worship hall and sometimes they are simply strung around a rock or a tree to indicate that these are also considered areas where *kami* resides (Beaver, 1982).

## 6.2. A correct shrine visit

The layout of a shrine itself is like a roadmap that leads people into behavioral practices, but some of them may be unexpected and unanticipated. Even though most visitors share a somewhat similar way of visiting a shrine, the correct way of visiting may be quite different. In order for priests to be promoted, amongst other things they must demonstrate how to visit a shrine. The correct way to visit Kamigamo Shrine according to priests at the shrine begins with purification of hands and mouth before entering the shrine. Next the visitor should cross the Negi Bridge. The flow of water beneath the bridge is believed to remove impurities. After that one should pay respect before the shrine of the mythical mother of the principal deity, cross another bridge for further purification and head towards the Middle Gate. There the visitor can compose one's prayer or petition and then toss a few coins into the offering box. Not only does it serve as donation but in Kamigamo Shrine's case it is also another way to remove impurities. This is then followed by two bows, two claps and another bow. Next the visitor should step back and inform the deity that one's business is over by performing another bow. Before departing a final bow is required to show gratitude and say farewell to the deity. The visit then ends at the shrine's information and amulet corner, where one can acquire talismans and amulets amongst other things (Nelson, 1996).

Kamigamo Shrine is within a residential area in the northern part of Kyoto City. Due to its location it is often less crowded than shrines around Gion and the city Center. It is a designated UNESCO World Heritage site with most of its shrine building classified as important cultural properties. It was established a hundred years before Kyoto City was founded, in the seventh century. Since Kyoto City was made capital and until present day the shrine has enjoyed imperial patronage and support. To enter the shrine one must

cross a large, green and spacious lawn, giving visitors the feeling that they are in a park. Two large sand cones by the entrance make up one of the main attractions. They are believed to represent a sacred mountain north of the shrine (Japan Tourist Info, 2000).

### 6.3. Visitor's actions

Observations and interviews conducted by Nelson (1996) give a sample of what Kamigamo Shrine visitors actually do on shrine grounds. However, as Nelson (1996) says, visitor's interpretations are culturally constructed and may not occur at verbal or conscious level, making it a problematic task to present interpretations regarding shrine visitor's activities.

The first visitor is a man in his thirties from Kyoto. He goes to Kamigamo Shrine in the morning at the 15<sup>th</sup> of every month. He skips the cleansing of his hands and mouth and heads directly to the middle of the Tower Gate entrance and makes some sweeping gestures. Then he positions himself in front of the Middle Gate and begins his own invocational prayer. He starts slowly but the speed of his voice triples throughout his prayer. After about ten minutes he departs. He is always on time, always stands in the same place and always leaves without acknowledging anyone.

Another man in his fifties goes to Kamigamo Shrine every month between the first and the fifth. He takes the bullet train from Yokohama, paying a reasonable amount for the round trip. When inquired about his motive behind the journey he says that it is because he was granted a vision shortly before a terrible typhoon in 1991. He performs *misogi*, purification by flowing water, daily to prepare for another vision. While in front of the Middle Gate, he bows, claps and bows again. Not only does he do this once, but three times in total. He then makes a visit to the priests in the administration building.

An elderly lady visits the shrine twice a month. In front of the Middle Gate, holding her hands together she mutters a prayer for about five minutes. On her way out of the shrine she picks up a few berries and bows to the hillside. She then kneels beside a small river and begins what seems to be a prayer and tosses the berries one by one into the stream. Then she bows to the stream, walks towards the second gate at the shrine, turns around and makes a final bow.

Nelson (1996) concludes from these descriptions above that it seems that many people supply their own religious framework. Furthermore he says “that the institution of contemporary Shrine Shinto allows individuals sufficient freedom to make these choices during their infrequent visits” and believes that this is “vital to the continued relevance” of Shinto in modern Japan. When visiting Kamigamo Shrine, as with many other shrines, visitors are on their own. There are no written instructions about how to pray and the opportunities to see a shrine priest, not to mention talk to one, are limited since their work is mostly done away from areas most frequented by visitors. Even though the priests have been educated to uphold certain ritual gestures they do not impose these traditions upon worshippers. While the majority of visitors simply toss a coin, clap their hands a few times and bow, there are numerous personal ways of interacting with the deity.

#### 6.4. A social gathering spot

As mentioned earlier every visitor on sanctified grounds is considered a worshipper. As visitors actions during opening hours have been introduced, the next step is to look at what happens at night, as most shrine areas remain open. The vast green spaciousness of Kamigamo Shrine makes it an ideal meeting place. After the priests on overnight duty make their final walk through the shrine grounds at night all sorts of activities take place. At night it is not uncommon to see an individual performing the clapping and bowing gesture before the closed gate of the inner courtyard but most of the late visitors are couples taking a walk. Other interesting activities noticed by Nelson (1996) were a radio controlled car race, a motorcycle gang taking a beer break, bird watchers looking for nocturnal species and three old men fishing in their underwear.

Offerings such as rice, salt, fruit and water appear not only by the altars at Kamigamo Shrine but also along a certain stream within the shrine grounds. These offerings are similar to what people present by their *kamidana* at home and the ones presented by Shinto priests during important ceremonies. Candles are often placed next to these offerings. Worshippers or not, the groundskeeper at Kamigamo Shrine despises these late hour visits and offerings. He claims that the candles are fire hazards and that the food offerings attract animals. On top of the offerings he often finds empty bottles of beer and whiskey. Unwanted motorcycles, scooters and bicycles are sometimes dumped

at the shrine. Used condoms and droppings left by visitor's dogs are also amongst the things he has to clean. What can be understood from these items and from activities seen by Nelson (1996) is that a lot of nonreligious activities are undertaken at the shrine at night, most of what appear to be social gatherings or dates.

### 6.5. Visitor's motivations

Researches done by Nelson (1996) and Kostelnik (2010) show what motivations are behind shrine visits. Furthermore statistics showing how much Japanese people know about both Shrine *kami* and the *kami* residing in their *kamidana* at home are introduced. For their knowledge about deities can also shed a light on the strength of Shinto in modern Japan.

In Kostelnik's (2010) research statistics are based on surveys taken by 85 individuals from the age of 18-65 who were visiting Yasaka Shrine in Kyoto City. Yasaka Shrine, sometimes called Gion Shrine, was built in 656. Most of the buildings one can see today are from a reconstruction in 1654. It is dedicated to the god of prosperity and good health, along with his wife and eight children. It has a ceremonial stage with many lanterns that bear the names of their sponsors and are lit after dark. The main building is a wooden single story spirit hall. Right next to the shrine grounds is Mauyama Park which is the most popular spot in Kyoto for viewing cherry blossoms in spring (Heyes, 2010).

47% of the participants in Kostelnik's (2010) research claimed that the main reason for their visit was tourism. 29% said they were there to participate in a ritual. Others were split between going on a specific date, 12%, and other reasons also 12%. Other reasons may well be ritual and religiously connected such as acquiring talismans or amulets, fortune telling or other shrine related activities. When inquired about their primary motivation for visiting shrines in general, 53% answered tourism. Rituals came as second with 41% and to go on a specific date was the main motivation for 6%. When inquired about how often they visited shrines, 71% claimed to go on annual basis, or once or twice a year. 29% said that they went every month.

Nelson's (1996) survey is based on answers from 112 visitors of all ages at Kamigamo Shrine. When he asked people about why they decided to visit Kamigamo Shrine the



most common answer, given by 16% of participants, was that there was no special reason. Other reasons given included the shrine being recommended by a friend, it being traditional, wanting to take pictures and having seen it on television. Out of all the answers given, strictly religious reason only counted for 8% of the visits. These reasons were that visitors were planning a wedding there, having a child dedication, asking for harmony and asking for blessing for one's company. As for the shrine's characteristics motivating people's visits, 66% of the answers were related to nature. Another question was related to visitors knowledge about the shrine. When visitors were asked if they knew the name of Kamigamo Shrine's principal *kami*, only 14% knew the deity's name. It should be noted here that the deity's name was on almost all of the more detailed information signs on the shrine grounds. When this was mentioned to a senior priest at the shrine, he was amazed that 14% answered correctly. It was a much higher percentage than he expected. This lack of religious knowledge can also be seen in a research done by Nakamura (1997). When middle aged respondents were asked about what *kami* are enshrined in their *kamidana* at home, those who knew the answer slightly outnumbered those who did not. Among the younger respondents, those who did not know were twice as many as those who claimed to know it. However, since religion has been looked at as a taboo in Japanese public schools since the end of World War II and religion has virtually been excluded from the schools curricula (Fujiwara, 2005) this lack of religious knowledge might not be such a surprise.

## 7. Conclusion

Undoubtedly the support of the Japanese government and the synchronization of rituals under Sect Shinto and Yoshida Shrine forced various kind of *kami* reverence to become a part of what we call Shinto today. But because of that Shinto has established itself into Japanese society on various levels. Shinto funerals may only cover a small part of funerals in Japan but they have never been an important part of Shinto as a religion and Japanese people often perform Buddhist funerals because of a habit. Therefore Shinto's strength should not be evaluated by funeral rites. Ise amulet distribution may be how the Association of Shinto Shrines evaluates Shinto's strength, but after looking at the reason behind increased distribution it is clear that they can neither be considered accurate nor a good evaluation for the strength of a religion. The importance of Shinto festivals for the society as a whole and motivations behind festival participation show us that Shinto is strong not only on religious levels but also cultural and historical levels. Even though motivations behind most shrine visits are not religious, variations and little limitations on religious activities along with the layout of shrines lead the majority of visitors into performing religious like activities, whether it is a habit or not. Therefore it should be safe to conclude that Shinto rites and rituals remain strong in modern Japan and show no sign of decline.

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