

Chapter 1

An Alternative Approach to the History of Shinto

In today's Japan, Shinto has a distinct identity. Shinto is the religion of shrines (*jinja*, *jingū*), large and small sanctuaries that are distinguished from Buddhist temples by their characteristic architecture. These shrines, some 100,000 in all, are managed by about 20,000 Shinto priests, who are immediately recognizable from their traditional attire. The shrines accommodate a multitude of deities. While these deities differ from one shrine to another, they clearly belong to the same category (called *kami*), and they are obviously different from the buddhas and bodhisattvas of Buddhist temples. Similarly, shrines stage a dazzling variety of ceremonies, but it is evident even at first glance that they share a common ritual language.

Still, however clear the contours of modern Shinto may be, in some ways it is also very difficult to pin down. According to official statistics, Shinto is Japan's largest religion, with more than a hundred million "adherents," a number that amounts to well over 80 percent of all Japanese. Yet only a small percentage of the populace identify themselves as "Shintoists" in questionnaires conducted by the media or by Shinto organizations. This reflects the fact that while many Japanese participate in shrine events and make use of the ritual services offered by shrines, only very few regard Shinto as their religious identity. Seen through the eyes of the average patron of shrines, Shinto remains a very vague concept. Shrines may be categorized as Shinto and temples as Buddhist, but this distinction is of little consequence to those who

make use of their services. It makes sense to distinguish shrines from temples, but with few exceptions it is impossible to differentiate between “Shintoists” and “Buddhists.”

Of course, the fact that Shinto hardly functions as a religious identity does not mean that shrines are taken lightly. As “religious juridical persons” (*shūkyō hōjin*) in law, shrines cannot be supported by public funds under Japan’s postwar constitution.¹ They depend for their upkeep on the largess of the inhabitants of their “parish” and the general public. Without a steady stream of income, no shrine can survive; a shrine priest much less so. When a shrine ceases to make itself relevant to the community on which it depends, it will disappear almost instantly. In this perspective, the fact that so many shrines have survived good times and bad over centuries bespeaks a truly astonishing staying power. Ultimately, this remarkable resilience is down to the never-ending efforts of generations of shrine priests, who time and again have succeeded in finding new roles and new sources of income for their shrines, and to the willingness of shrine parishioners and other patrons to make their resources available to them.

Shrines may have a permanent priest, but most do not; such smaller shrines are maintained and run by people in the neighborhood, or share a priest with a number of other shrines. Statistics show that, overall, there is about one priest to every five shrines. There are also a few hundred large and very large shrines: the Ise Shrine, for example, has some 600 personnel, ranging from priests and musicians to office workers. But of course, shrine priests cannot keep a shrine afloat on their own. Equally important is the role played by worshipers’ organizations (*sūkeikai*, *hōsankai*) and neighborhood associations (*chōnaikai*), which organize the community’s participation in and funding of shrine events.

How does a shrine work? Shrines are places where kami are believed to reside. The focus of most shrines is the main sanctuary, or kami hall (*shinden*), usually a simple wooden or concrete building in traditional style. The shrine’s main deities are said to dwell in this building, often in mirrors or other “kami objects” that are permanently hidden from view. In front of the kami hall is a worship hall (*haiden*), from which the visitor looks up to the sanctuary. Prayers are said in this worship hall. Only priests may

approach the sanctuary, and even they seldom enter its inner recesses where the kami is hidden. The area around the two halls is often parklike, and even in an urban environment it tends to look like a small natural forest, or at least it will feature a few trees. Access to the shrine precincts is through a characteristic torii gate. Visitors enter by way of this torii and rinse their hands and mouth at a basin with running water before proceeding to the worship hall. At larger shrines, they will pass by a shrine office (*shamusho*), where they can ask a priest to perform a ritual or buy kami tablets, amulets, postcards, and a variety of souvenirs. Most will pass the office without a glance, throw a coin into the money box (*saisenbako*) at the worship hall, clap their hands, and bow their head briefly in prayer before hurrying off once more into the secular world beyond the torii. The most popular opportunity for such a shrine visit is New Year. Some 70 percent of all Japanese visit a shrine in the first days of the New Year (a practice called *hatsumōde*);² outside this rush-hour period shrines tend to be very quiet places.

Shrines perform three categories of rituals. One is personal prayers for individuals or families. After *hatsumōde*, which also belongs to this category, the most popular practices are *hatsu miyamairi*, the first shrine visit of a newborn baby, and *shichi go san*, a shrine visit to celebrate a child's third, fifth, or seventh birthday. These rites are observed by some 50 percent of Japanese. On these occasions, a priest will intone a solemn prayer (*norito*) and dancing maidens called *miko* will perform in front of the altar. The participants make a symbolic offering (a branch of the ever-green *sakaki* tree called a *tamagushi*) and are offered a sip of sacred rice wine (*miki*), signaling a mutual promise between the kami and the worshiper. Other popular rituals are purification rites for building sites and cars, weddings, prayers for avoiding misfortune in "dangerous years" (*yakudoshi*), and prayers for success in examinations.

The second category of shrine rituals is of an imperial nature. These rituals are standardized across the land and occur simultaneously at most manned shrines. The most important ones are *kinensai* (February 17) and *niiname-sai* (November 23). Both are classical court ceremonies in which the emperor prays for (*kinensai*) and

gives thanks for (*niiname-sai*) the year's harvest. As we shall soon see, these rituals only entered the ritual calendars of shrines in the late nineteenth century. Other national rituals have a similar imperial theme: *kigensetsu* (February 11) celebrates the founding of the nation by the mythical emperor Jinmu, which tradition dates to 660 BC; *Meijisetsu* (November 3) the birthday of the Meiji emperor; and *tenchōsetsu* (December 23) the birthday of the present emperor. These rituals, which do not draw large crowds, symbolize Shinto's connections with the imperial house.

The third and last category consists of shrine festivals (*matsuri*). Apart from New Year, festivals are the main occasions on which shrines really come to life. Shrine festivals reflect local traditions and are spread across the year. Large festivals last for many days and give a cultural identity to whole cities, as well as attracting thousands of visitors and tourists. Small festivals are intimate affairs, not unlike neighborhood parties. The most common pattern of a festival is a parade, for which the kami is transferred from the kami hall into a palanquin called a *mikoshi*. The *mikoshi* is carried or wheeled through the neighborhood and temporarily installed at various sites where the kami is entertained with dancing, theater performances, wrestling matches, archery contests, and the like. Festivals tend to be run by the local community rather than the shrine priests, who take center-stage only as ritual specialists performing liturgical tasks such as the transfer of the kami to the *mikoshi* or the recitation of prayers. Most of the festivities take place outside of the shrine and are managed by selected community members. Typical of shrine festivals is that they engage large parts of the community in their proceedings, and that they envelop the community in a carnivalesque atmosphere in which much is allowed and all is forgiven. All in all, some 25 percent of Japanese participate in a local festival of this kind.

Where in all this is "Shinto"? For shrine priests, these three types of rituals are all part of a single tradition. For most participants, however, the coherence in their own ritual behavior does not derive from such categories as Shinto and Buddhism. From their point of view, the New Year shrine visit belongs together with the Buddhist *obon* festival in August and the eating of

Christmas cake in December. All events of this kind form part of a single calendrical cycle of seasonal festivities (*nenjū gyōji*) that brightens up the routine of a busy life. For most, “religion” and “faith” have little to do with it.

Conceptualizing Shrine Practice as Shinto

“Shinto” as an overarching construct may have little appeal to the average shrine patron, but it has had a profound influence on the design and operation of shrines. Also, individual shrines are aware of the fact that, without a broader conceptual context, each shrine would be even more vulnerable to social change. Shrines explain their function in society in terms of “Shinto” and market themselves under that flag. Developing Shinto as a concept, then, is of utmost importance to the shrine world as a whole.

In the postwar period, this has been one of the main functions of the National Association of Shrines (Jinja Honchō; hereafter NAS), an umbrella organization working on behalf of some 80,000 member shrines. NAS was founded in 1946, at a time of deep crisis when it was far from obvious that Shinto would survive the demise of the old imperial Japan. All agreed that if Shinto was to be rescued from rapid disintegration, it needed to be reinvented. Yet the direction that Shinto would take after Japan’s catastrophic defeat in the war was far from clear. The choices made by leaders of the shrine world at this crucial juncture reveal much about the position of shrines in society, and about the ambiguities of “Shinto” as a conceptualization of shrine practices.

In the turmoil immediately after Japan’s capitulation, the shrine world had good reason to fear for its future. Since 1868 shrine ritual had been a matter of political importance to the Japanese state, and especially from around 1900 onwards Shinto had occupied a secure place at the center of Japan’s national identity. The allied powers that occupied Japan in September 1945 saw Shinto as the ideological foundation of Japanese “emperor worship” and aggressive expansionism. They moved quickly to remove its influence from the public sphere by drastic measures.

In the face of this threat, shrines fought an uphill battle on all fronts. Budgets were nonexistent, and many of the leaders of the old Shinto establishment were being purged from public life. Nor was it easy to find sympathy among the general public. In the face of Japan's disastrous collapse, most Japanese felt a profound aversion to the propaganda that they had been bombarded with for over a decade, and shrines suffered for their long-standing association with that propaganda. Shinto was utterly out of synch with the times and many could not envision its survival in the new, democratic Japan of the future. The Occupation authorities were in fact convinced that if they left it alone, Shinto would disappear by itself. They abstained from the use of force against even the most militarized shrines in the sure knowledge that, over time, these shrines would fold without their help.

However, as things turned out, Shinto proved more robust than most had imagined. The large majority of shrines not only survived but found renewed prosperity as soon as the worst period of economic hardship was over. In 1946 such an outcome must have appeared less than likely, even to the Shinto leaders who formed NAS's early policies. The possibility that Shinto would fall into the abyss of modernization and democratization was felt to be very real, and those who worked to save the shrine world had strong views on what Shinto was to represent in this new age.

Among the debaters, we can discern three main camps. The first, led by Ashizu Uzuhiko (1909–92), stressed Shinto's role in uniting the Japanese people under the spiritual guidance of the emperor. The second, drawing on the work of the ethnologist Yanagita Kunio (1875–1962), rejected the idea that centralist imperial ideology was at the core of Shinto. Instead, this group stressed the spiritual value of local traditions of worshipping local kami, in all their centrifugal variety. The third, fronted by Orikuchi Shinobu (1887–1953), argued that if Shinto was to survive, it should be developed from an ethnic religion into a universal one.³

These three positions reflected radically different approaches to Shinto. Ashizu was an imperial loyalist and activist who saw Shinto in a political context. Yanagita and Orikuchi, on the other hand, were academics with a nativist bent, both specializing in Japanese folklore and dedicating their careers to a search for the

deepest roots of Japan's religious culture. Within NAS, Ashizu fought a hard battle to exclude the influence of Yanagita and Orikuchi from the new shrine organization.⁴ He feared that their emphasis on regional diversity would tear apart Japan's sense of national unity, and even suspected that their views were being used in a leftist conspiracy to destroy the nation. Initially, Ashizu prevailed, but over time the alternatives offered by Yanagita and (to a lesser degree) Orikuchi have bounced back.

We will return to NAS and the shifting positions of its spokesmen in Chapter 6 of this volume. For now, our main point is that all of the three "camps" that struggled over the authority to give new direction to Shinto in 1946 drew on different aspects of the tradition as it existed at that time. Shinto was a political construct designed to instill a "national spirit" in the people; but it was also a bottom-up complex of local rituals and festivals with little internal coherence; and finally, it included a number of religious groups that adhered to universalistic teachings. Let us take a brief look at each of these strains of Shinto, all of them still alive and well in present-day Japan.

Meiji and the Formation of Shinto as a State Cult

To understand the three faces of Shinto, we need to turn our attention to the prewar period. The formative years of modern Shinto are concentrated in the half-century between 1868, the year of the so-called Meiji Restoration, and 1915, when Tokyo's Meiji Shrine was inaugurated. Many have argued that Shinto was "invented" in this period, and it is indeed beyond doubt that pre-Meiji Shinto was a very different animal from its post-Meiji heir.

In the twelfth month of 1867 a small band of insurgents arranged for the emperor to issue an imperial rescript announcing the abolishment of the shogunate. The rescript called for a restoration of direct imperial rule, as in the days of the first (mythical) emperor Jinmu. Soon it became clear what this meant for shrines. The new regime was to be based on the principle that "rites and government are one" (*saisei itchi*), and in the third month of 1868, all shrine priests were placed under the

authority of a newly resurrected ancient institution, the Jingikan, or Council of Kami Affairs. This Council was put in nominal charge of all shrines. In the ensuing weeks shrines were methodically separated from Buddhism. Buddhist priests, deities, buildings, and rituals were banned from all shrines. In the words of Allan Grapard (1984: 245), the Meiji government “forced thousands of monks and nuns to return to lay life and watched without moving when innumerable statues, paintings, scriptures, ritual implements and buildings were destroyed, sold, stolen, burnt, or covered with excrement.” It was at this time that Shinto became physically and institutionally distinct from Buddhism.⁵

Why this sudden obsession with shrines? The radical reforms of 1868 drew on a wave of nostalgic nativism that idealized Japan’s age of antiquity as a divine era of natural harmony and innocence. Japan needed to make a fresh start; to do this, it had to rid itself of the accretions of history. Many branded Buddhism, which had enjoyed a privileged status under the Tokugawa shogunate, as one of the corrupting influences that had undermined Japan’s ancient vigor. In a sense, this was a simple result of the changing times. In spite of the shogunate’s continued support, Buddhism had already lost its former position of intellectual dominance to Confucianism by the eighteenth century. By the nineteenth century it had become a popular target of Confucian condemnation. The Meiji revolution itself was fueled by a heady mix of Confucian ethics and imperial patriotism, in which Buddhism was either marginalized or refuted.

Another factor behind the Meiji institutionalization of Shinto was an acute sense of crisis in the face of Western expansionism. It was feared that Christianity would gain a foothold in Japan, with devastating effects on the nation’s cohesion and, ultimately, its chance of survival. The new Shinto was also a means to enhance the visibility of the emperor, who was now the sole focus of national unity. The Meiji government looked to shrines as a means to educate the people and make them aware of their new status as imperial subjects.

In effect, the new Meiji cult of shrines functioned as a form of Confucian-inspired ancestor worship. By honoring the ancestors

of the nation, a community was created that celebrated a shared past. To this end, shrines were redefined as places that commemorated heroes of the state. The centerpiece of the new shrine system was Ise, the shrine of the imperial ancestor and sun-goddess Amaterasu. It is no coincidence, then, that in the third month of 1869 Emperor Meiji (who was only 16 years old at the time) became the first emperor ever to worship at the Ise Shrine.⁶ In 1871 all other shrines were arranged on a hierarchical scale, from imperial and national shrines at the top to prefectural shrines, district shrines, and finally non-ranked shrines at the bottom. At the same time, hereditary lineages of priests were abolished and a state-sanctioned system of appointed priests was put in its place. In this way shrines were appropriated by the state and designated as sites for the performance of state rituals (*kokka-no-sōshi*). From this time onwards, state-appointed priests were to perform an increasingly standardized set of state rituals as local representatives of the emperor. Their performance of these rituals aimed to unite the people with their emperor in a shared act of ancestor worship, in the manner of a family that gathers in front of the family altar to create and renew a sense of shared purpose and solidarity.

The effect of these measures was that, for the first time, “Shinto” took on very clear contours. Shinto was about shrines, the emperor, and Japan, and it had a clear boundary vis-à-vis Buddhism. Yet in many other senses Shinto still remained a disconcertingly vague concept. As the government would soon find out, there was no consistent teaching that was readily available for the Shinto missionaries whom the Council of Kami Affairs began to send out into the country in 1870. Shinto thinkers disagreed on even the most fundamental questions. Which kami should be incorporated in the imperial cult? What is their relation to each other? What do the classical texts teach about life and death, good and evil, reward and punishment? No consensus could be reached on any of these central questions, and under these circumstances an effective missionary campaign was impossible.

Moreover, it was clear almost from the start that the goal of enhancing national cohesion would not be served by alienating

Buddhists. Already in 1872 the Council of Kami Affairs was closed down and replaced by a new institution called the Ministry of Edification (Kyōbushō).⁷ This Ministry coordinated a new grand campaign, run by official “national evangelists” (*kyōdōshoku*), to spread Japan’s “Great Teaching” to the populace. The campaign also coopted Buddhist priests, and its Great Teaching was deliberately kept as neutral as possible. It merely stressed three general points: (1) respect for the gods and love for the country; (2) observance of the “Principles of Heaven and the Way of Man”; and (3) reverence for the emperor and obedience to his government. Again, the message consisted of a combination of universal Confucian ideas with Japanese symbolism. The role of shrines in this scheme was to give substance to that Japanese focus, pointing ultimately to the emperor as the father and chief celebrant of the nation.

As the political situation began to settle in the 1870s, the question arose what status this national Great Teaching should have. Buddhist groups, most notably the Jōdo Shinshū (True Pure Land) sect, soon felt ill at ease within the shrine-dominated campaign and objected to having to worship deities that were never part of their own tradition. Adopting the Western concept of “religion,” they argued strongly that “Shinto” was not and never should be a member of that category. Buddhist representatives maintained that, in contrast to temples, shrines were not sites of *religion* but of *ritual*. Participation in shrine rites, then, should not be premised on faith or belief. It could not be anything more than a simple expression of respect for the Great Men who had built the nation. This line of reasoning not only served to give Buddhism a monopoly over the “religious” realm; it also allowed the government to combine freedom of religion (eventually guaranteed in the Constitution of 1889) with a continued official shrine cult. As renewed bickering among Shinto ideologues and protests from Buddhist groups reduced the campaign to a shambles, the government took drastic measures. In 1882 shrine priests were forbidden from engaging in any “religious” activities (such as preaching, conducting funerals, or selling amulets); two years later, the Great Teaching campaign was discontinued.

After this debacle the state’s interest in shrines waned rapidly. The urgency of the early Meiji years had faded, and Christianity

had by now proved less threatening than first feared. Significantly, the government planned to phase out state funding for shrines, which caused all the more hardship because all temple and shrine lands had been confiscated in 1871.

It was only after the Sino-Japanese war of 1894–5 and the Russo-Japanese war of 1904–5 that new opportunities arose for shrines to make themselves relevant to the government. A wave of renewed self-confidence inspired much patriotic enthusiasm, expressed in a ritual format that put shrines center stage. The fallen from these wars were enshrined in newly founded military shrines, including Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo and a range of “nation-protecting shrines” (*gokoku jinja*) elsewhere, and shrine visits by the military, as well as school classes, became a new social ritual. At the same time, a growing socialist and communist movement swept over Japan, preaching class struggle and revolution and inspiring fear that national unity was threatened. Under these circumstances Shinto once more became a focus of attention. In 1906 thousands of village shrines were merged with the aim of retaining only one shrine in each community, which could then serve as a stage for national, imperial ceremonies (Fridell 1973). The earlier plan to end state support for shrines was abandoned and a new financing system was introduced; also, the Shinto liturgy was standardized by law. When Emperor Meiji died in 1912, a large plot in central Tokyo was reserved for a shrine in honor of his spirit and that of the empress. This widely advertised project, which was finished in 1915 with the inauguration of Meiji Shrine, finally set Shinto squarely on the map by triggering a national media campaign and engaging large numbers of people in an explicitly “Shinto” undertaking (Imaizumi 2007). Until 1945 Shinto was to serve as Japan’s “non-religious” state cult, propagated with increasing zeal especially after 1931 as the country headed into war.

All these changes had a profound effect on shrines. The erasure of earlier ties with Buddhism proved to be only the beginning of an intense period of transformation. Many shrines simply disappeared, while new ones dedicated to national heroes (ranging from the Meiji emperor to fallen soldiers and paragons of virtue from earlier ages) were erected across the country, and even in

Japan's colonies. Pre-Meiji shrines that survived all reforms were often redesigned and given a new identity: a new name, or even a new set of kami taken from the imperial classics. As ancient priestly lineages disappeared, local traditions were lost and exchanged for standardized procedures drawn up in Tokyo. On top of all this, shrines lost their traditional sources of income (notably, shrine lands) and had to adapt to a new social context, marked by increased mobility and modernization in all its different guises.

The first and second categories of rituals performed at shrines today that were mentioned above, namely the personal and the imperial, were products of this short period of intense modernization that began in 1868. We have already noted the introduction of imperial rites; some of the "private" rites that now constitute the mainstay of shrine ritual are even newer. The New Year ritual of *hatsumōde* developed from a variety of earlier customs in the early twentieth century. In Edo (as Tokyo was called before 1868), people had visited shrines dedicated to the Seven Gods of Fortune to pray for luck in the coming year; in many other places, worshippers selected a shrine or temple that was located in a lucky direction from one's house (*ehō-mōde*), as determined by a Yin-Yang specialist of divination (*onmyōji*). Also rites of purification for, say, building plots had before Meiji been a speciality of Yin-Yang diviners; the performance of such rites by shrine priests was a twentieth-century innovation. Shinto marriages only gained popularity after the wedding ceremony of Crown Prince Yoshihito (the future Emperor Taishō) in 1900. *Shichi go san* has older roots in earlier rites of passage for children, but these did not typically involve shrines. This ritual gained its modern form only in the Taishō period (1912–26). Before that time, customs varied from one region to the next; in the Kansai area, for example, there was no tradition for taking young children to shrines, and instead 13-year-olds were taken to Buddhist temples. The custom of drawing lots to foretell one's personal fortune (*omikuji*) at shrines and tying them to branches in the shrine grounds, as depicted on the cover of this book, spread in the same Taishō period. The origins of today's *omikuji* can be traced back to early Edo *Kannon kuji* (Avalokiteśvara lots), popularized first at Tendai temples and later

by, again, Yin-Yang diviners (Ōno Izuru 2002). All these rites were actively promoted in the modern era in response to shrines' loss of economic independence. After all, shrines had lost both their landholdings and the right to engage in "religious" activities, including even the sale of amulets. These new practices were designed as "nonreligious" opportunities to draw people to shrines; they were new ritual services that shrine priests could offer without breaking the law.

In December 1945, only months after Japan's surrender, the American-led Occupation issued the so-called Shinto Directive (Shintō shirei). The stated aim of this Directive, made explicit in its first article, was to put an end to "the perversion of Shinto theory and beliefs into militaristic and ultranationalistic propaganda, designed to delude the Japanese people and lead them into wars of aggression." The Directive prohibited all financial contributions to Shinto shrines from public funds, as well as all forms of official support for Shinto rites or ideas. At the same time, shrines were offered a new lease of life as private religious organizations: "Shrine Shinto, after having been divorced from the state and divested of its militaristic and ultranationalistic elements, will be recognized as a religion if its adherents so desire." In February 1946 shrines were registered under a new law as religious juridical persons (*shūkyō hōjin*), and NAS was founded as a new umbrella organization.

Rather than making a radical break with the past, NAS opted to hold on to many elements of the Meiji state cult. It retained the leadership of the Ise Shrine, and to this day the organization makes a great effort to distribute Ise deity amulets (*jingū taima*) to households throughout Japan, for both ideological and financial reasons. The imperial rituals instituted in the Meiji period have a prominent place on the ritual calendar of member shrines, just as they did before the war. Perhaps most importantly, NAS inherited the Meiji view of Shinto as a non-religion. This partly explains Shinto's weakness as a religious identity. NAS sees Shinto as a "public" ritual system open to all members of the community irrespective of their "private" beliefs, not as an exclusivist religion. Thus, if Shinto does not function as a religion, this is primarily due to a choice made by the shrine organization itself.

Shinto as Folklore

The state cult of shrines and its legacy in NAS's policies stand out as a major factor in the crystallization of Shinto, both before the war and after. However, we should not be tempted to believe that before 1945 shrines were simply stages for patriotic ceremonial. If that had been the case, Shinto would indeed have imploded in the aftermath of Japan's capitulation. The fact that the number of shrines hardly decreased at all after the discontinuation of the state shrine cult must cause us to pause, because it proves that the imperial cult was never more than an ephemeral superstructure. Even when nation building was at its most intense, state ritual was not all there was to Shinto. In fact, the evidence suggests it was not even the most important part of Shinto.

In spite of the centralizing policies of the government, shrines continued to function first and foremost as stages for local community festivals. Within the confines of this category, the variety is endless: spring festivals in prayer for a good growing season, autumn festivals in thanks for the year's crops, New Year festivals to pray for good business in the coming year, summer festivals to ward off illnesses, hunting rituals, fishing rituals, purification rituals, and celebrations of local foundational events.⁸ In spite of the fact that most of these ceremonial occasions do not primarily address imperial themes, even prewar shrine administrators recognized their importance. Local festivals were far more effective in inspiring the general public to be actively engaged in shrine affairs than the ideological rites of imperial Shinto. Festivals were profoundly affected by the separation of shrines from Buddhism in 1868, but they nevertheless displayed a measure of continuity with the period before Meiji. Their nature was such that they were not easily assimilated into a standardized, secularized imperial cult. A rite in which court emissaries presented imperial offerings was added to the festival proceedings at shrines of high rank, but otherwise local festivals remained peripheral to the interests of Shinto ideologues.

To others, however, it was the mystery of this endlessly variegated body of local practices that constituted Shinto's true appeal. The most influential thinker and writer to call attention to local

shrine cults was the above-mentioned Yanagita Kunio.⁹ Yanagita was an outspoken critic of officialdom's way of running shrines. As early as 1918 he wrote:

During the Russo-Japanese war, when nobody could foresee whether we would win or lose, people in villages that had sent many of their youngsters to the battlefield had no other way to deal with their anxiety than to turn to the kami of their village shrines [*ujigami*]. Many shrines performed so-called enemy-quelling rites attended by local politicians and officials, and those rites attracted much attention. But at the same time, mothers and wives fasted, performed ablutions and carried out such practices as *o-hyakudo* [making a hundred successive shrine visits]. Such acts of faith were in fact counted among the virtuous acts of the wartime. It is utterly groundless to ignore all this [religious activity] and claim that shrines are merely places for expressing respect for ancestors and Great Men.¹⁰

In this passage Yanagita displays an attitude towards the people and their customs that is very different from that of the authorities. Yanagita was much more impressed by private acts of sincere faith performed by the "folk" (*jōmin*) than by official ceremonies such as enemy-quelling rites. In his view, this grass-roots faith was profoundly religious, and he considered the policy to separate shrines from religion as a gross act of cynical opportunism. Yanagita saw the bureaucratic policy to cleanse shrines of all "religious" stains in the name of imperial Shinto as a threat to the authentic faith of the people. For him, shrine worship and other local practices (though not those rooted in Buddhism) bore testimony to the oldest and deepest layers of Japan's culture. In his search for the authentic roots of Japan, Yanagita looked to the periphery where he assumed that ancient practices and mentalities had remained untouched by modernity. In Yanagita's eyes, the official policy towards shrines threatened to wipe out these last remaining islands of uncontaminated folk culture, and thus destroy Japan's unique heritage.

Yanagita had good reasons to be concerned. The separation of Shinto first from Buddhism, and then from "religion," excluded many traditional practices from shrines. Healing, divination, rites

of possession as a means of communicating with ancestors or protector spirits, and many other kinds of rituals were banned from shrines, as were the practitioners who engaged in them. Of course, demand for such rituals persisted, and they never disappeared; their practice simply moved to another location or went underground (Bouchy 2003; Liscutin 2000). Even in their new hideaways, though, practitioners of what the authorities regarded as “primitive superstitions” had to live with a constant fear of police harassment, and many felt pressured either to give up their calling or find a government-sanctioned way to carry on.

Yanagita was not above condemning many of the activities of popular religious figures as superstition; but in a carefully selected range of folk practices, he perceived a cultural heritage of great value. In his vision, Shinto appeared as a complex of ancient beliefs and practices that had been handed down, from one generation to the next, by nameless “folk” in the remotest parts of the land. He used rich data from countless fieldwork trips to theorize about a pure and original Japanese essence in which kami worship played a central role. This does not mean that Yanagita was opposed to the central idea of the prewar *kokutai* ideology, namely that the people and the emperor are one.¹¹ While criticizing top-down imperial Shinto, he stressed the original unity of folk ritual and imperial ritual. In his view, both expressed the same concerns with fertility, life, and growth that can ultimately be traced back to the ancient Yayoi age (c. 300 BC–AD 250) when the arrival of rice cultivation laid the foundation for Japan’s culture. Like the official line on Shinto, then, Yanagita’s studies were premised on the notion of a single, indivisible Japanese “spirit.” The difference was that, in Yanagita’s eyes, the local customs of the people constituted the very core of that Japanese cultural essence, while officialdom tended to look down on local practices and beliefs as superstitions that stood in the way of a truly modern Shinto.

Yanagita’s vision was to a large degree shared by Orikuchi Shinobu, whom we met earlier as an advocate for a more “religious” Shinto. Orikuchi used textual sources rather than fieldwork, but his findings pointed in much the same direction as Yanagita’s. As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5,

Orikuchi looked for the roots of imperial rituals in folk practices that had survived in the periphery of modern Japan. Both Yanagita and Orikuchi, then, sketched the contours of a very different conception of Shinto: not as a nonreligious practice of emperor worship, but as the essence of Japan's cultural identity as a *Volk* – which was also reflected in imperial ritual. This “romantic” vision of Shinto has survived into the postwar period as an alternative to the more political model that originated in Meiji.

Religious Shinto Sects

The Meiji period also saw the emergence of a number of “Shinto sects” that were officially recognized and administered as religious groups. These groups were labeled *kyōha Shintō*, literally “Shinto groups with [specific] teachings.” By 1908, there were 13 in all. This category arose as a result of the separation of shrines from religion, institutionalized in 1882 (Hardacre 1986; Inoue Nobutaka 2002). The idea was that, while shrines would limit themselves to ritual, the propagation of Shinto teachings would be delegated to private groups approved by the government. Some of these groups were founded by shrine priests as a way to continue their religious activities after 1882. In these cases the Shinto sects were a new way to coordinate the activities of already existing lay “confraternities” (*kō*) connected to famous shrines or sacred mountains. At Ise, for example, an “Ise Teaching Institute” was already set up by 1872; in 1882 it was reorganized as a Shinto sect called *Jingūkyō*, “the teaching of the Ise Shrine,” which served as an umbrella organization for all Ise confraternities scattered throughout the country. At Izumo Shrine in Shimane Prefecture there was a similar development. Other Shinto sects originated as grass-roots popular movements, led by popular healers and other religious figures. These groups found in the new category of *kyōha Shintō* a shortcut to official recognition that seemed to promise an end to police harassment. Often this could only be achieved by adapting the group's teachings and practices to the official line on Shinto.

At least some of these Shinto sects focused on a single site or deity to which they gave universal meaning, as a creator deity

seeking a personal relationship with devoted believers. In this sense, these sects were religious in a manner that closely resembled the example of monotheistic Christianity. They built “churches” (*kyōkai*), often performing regular services attended by dedicated congregations, and engaged in active proselytization. As the direct predecessors of the later “new religions” (*shinkō shūkyō*), they brought a new form of religious organization to Japan. Some achieved a remarkable degree of success. In the 1930s the nationalist Shinto scholar and educationalist Tanaka Yoshitō (1872–1946) lost faith in the feasibility of spreading Shinto among the populace by “secular” means, while at the same time discovering in the preachers of the Shinto sects a group of educators who could compete “even with Christians” (Isomae 2000a). It must have been a similar assessment that persuaded Orikuchi Shinobu to argue that Shinto’s only chance of survival after the surrender lay in its becoming a universal “religion” in the full Western sense of the word.

Many Shintos; Many Histories

We can sum up the above by observing that Shinto, as it emerged after Meiji, had three faces:

- 1 A “nonreligious” body of state ritual focusing on the emperor.
- 2 A broad swathe of local rituals that addressed a range of other concerns, from community prosperity to individual good luck and health.
- 3 A number of religious groups, defined by the state as “Shinto sects.”

All three came with their own definitions of Shinto, ranging from imperial *kokutai* ideology, via Yanagita’s folklore-based notion of an authentic national culture with roots in ancient times, to the various teachings of the founders of Shinto sects. If we include the viewpoint of the actual users of shrines, many of whom did not and do not see their shrine practices in terms of “Shinto” at

all, the picture becomes even more confusing. With the possible exception of this fourth view, all these attempts at defining Shinto are clearly products of modern Japan. Moreover, it is clear that the theories and doctrines of the ideologues of state ritual, folklorists like Yanagita, and sect leaders do not necessarily have a lot to do with the ways in which shrines have functioned, even in the modern period itself. This places us in a difficult predicament as writers of a Shinto history, however “brief.”

In fact, one notion that is shared by all these conceptions of Shinto is that it is the “indigenous” religion of Japan, with roots in the nation’s ancient past. Whatever line one takes, Shinto is invariably staged as the “original” essence of Japanese culture. This emphasis on ancient indigenous origins has led both modern and premodern Shinto thinkers to history, and it has determined the basic premise on which Shinto’s views on its own history may be constructed. Almost invariably, current historical narratives follow a classical three-part plot: from ancient purity, by way of a “medieval” age in which Shinto was mixed with Buddhism and Confucianism, to final restoration and a return to authentic purity in modern times. Even the best introductory history of Shinto, Inoue Nobutaka’s *Shinto: A short history* (2003), follows this overall plot, even though it is careful to avoid depicting ancient Shinto as “pure” and to stress the role of Buddhism as forming rather than distorting Shinto.

These historical accounts are based on the fundamental assumption that there has been such a thing as Shinto throughout Japan’s history. The importance of this belief to the self-understanding of Shinto professionals (priests, educators, administrators) explains the enormous impact of the work of Kuroda Toshio (1926–93). This historian of medieval Japan launched a frontal attack on Shinto dogma by arguing that the understanding of Shinto “as the indigenous religion of Japan, continuing in an unbroken line from prehistoric times down to the present” is nothing more than a myth (Kuroda 1981). Instead, he posited that “before modern times Shinto did not exist as an independent religion,” and he maintained that premodern Shinto should be understood as a “component” or an “extension” of Buddhism in its Japanese guise (Kuroda 1981: 3). This insight has since served as the starting

point of a fundamental reconsideration of Shinto and its role in Japanese history. There is little doubt that a disinterested review of the sources confirms Kuroda's point: an analysis of the historical usage of the term "Shinto" (*jindō,shintō*) reveals that this word took on its present meaning much later than traditional histories would suggest (Teeuwen 2002). Certainly, there was no Japanese religion called Shinto in ancient Japan. By implication, this means that the "pure Shinto" of modern times was not the product of a restoration, but a modern invention.

Yet Kuroda's analysis creates as many questions as it solves. Surely there was a distinct Japanese "tradition" (if we want to avoid the term religion) with some degree of coherence before Buddhism arrived on the islands in the sixth century, even if it was not at the time conceptualized as Shinto? Kami shrines, myths, and rituals appear as obvious elements of such an ancient tradition. Many shrines have existed in the same location where they are today since classical, or even prehistoric, times. Most shrines are much younger, but even these can be regarded as specimens of a genus that has its roots in ancient Japan: kami shrines. Texts of court mytho-history from the early eighth century, most notably *Kojiki* (Record of ancient matters; 712) and *Nihon shoki* (Chronicles of Japan; 720), contain tales about kami that are obviously non-Buddhist in nature. Even though these texts are not free from continental influences, they are in fact less "Chinese" in outlook than one might expect, considering the nature of the court at that time. Finally, many elements of modern Shinto ritual display a clear continuity with documented ancient forms. Much of this is due to later reconstructions of classical ritual forms, but at least there was always a common ground between existing and reconstructed ritual that allowed such reconstructions to be implemented in the first place.

At first sight these observations may appear to lead us back to the traditional view of Shinto as a continuation of Japan's "original" religion. However, such a representation of history would only be justified if kami shrines, myths, and rites had developed as a coherent complex of phenomena, reasonably distinct from other traditions. If a closer look at the sources reveals that shrines through much of their history were affected more profoundly by

their connections with Buddhist temples, or by Yin-Yang lore from the Asian continent, it makes little sense to frame their development as a history of Shinto. Vice versa, in mapping the historical development of, for example, a kami myth, it would be a gross distortion of history if we were to focus only on those contexts that fit in with the modern concept of Shinto, especially if it turns out that the myth in question was most “alive” in quite different contexts.

The crux of the matter is that kami shrines, myths, and rituals are a great deal older than their conceptualization as components of Shinto. Therefore, the only way to delve into the history of these shrines, myths, and rituals is by laying the concept of Shinto to one side, at least as a start. Only in this way will it be possible to study these aspects of kami worship in their proper historical contexts. It is only after this that we will be able to look back and try to identify the significance of Shinto in the histories that we have just explored.

For these reasons this book will take a different approach to that of more conventional histories of Shinto. Such histories have typically assumed that Shinto has been an abiding force in Japanese history, and they present a selection of data that confirms this. Of course, as already noted, there were indeed significant linkages between the histories of kami cults long before Meiji, and Chapter 2 will give a brief survey of historical developments that served to bring kami shrines, myths, and rituals together. In the main body of the book, however, we will take the reverse approach of tracing the history of some of the main components from which Shinto was construed at a later stage: shrines, myths, and rituals. The difference is that while Shinto historians naturally stress the “Shinto-like” aspects of shrines, myths, and rituals, we make a conscious effort to put that Shinto angle aside, and thereby gain a less preconceived understanding of shrines, myths, and rituals in their contemporary setting, when there is no evidence that they were understood as ingredients of Shinto.

This fragmenting approach is necessary not only to understand pre-Shinto kami cults in their proper context, but also to bring out the process of “Shintoization” that culminated in the Meiji shrine reforms. To appreciate the impact of the Shinto ideology of

modern times, we need to know what kami shrines, myths, and rituals entailed before they were assimilated to that ideology. Moreover, we need to bring out the elements of coherence that were already there before Shintoization set in and that made the conceptualization of kami cults as Shinto credible and feasible.

A Shrine, a Myth, and a Ritual

To root this history solidly in the soil of the real Japan, rather than in some abstraction, this book focuses on one particular shrine (Chapter 3), one myth (Chapter 4), and one ritual (Chapter 5). Of course, this forces us to make a selection that by definition will not be representative; but at least it will slice through history in a different and, we believe, more informative way than a book that begins by imposing the modern category of Shinto on pre-modern times.

Given the central position of the Ise Shrine in modern Shinto, it would have been both logical and useful to focus on this site. On the other hand, Ise is in many senses a very exceptional shrine, and perhaps the least representative of them all.¹² Other shrines and their rituals were “Shintoized” by way of assimilation to Ise, as the shrine of the imperial ancestors. Therefore, we have chosen to focus on another important shrine that can give us a better idea of what was there prior to Shintoization. Excellent studies of the shrine sites of Kasuga (Grapard 1992a), Konpira (Thal 2005), Kumano (Moerman 2006) and Oyama (Ambros 2008) already exist; partly for that reason, this book will focus on another shrine complex that is today known as Hiyoshi (in its earlier guises, as Hie), located at the foot of Mount Hiei near Kyoto. This shrine was a pioneer in many different ways: in its symbiosis with the Buddhist establishment on Hiei’s slopes; in its economic and political role as a holder of lands and a center of kami-assisted warfare; in its contribution to early formulations of Shinto; in the tragedy of its late medieval destruction and early modern rebuilding, and in its lengthy and, at times, violent struggle to break away from the Buddhist control exerted by Hiei’s monks. The site shares many of these developments with other

larger shrines, and it may serve as a lens through which to survey some of the major watersheds in the history of shrines.

The myth that we will follow through history is the tale of the sun-goddess Amaterasu who hid in a rock-cave and thus threw the world into darkness. This is one of the most famous episodes of kami mythology, and it has had an exceedingly rich afterlife in many different contexts. The main protagonists of this myth are the kami of central court lineages, including the imperial ancestor Amaterasu herself; still, in many of its later incarnations, the myth was not primarily interpreted as a political one, but rather as a metaphor for enlightenment practices, or as the origination myth of performative traditions such as *waka* composition, Noh, and kami dancing (*kagura*). Only after Meiji were such interpretations purged from the historical record, in what we may understand as a determined attempt to re-establish the court's monopoly on imperial symbolism.

Finally, the ritual that will be examined in detail in this book is the imperial enthronement ceremony called the *daijōsai*, or the "great rite of [rice] consumption." The *daijōsai* was in many ways the defining ritual of modern state Shinto. After all, it was the greatest of the imperial state rites, dramatizing the emperor's exclusive relationship with Amaterasu, and so narrating in the most powerful and persuasive fashion the transcendental nature of the imperial line. A historical exploration reveals that the *daijōsai* had the most interesting of pre-Shinto histories. The ritual is not as old as the modern state maintained; its original meanings were quite different from those now established; and, moreover, it was by no means consistently regarded as a necessary element of imperial enthronements. Once again, it was only with Meiji that the contemporary meanings of this rite and its Shinto identity were determined.