

John BREEN

Resurrecting the Sacred Land of Japan The State of Shinto in the Twenty-First Century

This article explores a subject overlooked in both Japanese and non-Japanese scholarship, namely the state of Shinto in twenty-first century Japan. It addresses Shinto from the perspective of the Shinto establishment, and adopts a material approach, focusing on the material objects known as *jingū taima* or Ise amulets. The approach is justified by the Shinto establishment's ongoing campaign to disseminate Ise amulets to ten million Japanese homes. This article asks why the Shinto establishment devotes its energies to the amulet campaign and what the campaign discloses about twenty-first century Shinto. It examines the Ise amulets as material objects, explores their manufacture and distribution, and reports on growing resentment amongst shrine priests towards the campaign. It is argued here that, for the Shinto establishment, the Ise amulet campaign is a vital strategy in its declared aim of resurrecting in the postwar the sacred land of Japan.

KEYWORDS: Shinto—Ise—amulet—Jinja Honchō—Shrine Office

John BREEN is reader in Japanese at SOAS (London University) and associate professor at Nichibunken, Kyoto.

WHAT is the nature of the Shinto present? How does Shinto today reflect on its notorious past? How, indeed, does it see its future role? In brief, what are we to make of Shinto in the twenty-first century? Questions pertaining to postwar Shinto, except in so far as they relate to Yasukuni shrine, have received precious little attention in Japan or elsewhere. The purpose of this article is to shed some much-needed light on Shinto and its agenda at the start of the twenty-first century. Where to begin? Any discussion of the Shinto present must surely privilege the Shinto establishment. By the Shinto establishment I refer to Jinja Honchō 神社本庁 or the National Association of Shrines (hereafter NAS). NAS, fashioned in the immediate aftermath of the war, is a comprehensive religious juridical person (*hōkatsu shūkyō hōjin* 包括宗教法人) that supervises the vast majority of shrines in the land. NAS merits the closest attention because it trains, appoints, promotes, and dismisses Shinto priests; it determines the rites that these priests perform, and through its theological research institute (Kyōgaku Kenkyūjo 教学研究所), it shapes Shinto's modern meanings. Any study of NAS must involve a critical use of NAS publications, notably the weekly *Jinja Shinpō* 神社新報 and the monthly *Gekkan Wakaki* 月刊若木. Here I make full use of these publications, but the principle method deployed here is a material one.¹

Material objects of all sorts are vitally important to the study of religion because they mediate human contact with the sacred; they structure sacred space, and they give meaning to ritual practice. Of the many material objects that define Shinto, one might usefully explore the *shintai* 神体, those always-hidden sacred objects in which the kami reside. A study of the diverse offerings (*shinsen* 神饌) presented to the kami in shrine rites would yield much. So, too, would an investigation of the material objects, natural and man made, that give physical shape to the shrine and its compound: the *torii* 鳥居 gates, the *honden* 本殿 sanctuary, and *haiden* 拜殿 worship hall or, indeed, the sacred trees known as *shinboku* 神木 or the forests (*mori* 杜) in which shrines typically nestle. The material object to which the Shinto establishment directs our attention, however, is none of these. NAS draws us rather to an object known as *jingū taima* 神

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1. RAMBELLI 2007 is a fine example of this approach applied to Japanese Buddhism.

宮大麻. *Jingū* refers to the Ise 伊勢 shrines, while *taima* is the Ise name for what is elsewhere known as *ofuda* お札 or “amulet.” *Jingū taima* are Ise amulets, and it is probably no exaggeration to say that they are the key to an understanding of twenty-first-century Shinto.² NAS is presently pushing a campaign, officially styled *issenman katei jingū taima hōsai undō* 一千万家庭神宮大麻奉斎運動, designed to get amulets from the Ise shrines into ten million Japanese homes. It regards this campaign as nothing less than the “barometer” by which to evaluate the success or failure of Shinto today. The campaign actually began in 1987, but it enjoyed only mixed fortunes until it was invigorated in 2005 with the introduction of the “model district” system (*moderu shibu seido* モデル支部制度). This system involves prefectural shrine offices (Jinjachō 神社庁) selecting a number of districts within their jurisdiction, and directing shrine priests there to generate new ideas and double their efforts, so that the target of 10 million might be attained. Statistics seem to suggest the reinvigorated campaign is a considerable success, with the target now tantalizingly close. In 2009, 8,995,979 Ise amulets were shipped across Japan; this figure marks an increase of 374 on 2008, and the fourth increase in as many years (*Jinja Shinpō* 15 March 2010, 1).

The first section of this article begins with the most basic of all questions: why does NAS devote its energies to this Ise amulet distribution campaign, and what does that devotion tell us about twenty-first century Shinto? The Ise amulets themselves, their contested nature, and the strategies for distribution, are the subject of the second section. The system of Ise amulet distribution, for all the success it appears recently to be enjoying, is not perfect, and there is evidence of it causing resentment amongst shrine priests. Priestly resentment and resistance constitute the focus of the final section.

The “Why” of Ise Amulets: “Resurrecting the Sacred Land of Japan”

The why question—why NAS attaches such importance to Ise amulets and their distribution—is best answered by an expert in the field such as Kuroiwa Akihiko, formerly head of the NAS section in charge of Ise amulet distribution. Kuroiwa recently aired his views in the weekly *Jinja Shinpō*, evidently representing the NAS position. He identified three interlinking rationales for the amulet campaign: “connectivity” (*tsunagari* つながり), “return to origins” (*genten kaiki* 原点回帰), and “bequeathing a legacy of grandeur” (*sōgonsa o nokosu* 荘厳さを残す) (KUROIWA 2008, 2).

1. “Connectivity” refers to the role of Ise amulets as a vital link between the

2. There are two main shrines in Ise, the *naikū* or inner shrine and *gekū* or outer shrine. NAS has no interest in disseminating amulets from the outer shrine dedicated to the food kami Toyo-uke 豊受大神; it is solely concerned with amulets from the inner shrine where Amaterasu Ōmikami 天照皇大神, the Sun Goddess and ancestress of the imperial line, is venerated.

people and the Ise shrines. When people buy amulets, and venerate them at home, they are connected to Ise, and the seeds of popular faith in the Ise kami are sown.

2. “Return to origins” relates to the perception in NAS that the Japanese of today have “lost a sense of awe and veneration for the transcendent.” Kuroiwa identifies symptoms of this loss “in the problems of Yasukuni 靖国 and historical understanding.” He argues, in brief, that the Japanese must return to the emperor, and to Ise where his ancestor is venerated. Ise amulets are the indispensable technique for effecting that return.

3. “Legacy of grandeur” is an oblique reference to the economy of Ise amulets. NAS speaks of amulet “distribution” (*hanpu* 頒布), but amulets are in fact sold and bought, and they generate vital income for the Ise shrines. According to one authority, more than 50 percent of the Ise shrines’ total annual income is dependent on amulet sales (YANO 2006, 175).³ Kuroiwa concludes his *Jinja Shinpō* piece with an exhortation and an assurance:

As long as the emperor and the Ise shrines survive in their true form, then the sacred land of Japan will one day be resurrected. We must believe in this and, inspired by it, spare no efforts to distribute Ise amulets. (KUROIWA 2008, 2)

The emperor and Ise constitute what Kuroiwa calls mysteriously “our inner *kokutai* awareness” (*waga uchi naru kokutai ishiki* 我が内なる国体意識). Ise amulets, when venerated by families in households across Japan, link the common people to Ise and so are key to the resurrection of sacred Japan. At the same time, they guarantee the financial future of the Ise shrines. Kuroiwa does not spell out in his short article what the sacred land looks like, but judging from articles in *Jinja Shinpō*, *Gekkan Wakaki*, and other NAS publications, it is a political and social vision centred on Ise, on Amaterasu the Sun Goddess, on the myth of the emperor’s divine origins and on the emperor himself as political sovereign and celebrant of sacred rites.⁴ In this vision, all Japanese are cognizant of the truth of the emperor’s uniqueness, and pay him homage. This resurrection of Japan along the axis of the Ise myth is not something new to the Ise amulet campaign

3. It might be noted that in May 1973 NAS issued a notice to shrine priests instructing them not to speak of “selling and buying” amulets “since [amulets] are not commodities” (JINJA HONCHŌ SAIMUBU 2009, 17).

4. NAS idealizes the mythical first emperor Jinmu 神武. For a recent example, see the *Jinja shinpō* editorial of 9 February 2009 titled *Tsutsushinde Jinmu sōgyō no seishin o 謹んで神武創業の精神を* (In praise of the spirit of Emperor Jinmu’s state creation). On the reproduction of the modern emperor as Jinmu-type celebrant, see especially the *Jinja shinpō* editorial of 1 January 1971 styled *Saisei itchi no goseido 祭政一致の御制度* (The system of *saisei itchi*). The latter editorial is notable for its reminder to shrine priests of the Meiji government’s edict that defined shrines as “sites for the performance of state rites,” and thus not the property of individual priests or even their communities.

MONTH	RITE	MEANING OF RITE/EVENT COMMEMORATED
1	Genshi sai	Descent to earth of Amaterasu's grandson, Ninigi
2	Kinen Sai Kigensetsu	Prayers to Amaterasu for bountiful harvest Jinmu tennō's enthronement, 660 BC
4	Jinmu tennō sai Shōwa sai	Jinmu's death anniversary Birth of Shōwa emperor
10	Kanname sai	Emperor worships Ise "from afar"
11	Niiname sai	Emperor worships Amaterasu in harvest rite
12	Tenchō setsu	Emperor's birthday

TABLE 1. The annual ritual cycle for shrines as determined by the National Association of Shrines (Jinja Honchō).

launched in the 1980s; it has been the *raison-d'être* of NAS since its foundation in 1946. This is an important point about postwar Shinto that merits further elucidation.

Take, for example, the cycle of rites that NAS requires priests to perform at shrines the length and breadth of Japan. The cycle comprises, in addition to the annual rite for the shrine's own kami (known as *reisai* 例祭), the following ritual moments: the spring Kinen sai 祈年祭 and the autumn Niiname sai 新嘗祭, both of which are major rites (*taisai* 大祭); Saitan sai 歳旦祭, Genshi sai 原始祭, Kigen sai 紀元祭, Kanname sai 神嘗祭, Shōwa sai 昭和祭, Meiji sai 明治祭, and Tenchō sai 天長祭, all of which are median rites (*chūsai* 中祭). What these performances share in common is their dynamic articulation of the Ise-centered myth of the unbroken line of emperors (*bansei ikkei* 万世一系). That is, they celebrate between them the Sun Goddess herself, the mythical first emperor Jinmu and all imperial ancestors—mythical and otherwise—from Jinmu to the present emperor's father (TABLE 1). The continuities between the NAS ritual cycle and that of so-called "State Shinto" of the prewar period are unmistakable.

The NAS deployment of Ise amulets to resurrect "sacred Japan" remains confined to the realm of fantasy so long as the Constitution upholds the separation of the state from Ise and, indeed, from other shrines throughout the land.⁵ The Ise shrines are defined in law as religious corporations, and the Constitution prevents the state from cultivating a relationship with them. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the gap between the state and the Ise shrines closed quickly after the Occupation; and it remains close. As early as 1960, Prime Minister Ikeda Hayato 池田勇人 responded to a campaign by NAS and its sympathisers with a historic

5. For some reflections on the shifting relationship between state and Shinto in the postwar period, see BREEN 2010a.

statement on Ise. In October of that year, Diet member Hamachi Bunpei 浜地文平 had demanded the premier clarify the relationship between the emperor and the mirror kept in the Inner shrine (*naikū* 内宮) at Ise. The relationship was surely, proposed Hamachi, not to be understood as that of an individual's faith in the "religion" of Ise. For if this were the case, then it was conceivable that that relationship might end with the present reign.

Prime Minister Ikeda, albeit in a roundabout fashion, gave Hamachi the assurances he and the NAS desired. "It is not the case that emperors bestowed the mirror as a [human] gift on the Ise shrines.... We are rather to understand that the sacred mirror enshrined in the imperial palace and the mirror in its true form, namely the mirror enshrined in Ise, are an inheritance that is as old as the imperial line itself" (JINJA SHINPŌSHA 2008, 83–5). This was confirmation, as an NAS commentator put it, that the Ise mirror and the imperial line are indivisible; that the mirror was, indeed, the Sun Goddess's gift to the emperor. In brief, it acknowledged the historical truth of the Ise myth, and was thus "a shining first step in the resurrection of the Japanese *kokutai* left vague ever since defeat in the war" (JINJA SHINPŌSHA 2008, 88–9).⁶ It is to be noted that no subsequent Japanese cabinet has questioned the Ikeda understanding; it has never been retracted or even challenged in the Diet. Indeed, ever since 1975, Japanese Prime Ministers of all political hues have made annual, and quite obviously official, New Year pilgrimages to the Ise shrines. Their number includes the Christian Ōhira Masayoshi 大平正芳 and the Socialist Murayama Tomiichi 村山富市 and the Minshutō 民主党 politician, Hatoyama Yukio 鳩山由紀夫. It is curious that this state patronage of the Ise shrines has attracted very little media attention, unlike state patronage of the Yasukuni shrine, for example.⁷ NAS's hope is that the shining first step of the "Ikeda understanding" will eventually be followed by Ise shedding its status as a religious juridical person, and returning to the state (SANO 2005, 393).⁸

Some concluding comment is in order here on the substance of the relation-

6. For the importance to the NAS of the Ikeda response, see for example SANO 2005. A recent *Jinja shinpō* editorial (*Shinzui wa tennō o oshieru koto* 神髓は天皇をおしえること, 12 April 2010) argued the importance of introducing the Ise myth into mainstream education. "Unless [children] know the myth of the descent to earth of the Sun Goddess's descendants, they cannot know the essence of the emperor or the character of this nation."

7. The Catholic Church in Japan is one of very few bodies to have raised concerns over state patronage of Ise. The Japanese Bishops saw in Asō Tarō's 2009 Ise pilgrimage "an intention to revive state Shinto." For their protest, see *Asō Tarō shushō no Ise jingū sanpai ni kōgi shimasu* online at <http://www.cbcj.catholic.jp/jpn/doc/cbcj/090109-2.htm> (accessed 22 June 2010). For a discussion of postwar Catholic and Shinto problems, see BREEN 2010b.

8. Sano adds here that he does not see the need for "exaggerated regard for the Constitution." Rather, "The original form of the Japanese state lies where there is no Constitution; it consists in ignoring the Constitution" (SANO 2005, 395).

TABLE 2. The amulet manufacturing cycle. Source: JINJA HONCHŌ 1998.

MONTH	EVENT	SITE
January	The first amulet and calendar of the year (Taima koyomi hōsei hajime sai 大麻曆奉製始祭)	Maruyama ritual site (Maruyama saijō 丸山祭場)
April (mid-month)	The cedar tree felling (Taima yōzai kirihajime sai 大麻用材伐始祭)	Hōsei sho 奉製所 (Amulet manufacture department, Ise)
April (end)	Manufacture (hōsei 奉製)	Hōan sho 奉安所
Weekly April to September	Amulet purification rite (<i>taima shubatsu shiki</i> 大麻修祓式) Priest: ritual confinement overnight in Saikan Priest: presents offerings to the Ise amulet of rice and wine Priest: Intones <i>norito</i> prayer Hōansho staff: eight hand claps Priest: Purifies staff and amulets with wand	
September	Ise amulet transfer rite (Jingū taima hanpu hajime sai 神宮大麻曆頒布始祭)	Kaguraden 神樂殿
October	Prefectural rites announcing imminent distribution of Ise amulets to local shrines (Jingū taima hanpu hokoku sai 神宮大麻曆頒布始報告祭)	Kyoto prefectural shrine office
December	Ise amulet and calendar manufacture conclusion rite (Taima koyomi hōsei shūryō sai 大麻曆奉製終了祭)	
February (end)	Ise amulet and calendar distribution conclusion rite (Jingū taima hanpu shūryō hokoku sai 神宮大麻曆頒布終了報告祭)	Kyoto prefectural shrine office
March	Ise amulet and calendar distribution conclusion rite (Jingū taima koyomi hanpu shūryō sai 神宮大麻曆頒布終了祭)	Kaguraden 神樂殿

ship between NAS and the Ise shrines. Article 2 of the NAS Charter (Jinja Honchō Kenshō 神社本庁憲章) proclaims, “We venerate the Ise shrines as the holiest of holies (*honsō* 本宗), and with sincerity honour them.” Ise is the most important by far of the NAS shrines.⁹ That NAS assumes charge of the distribution of amulets of Ise but of no other shrine is the best evidence of Ise’s privileged place in the NAS scheme of things. There is other evidence besides. For example, NAS appoints, dismisses, promotes, and demotes priests at all Shinto shrines under its umbrella, but it relinquishes that authority over the most senior Ise priests, the *saishu* 祭主 and *daigūji* 大宮司. These appointments are entrusted to the emperor himself. They are made “according to imperial discretion,” and the incumbents are members of the imperial family.¹⁰ It goes without saying that the reason why NAS entrusts these Ise appointments to the emperor, why NAS reveres the Ise shrines as the holiest of holies and why it distributes Ise amulets is that Ise is the site that alone makes sense of the sacred land of Japan, and the imperial myth about which it must be constructed.

Amulets and their Distribution

What then of the material objects known as Ise amulets in which NAS invests such significance? What exactly are they? How are they manufactured, and distributed?

Ise amulets are by no means a modern invention; they have a long history. In early modern Japan (1600–1867), itinerant Ise priests known as *onshi* 御師 criss-crossed Japan distributing them to clients in all corners of the realm (MATSUMOTO 2004, 238).¹¹ These amulets, as well as Ise calendars (Ise *koyomi* 伊勢曆), played a vital part in connecting early modern Japanese to the Ise shrines. Indeed, it has been estimated—at least by NAS experts—that 90 percent of all early modern Japanese households possessed an Ise amulet. In early modern Japan, they were typically known as *oharai* お祓 and were understood to be efficacious in warding off evil, as the name suggests. In the modern period (1868–1945), Ise amulets were restyled *jingū taima*, and their purpose was to spread belief in Amaterasu as imperial ancestor; their amuletic powers were accord-

9. NAS regards Yasukuni as being of only slightly less importance than Ise, but for complex reasons Yasukuni does not in fact belong to NAS. On this point, see BREEN and TEEUWEN 2010, Chapter 6.

10. At the time of writing, the *saishu* is Ikeda Atsuko 池田厚子, the emperor’s older sister. She serves also as the NAS *sōsai* or president. The *daigūji* is Takatsukasa Naotake 鷹司尚武, the emperor’s nephew.

11. The early modern dissemination of Ise amulets is presumed to explain the proliferation of household kami altars (*kamidana* 神棚), which were unknown in previous periods of Japanese history.

ingly abandoned.¹² Two interpretations of these new Ise amulets quickly gained currency. One held that they were symbols (*onjirushi* 御璽) of the Sun Goddess and her unsurpassed virtue (*shintoku* 神徳); the other that amulets were *himorogi* 神籬, namely the most sacred of material objects since, in them, the Sun Goddess was a real presence.

These contrary positions were established in the Meiji period, and they are current today. In 2003, there was a major debate on Ise amulets at NAS headquarters in Tokyo, where arguments in favor of both positions were traded. The symbol theory won through; this at least was the conclusion reached by two observers of the debate, Toki Jun 土岐淳 and Fujimoto Yorio 藤本頼生. This appears perhaps to have established the orthodox NAS position but, as Toki and Fujimoto explain, matters are more complex. “[The conclusion reached here] reflects profoundly the influence of the prewar understanding [of Shinto] as nonreligious” (TOKI and FUJIMOTO 2004, 278).¹³ In other words, they understood that participants were refusing to allow the *himorogi* theory not on theological grounds but for the reason that it amounts to a “religious” interpretation which fits ill with the NAS understanding of Shinto as “nonreligious.”

Any deeper understanding of Ise amulets demands attention be paid to the processes of production (*hōsei* 奉製) and distribution (*hanpu* 頒布). TABLE 2 sets out the key stages in the production cycle, each of which is marked with ritual performances. Production is launched in January when a priest emerges from confinement and purification to kneel before the first amulet of the year, and solemnly place a seal upon it. Manufacture proper starts in April with the tree felling rite (*kirihajime sai* 伐始祭), which takes place near Uji Bridge 宇治橋 on the Maruyama ritual ground (丸山齋場). In the presence of some eighty Ise priests, and following prayers to the Sun Goddess, a craftsman faces the direction of Mt. Kamiji 神路山 and swings a sacred axe three times. Mountain cedar from Mt. Kamiji is integral to all Ise amulets, regardless of their shape and size. A sliver of cedar, suggestively styled *gyoshin* 御真 (sacred core), is affixed to or embedded in a thin flat wooden tablet in most varieties of amulet. In the “economy” version of the Ise amulet, commonly known as *kenbarai* 劍祓 after its pointed, sword-head shape, the cedar sliver is inserted directly into a fold of paper (ILLUSTRATION 1).

From May through September, weekly rites of amulet purification (*taima shubatsu shiki* 大麻修祓式) are held in the storehouse attached to Ise’s inner shrine (*hōan sho* 奉安所). On each occasion, a priest emerges from a night of ritual confinement and purification, places offerings of food and wine before the amu-

12. On the changing meaning of Ise amulets, see TOKI and FUJIMOTO 2004. In popular usage, the name *kenbarai* is still often retained. See, for example, the caption to ILLUSTRATION 1.

13. The idea of Shinto as a non-religion was established in Meiji Japan. For a neat discussion of the dynamic process and the implications, see NITTA 2000.



ILLUSTRATION 1. Two varieties of *jingū taima*: *kenbarai* 劍祓 on the left and *kakubarai* 角祓 on the right.

lets, and recites a prayer. The prayer contains this short plea to Amaterasu, the Sun Goddess: “May the most sacred spirit of the Sun Goddess take up residence in this amulet...” (JINJA HONCHŌ 1998, 59–60). Priests and others involved in the manufacturing process then strike their palms together Ise-style eight times. The rite concludes with the priest’s wand passing over the amulets and the amulet workers themselves.

NAS instructions for the handling of the amulets in the home, their ultimate destination, are also suggestive.¹⁴ Set the amulet on an altar, “the heart of the family.... Place first fruits for the Ise kami on a small table, a tray or bowl, or silk cloth.” At all times, “cleanliness is of the essence.” With hearts of purity, the entire family shall welcome the New Year, and worship not only the local shrine kami (*ujigami sama* 氏神様) but the Ise kami too (*Oise sama* お伊勢様). Veneration is not, however, a once-yearly undertaking. It is to be performed daily:

Offerings: Every morning, rice, salt, and water are to be offered and worship performed. On each occasion be sure to offer rice wine, the first fruits and other gifts [of food], too. Later, consume these items with feelings of gratitude.

Veneration: The [etiquette] is the same as at a shrine:

2 bows (bow deeply twice)

2 hand claps (strike hands together twice)

1 bow (bow deeply once)

(JINJA HONCHŌ 1998, 68–9)

Notwithstanding the official NAS interpretation of the amulets as “symbols,” purification rites in Ise and the rites demanded for home veneration suggest, indeed, the very different understanding that the Sun Goddess is present in every one of them.

What is the dynamic process by which these amulets, manufactured annually in their millions, are transferred from Ise to home altars? Kyoto can serve here as a case study. It can be seen in TABLE 2 that there takes place every September in the Kagura Hall 神楽殿 of the Ise shrine a solemn rite of transfer known as *jingū taima koyomi hanpu hajime sai* 神宮大麻曆頒布始祭 (JINJA HONCHŌ 1998, 68–9). This involves the Ise chief priest (*daigūji*) physically transferring the amulets to the NAS director (*tōri* 統理).¹⁵ The director then hands the quotas for the year to the chief of the Kyoto prefectural shrine office and the chiefs of all the prefectural shrine offices. The Kyoto chief transports them back to the Kyoto offices where, in October, before an assembly of shrine priests, there is a local rite of transfer.

The Kyoto shrine office has charge of 1,579 shrines, scattered over nine sepa-

14. Amulets have a ritual lifetime of one year, and every New Year they are taken to the local shrine to be ritually burned; new amulets are purchased for the new calendar year.

15. At the time of writing the NAS director is Kuni Kuniaki 久邇邦昭, cousin to the present emperor and former Ise chief priest.



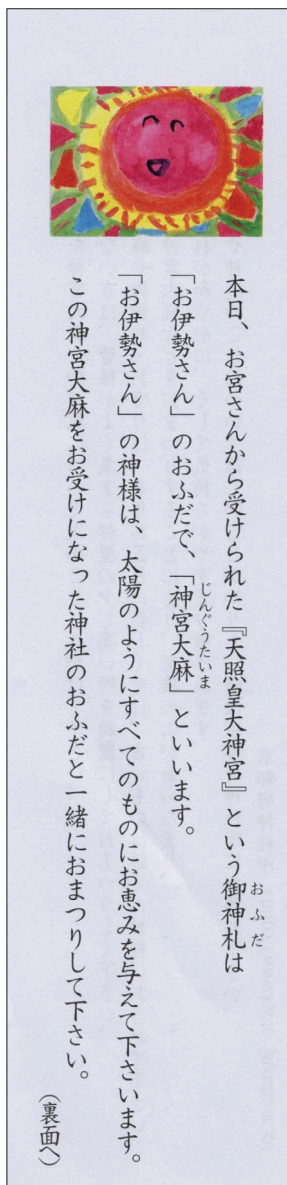
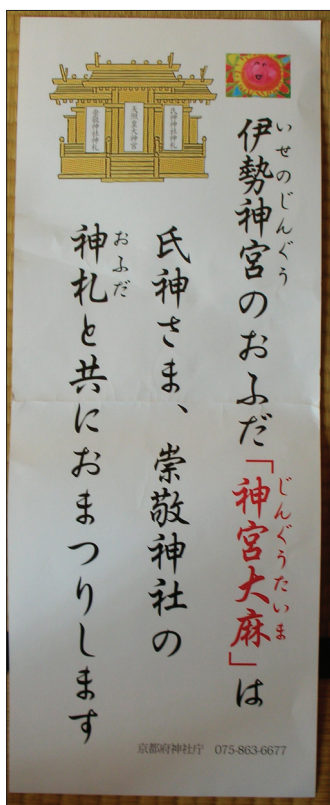
ILLUSTRATION 2. A simplified kami altar made of balsa wood.



ILLUSTRATION 3. Amaterasu, the Sun Goddess: the winning entry in the primary school painting competition sponsored by Kyoto *jinjachō*.

ILLUSTRATION 5. The text advises that Amaterasu, sun-like, bestows blessings on us all.

ILLUSTRATION 4. A poster recommending the veneration of the Ise amulet at the center of the family altar.



rate “shrine districts.” Each district has its own “office,” tasked specifically with amulet distribution. In the past few years, amulet sales in Kyoto appear to have enjoyed a modest but steady growth. Statistics for 2008 show Kyoto shipped 105,159 amulets in that year, an increase of 320 on 2007 (HONSŌ HŌSANKA 2009, 95), but in 2009 they excelled themselves and increased distribution by a further 4,520 amulets (*Jinja Shinpō* 15 March 2010, 1).¹⁶ This attests above all to tireless work by shrine priests and shrine committee members visiting homes to sell amulets. The Kyoto shrine office has also learned from strategies deployed successfully elsewhere in Japan. Kyoto priests, for example, distribute free of charge “simplified household altars” (*kan’i kamidana* 簡易神棚).¹⁷ NAS surveys have revealed a reluctance on the part of some to purchase amulets because they have nowhere to place them. Simple but dignified balsa wood altars provide a workable solution. Kyoto also promotes the “hard sell” at shrines. Visitors whose initial intention is to purchase a local shrine amulet are invited to buy an Ise amulet too, and those who do so are then strongly encouraged to purchase extra amulets to send to sons, daughters, and other relatives no longer living at home.

The Kyoto Shrine office has also developed a striking strategy of its own. It had the idea of sponsoring a children’s painting competition, and from the many entries it selected an image of the sun, which it uses now as a logo in its Ise amulet distribution campaign. ILLUSTRATION 3 was the winning entry. It won because, better than any other, it was believed to reflect “the warm, bright, and kindly face of Amaterasu and her virtues.”

The logo is now deployed in various places. ILLUSTRATION 4 shows a poster emblazoned with the logo; its purpose is to encourage people to worship Ise amulets alongside the amulets from their local shrine. ILLUSTRATION 5 shows the logo on an oblong slip of paper handed to all who buy local and Ise amulets together. The text beneath the logo explains the meaning of the Ise amulet, and its explanation is of considerable interest. It refers to Amaterasu as a kami who, “like the sun, bestows her blessings on all things.” Venerating the “Sun-like Amaterasu of the Ise shrines,” it says, “will ensure that the heart of the family is renewed, and that each heart is rendered loving; feelings of peace and healing will be restored to the family.” What is interesting is that the Kyoto shrine office makes no connection here between the Sun Goddess and the emperor, the imperial myth or the sacred land of Japan. In this reading—which has a distinctly early modern resonance—the Sun Goddess is a warm, bright, and kindly kami,

16. The largest number of amulets distributed anywhere in Japan was Hokkaido, followed by Aichi, Niigata, and Tokyo. Tokyo had the greatest increase in sales when compared to the previous year, 2008, followed by Kyoto, Kanagawa, and Hokkaido.

17. For an example of such an altar, see ILLUSTRATION 2.

who bestows her blessings on all humankind, but especially on the family. In its pamphlet *Daijesuto Mori* (だいじえすと社), Kyoto shrine office reinforces this reading. Here Amaterasu is cast as the “most noble of the kami in the Japanese myths, who imparts her dynamic strength to all other kami,” but again there is no reference to Amaterasu’s imperial connections (KYŌTOFU JINJACHŌ 2007, 3).

It would be rash to propose that this strategy explains the increasing sales of Ise amulets in Kyoto, but it is easy to see that this Amaterasu has considerably greater appeal for twenty-first century Japanese than the one limited to proclaiming the imperial myth and the imperial values of pre war Japan.¹⁸

Resistance and Resentment

NAS, as was pointed out above, invigorated the Ise amulet system four years ago with its “model district” innovation. Designated districts in the jurisdiction of the prefectural Shrine offices were tasked to double their efforts, and develop new strategies to achieve the target distribution of ten million amulets to ten million households. NAS regards this initiative as being, on the whole, successful. As a spokesman said, it has “put the brakes on what was an eleven-year sequence of falling sales” (*Jinja Shinpō* 12 March 2007). Certainly, if we are to judge from the statistics that NAS issues every year, there would seem to be sound reason for optimism. NAS, however, is anything but optimistic; it betrays signs rather of a sense of doom. There seem to be several reasons for this.

First of all, there are the results of NAS’s own 2007 shrine survey, *Jinja ni kansuru ishiki chōsa* 神社に関する意識調査. In response to the question “Does your family possess an Ise amulet?” 81 percent of people said they did not purchase amulets, or did not know whether they did. This came in the wake of a 2005 NAS survey on the Ise shrines, styled *Ise jingū ni kansuru ishiki chōsa* 伊勢神宮に関する意識調査 that puts the problem into sharper perspective. One thing this survey revealed was that 94 percent of twenty-year-olds did not have, or did not know they had, an Ise amulet. This is perhaps not so surprising a statistic, but it should be noted that the problem of engaging the younger generation is taken extremely seriously. Influential men in NAS are persuaded that the problem is exacerbated by the homophone *taima*, which also means marijuana. One priest in Toyama 富山 found that initial interest among the young gave way to dismay on learning the *taima* on offer could not be smoked (ZENTAI TŌGI 2004, 156). The problem is not confined to Toyama; the narcotic resonance of *taima* was deemed sufficiently serious to merit discussion at the NAS delegates’

18. For divergent views on whether Amaterasu might legitimately be understood as a nature kami, see the contributions of Sano 佐野 and Hirakawa 平川 to the Ise amulet debates at NAS headquarters in 2003 (ZENTAI TŌGI 2004, 154–55 and 160–61).

conference in May 2009.¹⁹ Of more enduring concern to NAS is the fact that the older generation are not obviously more receptive. Of the respondents in their sixties surveyed by NAS, only 24 percent were aware of ever having purchased an amulet. When asked why they did not make a purchase, some 60 percent replied either that they felt no need, or that they had never bought one before and did not see why they should buy one now. These statistics seem to suggest that, while older generations may “return to religion,” they do not discover a greater interest in the Ise amulets.

There is another, more sensitive side to the Ise amulet question, and that is the reliability of NAS statistics. There seems to be a widespread understanding, at least among priests on the ground, that they do not speak the truth. For example, the 8,995,605 sales for 2009 may represent the number of amulets shipped to shrine offices and from there to local shrines, but it is most probably not the number to have found their way into Japanese homes. This author (A) had the following exchange with a senior shrine priest (P) who serves at a famous shrine in central Japan and in the prefectural shrine office. He spoke on condition of anonymity.

A: NAS seems poised to reach its mark of ten million sales, so what is the explanation for the sense of crisis that seems to grip NAS officials and shrine priests?

P: NAS statistics are simply not to be credited. I should not really say this, but it is the truth. 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, which means that NAS statistics are all “padded.”²⁰

A: You mean shrine priests hang on to amulets they are unable to sell to parishioners, rather than returning them to the local shrine office for a refund?

P: Exactly. It is a question of their pride.... Those statistics are unbelievable because priests hoard the amulets. No doubt the degree of hoarding that goes on differs from prefecture to prefecture, but priests everywhere are hoarding.

The priest added, “Anyway, we live in an age where owning an Ise amulet and having faith in the Ise kami no longer connect. I personally am not persuaded of the value of disseminating amulets in order to spread faith in Ise.” This senior priest questions the value of the entire amulet campaign, but reluctantly plays his part. NAS is keenly aware of the existence of recalcitrant priests; they do much to compound the sense of crisis. Indeed, the article by Kuroiwa introduced at the

19. As the Asahi newspaper reported, delegate Kondō 近藤 tabled a motion proposing the government be asked to change the name of its narcotics law from *Taima torishimari hō* 大麻取り締まり法 to *Marihuana torishimari hō* マリファナ取り締まり法 (*Asahi Shinbun*, 6 June 2009).

20. The word used both here and in the next citation for “hoarding” was *kakaeru* 抱える.

start of this article was directed precisely at such men. Kuroiwa began his article as follows:

There are growing numbers of priests who do not understand the significance of distributing Ise amulets. I try and take on board their position, and I get the sense that they feel their own shrines are facing extreme difficulties. They want to know why they should they expend efforts on some other shrine. I appreciate the difficulties shrine priests are experiencing but, surely, when it comes to distributing Ise amulets an attitude of devotion and veneration [towards Ise] that transcends personal gain or loss is in order? (KUROIWA 2008, 2)

It is by no means clear that such an exhortation would carry weight with priests who serve, say, at the two thousand or so Shinmei 神明 shrines. NAS appears to have identified Shinmei shrine priests as a particular source of resistance. What distinguishes these shrines is that they all worship Amaterasu, the Sun Goddess. Why, ask Shinmei shrine priests, should they have to sell amulets from Ise if the amulets they already sell are those of Amaterasu? Fujimoto Yorio's presentation at the 2004 NAS conference on Ise amulets (Jingū Taima ni Kansuru Kenkyūkai 神宮大麻に関する研究会) focused precisely on this problem. His response to Shinmei resistance was curt: "Which is the center and which the periphery?... Even if the kami they worship is the same [as the Ise kami], it is vital that they first purchase amulets from the Ise kami... [since this kami] is venerated as the guardian kami for all Japanese" (FUJIMOTO 2005, 525–36). This, of course, is rather less an argument than an emotional dismissal of a genuine problem faced by Shinmei priests.

It is impossible to say how widespread priestly resistance is to the NAS amulet campaign. The uncertainty is due entirely to the fact that NAS has never conducted any opinion surveys of its priests. As a result, it has no substantial idea of what priests think of NAS and its several strategies. There is no knowing, then, whether the following statement by a priest at a famous Hachiman 八幡 shrine in central Japan is typical or atypical:

NAS is forcing us to sell Ise amulets and make contributions for the rebuilding of the Ise shrines [in 2013], and our dissatisfaction is deepening. Many shrines charged with distributing a fixed number of amulets find themselves unable to sell them on, and so end up hoarding them. Hoarding Ise amulets means we incur a significant financial loss. Our shrine is in one of the prefectural Shrine office's "model districts." This means we are required to double our efforts; and we have had our Ise amulet quota compulsorily increased. This comes at a time when my own shrine is dilapidated and desperately in need of repairs. I am sick of the attitude of some of the shrine priests around here; they are worse than bureaucrats or politicians.²¹

21. Private communication by email, 2 August 2009.

The reasons for this priest's frustrations are ideological, and they are economic. He has no real interest in the Ise shrines; he is concerned uniquely with his local shrine, its kami and its community. At the same time, he resents shouldering the financial loss of those extra amulets he must buy, but which shame prevents him from returning to the shrine office for a refund. There is a wider cause for resentment here. NAS solicits annual contributions, known as *futankin* 負担金, from all its shrines depending on the class of shrine and the number and rank of its priests. NAS offers no financial help in return; there is, for example, no redistribution of funds from wealthy shrines to the impoverished. Local shrine contributions, rather, pay the wages of the NAS bureaucracy and the prefectural shrine offices. This reality prompted the Hachiman priest to say: "It is the opinion of a majority of those at the chief priests meetings (*gūji kaigi* 宮司会議) I attend, that NAS does not exist for the benefit of shrines; shrines rather are there to benefit NAS. This is my personal view as well."²² It is clear, in brief, that NAS is keenly aware of priestly resistance to the amulet campaign, and that resistance serves to exacerbate the sense of crisis that seems to grip the organization.

Conclusion

The lead article in the April 2009 edition of the NAS monthly *Gekkan Wakaki* was entitled: "Time for renewed vigor in our support-Ise activities!" The article then went on to explain: "The activity of promoting Ise is the most important of the tasks (*saijūyō kadai* 最重要課題) undertaken by NAS. The task comprises three pillars: 1. the distribution of Ise amulets and calendars; 2. promotion of Ise pilgrimages; and 3. support for the rebuilding of the Ise shrines [in 2013]."²³ This is further proof, if any were needed, of the fact that Ise amulet sales are a life and death issue for the Shinto establishment. If they are not sold, and venerated, there will be no resurrection of the sacred land of Japan in our day, which Kuroiwa promised the readers of his *Jinja Shinpō* article. Amulets are, indeed, the material objects that shed the brightest light on twenty-first century Shinto.

The purpose here is not to attack NAS for seeking to resurrect in the present a form of society inspired by that of prewar Japan, but rather to explore the subject of Shinto in the present, which has to date received far too little academic attention.²⁴

22. One striking manifestation of shrine priests' general frustration with NAS and its ways can be seen in recent cases of shrines severing their links with NAS. For a discussion of some recent high profile cases, see BREEN 2009.

23. The uncredited piece is styled *Honsō hōsan katsudō ni sara naru funki o* 本宗奉賛活動に更なる奮起を, *Gekkan Wakaki* 718, 1 April 2009.

24. Notable exceptions, of course, are the writings of John Nelson and Helen Hardacre. For the former, see especially NELSON 2000 and for the latter, HARDACRE 1989. See also BREEN and TEEUWEN 2010.

However, Japanese society as a whole, and shrines in particular, are not served well by the NAS obsession with Ise, the imperial myth and the imperial institution. A few examples will serve to make the point. NAS has very little interest in the sort of issues that have occupied other religious organizations in recent years. The environment is one such issue. Many Westerners have the impression that Shinto is a religion of nature and the environment, and it is of course easy enough to see why. Shrines nestle invariably against wooded groves; their kami are sometimes understood to reside in natural phenomena like forests and mountains.²⁵ It might be thought that NAS would seize the initiative, then, and speak up on issues of the environment. This has not been the case, however. Apart from a small number of very recent exceptions, NAS maintains silence. The soaring suicide rate, a range of human rights problems, issues of “life ethics” such as brain death and organ transplants, are only now beginning to be given space in the pages of *Jinja Shinpō*. It is abundantly clear that for NAS these remain issues of very definitely secondary importance (BREEN and TEEUWEN 2010, Chapter 6).

What then of the cost to shrines and their priests of the NAS obsession with the imperial myth? That cost is to be seen in NAS’s indifference to local needs, which can be very great. The shrine world is in a state of crisis; at least, such is the perception of the journalist Yamamura Akiyoshi. Yamamura, whose sense of crisis is quite unrelated to sales of Ise amulets, crossed Japan interviewing local shrine priests. Everywhere he heard of the breakdown in relations between shrines and their (aging) parishioners, of the aging of priests and the absence of successors, of the impact of the economic turndown and “above all, the fact that the average Japanese has no knowledge of Japanese kami” (YAMAMURA 2009, 115). Yamamura paints a possibly exaggerated picture of destitute shrines, and impoverished priests in every corner of the land. He interviewed one priest who was single handedly responsible for sixty rural shrines, such was the paucity of priests in his area (YAMAMURA 2009, 116). Yamamura also reports some stirring tales of priests who have used their ingenuity to buck the trend, reigniting local interest in their shrines and festivals. But NAS is conspicuous by its complete absence from Yamamura’s article. The image he conveys is one of shrines entirely alone. Indeed, the chief priest of one shrine in Yamagata 山形, the Shishiguchi myōjin 獅子口明神, told Yamamura of a particular crisis his shrine faced, adding “The only support we had was from the local Communist party” (YAMAMURA 2009, 124).

The question arises as to the extent to which these and other shrines need NAS. What is abundantly clear, however, is that without shrines NAS has no meaning, and no future. NAS sees Shinto’s fortunes depending uniquely on the success or failure of its Ise amulet campaign, but they may well be wrong. The future of Shinto as we know it today is surely more dependent on whether NAS proves

25. For a discussion of Shinto and environmental issues, see BREEN forthcoming.

capable of adjusting its sights, identifying with the interests of local shrines, and coming to the assistance of their priests and parishioners.

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