

John K. NELSON, *Enduring Identities: The Guise of Shinto in Contemporary Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000. 336 pp. \$60.00 cloth, ISBN 0-8248-2120-3. \$29.95 paper, ISBN 0-8248-2259-5.

ONE OF ANTHROPOLOGY'S most significant contributions to religious studies was a shift away from the preoccupation with written texts to focus more squarely on the ways people actually practiced religion in their daily lives. This shift in focus occurred largely by default, as many of the societies anthropologists traditionally studied had no written texts, their religious beliefs being embodied in ritual and oral tradition. The insights it generated, however, have undoubtedly enhanced even the study of the so-called "great religions,"

as an emphasis on scriptures and other authoritative documentation risks accepting the prescriptive ideals of a privileged literary elite as representative of everyday behavior among the popular majority.

Recognizing the discrepancy between ideal and actual behavior is particularly relevant in the case of Japan, a society in which the superficial appearance of uniformity often masks a wide range of innovative departures. Several recent works have focused on Japanese religion as it is actually lived and practiced, demonstrating how people bend established symbols and institutions to their own particular interests. Notable examples include Ian Reader and George J. Tanabe's *Practically Religious: Worldly Benefits and the Common Religion of Japan* (1998), and Karen Smyers's *The Fox and the Jewel: Shared and Private Meanings in Contemporary Inari Worship* (1999). John K. Nelson's most recent work on Shinto is an admirable addition to this growing body of scholarship.

In a sense, this work is an extension of Nelson's earlier book, *A Year in the Life of a Shinto Shrine*, which sought to elucidate the annual round of ritual activity performed at Suwa Shrine in Nagasaki. This time, however, the author adopts a more analytical approach to the strategies employed by various actors and interest groups linked with Kamigamo Jinja, which is located in northern Kyoto and ranks second only to the Grand Shrine at Ise in terms of influence and prestige. Key to the analysis is the question of how Shinto has maintained its relevance and vitality even in a rapidly changing post-industrial society. The answer is basically twofold: Shinto endures because (1) it is fundamental to defining and perpetuating a sense of Japanese cultural identity, and (2) it is singularly unfettered by "centralized dogma, charismatic leaders, and sacred texts" (11). In other words, Shinto rituals and symbolism are sufficiently malleable to accommodate a varied range of meanings, while at the same time conferring the rootedness and legitimacy of time-honored tradition.

As the subtitle indicates, "guise" represents a central concept, referring here to the various roles and strategies that contemporary Shinto sustains. The emphasis throughout the book is on individual creativity in bending tradition, structure, and cultural heritage to one's own ends, and ritual is clearly the principal medium for doing so. The opening chapter introduces a seeming contradiction—the fact that, in Japanese society, the use of highly advanced technology coexists with religious practices bordering on superstition. This is partly resolved by the author's suggestion that Shinto be seen not as a religion so much as a celebration of cultural identity.

The second chapter describes the physical layout of the shrine. It also delineates the "proper" way to conduct a visit to the shrine, according to its priests. It is important to note, however, that the "proper" way is neither formally prescribed nor enforced. Visitors are therefore free to adapt the experience to their own specific needs and preferences—to personalize it, in other words. Indeed, exit interviews conducted by the author reveal a wide variety of purposes among visitors to the shrine. Typically they are drawn not by purely religious inclinations, but by an appreciation of nature combined with what Nelson refers to as "heritage aesthetics"—the appeal of culturally evocative, nostalgia-laden symbols. Since the form and meaning of the visit are not

restrictively imposed, the shrine allows for subjective personalized experience, thereby offering an escape from the rigid structure of daily life. Indeed, tolerance for freedom of expression is fundamental to the shrine's success and longevity.

Nelson then turns to a consideration of the historical, cultural, and geographical factors that render a particular location "sacred." This chapter clearly has cross-cultural implications for exploring symbolism in art and architecture. Sacred buildings "are physical manifestations of ideas" (72), though many of these ideas lie in the pre-conditioned eye of the beholder. An informed analysis of the layout of shrine buildings, for example, reveals graphic allusions to reproductive anatomy, and even the innocuous hollyhock symbol is imbued with sexual imagery. This particular guise, however, is one which the average visitor would quite likely overlook, and perhaps be shocked to discover. Here again, in the absence of strictly prescribed meanings, visitors are free to generate their own interpretations, ones more suited to their needs.

Chapter Four adopts a historical perspective, addressing various attempts to affiliate with the shrine for sociopolitical purposes. More than a simple historical account, the chapter outlines the construction of social memory, referring to the selective appropriation of the past for purposes of the present. The shrine thus becomes a form of social capital—a means of gaining privilege and position, of furthering one's own interests. Here again, the malleability of Shinto ritual accounts for its continuing relevance, as "the staging of ritual performances... can renegotiate 'tradition' just as easily as promote it" (121).

Nelson then brings us back to the present for a look at the Shinto priesthood. More specifically, he highlights the influential role of the head priest, whose managerial abilities can make or break the fortunes of a shrine. Priests must be trained and certified by the *Jinja Honchō*, a national administrative institution that issues strict guidelines for the proper execution of priestly duties. In practice, however, there is substantial room to improvise. Particularly interesting is the case of a former head priest at Kamigamo Jinja who threatened the use of *tatari* (divine retribution) in coercing donations. In general, however, priests are seen to function very much like stereotypic "salarymen," utilizing the managerial techniques employed in major companies. These include a daily morning meeting to begin the working day, a consensus-oriented decision-making process, and institutionalized opportunities for airing grievances and blowing off steam while under the influence of alcohol. Like their company counterparts, young priests labor as subordinates within a hierarchical administrative structure, delaying gratification in hopes of eventual reward.

In a sense, the shrine does constitute a business venture, marketing its services to a public whose tastes and preferences continue to change. This again raises the question: is Shinto in danger of dying out? Nelson thinks not, citing first the enthusiastic patronage of wealthy individuals, who willingly exchange generous donations for symbolic capital. Though the alleged purpose of this generosity is to give thanks for good fortune, the donation itself is conspicu-

ously displayed, and therefore constitutes an act of self-promotion. Also important is a burgeoning interest in Japanese tradition among the public at large. The annual neighborhood festival, for example, is seen as a repository of cultural heritage—a living remnant of the “*real Japan*”—which is now becoming as exotic to the Japanese as to their foreign visitors.

As for understanding the religious activities themselves, one of the most useful and interesting sections is Chapter Six, which offers a step-by-step description of the essential components of a Shinto ritual. Employing a structure suggested by Robert Ellwood, Nelson describes the ritual sequence in terms of four stages. *Purification* prepares the participants to receive the kami, or divine presence. *Presentation* involves beckoning the kami into the society of humans and presenting it with offerings and hospitality. This sets the stage for the third phase, *petition*, which constitutes a request for the kami’s favor. The request is presented in the form of a respectful chant-like prayer called *norito*, relying on the mysterious power of properly uttered words to effect the desired results. The final stage, *participation*, involves not just the attending priests, but other actors as well. *Miko*, or female shrine attendants, perform a solemn dance, again for the kami’s entertainment. Representatives of the community at large step forward to present token offerings—usually a branch of the *sakaki* tree—as a gesture of sincerity. Finally, after the kami has been released back into its realm, the participants withdraw to an adjacent building for a communal meal, where the sanctified offerings of food and saké are consumed. The author suggests that participation itself is more important than the beliefs associated with these ritual activities, as the former constitutes an active assertion of cultural identity.

Having delineated this basic four-stage structure, the subsequent chapter presents a lengthy and detailed description of the various rituals performed at Kamigamo Jinja throughout the year. Though by the author’s own admission such description can be a bit tedious, it nevertheless proves quite useful in understanding the varied meanings that Shinto rituals convey. Perhaps foremost among these meanings is a sense of continuity with the past—a valuable asset in a world afflicted by the insecurities of rapid change.

In the concluding chapter, Nelson reiterates a series of intersecting networks—the “institutional personas” of the shrine. Kamigamo Jinja is first of all “a physical yet culturally constituted place” (244)—a major site of communal identity formation for the Kamo clan and other interest groups. The shrine can also be understood as a purveyor of ritual services for public consumption, thereby addressing widely shared, culturally embedded anxieties relating to the uncertainties of life. Finally, Kamigamo is a vehicle for enhancing social status, either through financial contributions or active participation in its programs and projects.

In the wider scheme of things, the author describes how legitimate social concerns are subsumed under nationalistic interests. Preservation of the environment, for example, is espoused by the Jinja Honchō not as a goal deemed worthy in itself, but as a boon to the national welfare. However, owing to the aforementioned lack of coercive dogma, combined with the ingenuity of individual priests and patrons, the author hints at the potential for a broader

social mission. Shinto represents a fitting advocate for environmental preservation since the natural environment is considered the realm of the kami. Likewise, symbols of restoring vitality could easily be directed toward empowering the underprivileged. In short, Shinto is likely to maintain its relevance through “flexibility, creativity, intelligence, and resources for change and transformation” (248).

The book provides considerable insight into the way Shinto is practiced, both formally and informally, in contemporary Japan. Its depth of historical and ethnographic detail make it highly suitable for a course on East Asian religions. Yet it also addresses broader issues of cultural identity, the construction of social memory, the delineation of sacred space, and the exercise of individual agency within a structured institutional environment, all of which make it equally suitable for cross-cultural comparative purposes.

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