

Ouachita Baptist University

Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita

Scholars Day Conference

Scholars Day 2024

Apr 24th, 4:30 PM - 4:45 PM

The Religious Significance of Ise Grand Shrine

Noah Embrey

Ouachita Baptist University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/scholars_day_conference



Part of the [Other Religion Commons](#)

Embrey, Noah, "The Religious Significance of Ise Grand Shrine" (2024). *Scholars Day Conference*. 1.
https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/scholars_day_conference/2024/oral_presentations_a/1

This Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Carl Goodson Honors Program at Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scholars Day Conference by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita. For more information, please contact mortensona@obu.edu.

Noah Embrey

Dr. Pemberton

Honors OBU Connections

06 November 2023

The Religious Significance of Ise Grand Shrine

The Ise Grand Shrine (Jingu), a sacred space revered by followers of the Shinto faith, is a place of imperial rituals for the Japanese. Located in the Mie Prefecture on Honshu Island, Jingu is along the outskirts of Ise City. The shrine is a worship site for Japan's indigenous religion, Shintoism, and Jingu contains many objects that Shintoists believe are holy. Understanding their religion includes studying their places of worship - *Jinja* - and the rituals that occur at Jingu. Shintoists are very spiritual and active in pursuing their beliefs through rituals. In total, there are 125 *Jinja* at the Ise Grand Shrine ("About Ise Jingu"). There are around 100,000 *Jinjas* worldwide where kami are worshipped, and, a ritual of the religion's pilgrims, the *Jinja* are prayer sites. This research paper will discuss the religious history of Ise, explain the beliefs of Shintoists, explore the rituals performed at the shrines, and explain why the Ise Grand Shrine is a sacred space. Like all religions, the study of scripture is subjected to interpretation, but several resources are used to best reflect the Shinto faith.

Established 2000 years ago, the Ise Grand Shrine is the Shintoist's most holy shrine. It is dedicated to the goddesses and kami of the Shinto religion ("About Ise Jingu"). Their worldview, that the world is charged with sacredness, manifests through the kami and in worshipping them. Shintoists believe the kami are found in nature and in shrines, and that they are a divine energy in the natural world that acts as a life force. Collectively, the kami constitute a "creator" ("Soul of

Japan" 17). A divided creator contradicts a biblical worldview, as the Holy Trinity is one: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one" (Deuteronomy 6:4). Furthermore, Jesus reinforces the Old Testament teaching in Mark 12:29 by referencing Deuteronomy 6:4.

Buddhism does coexist with Shintoism; however, Shintoism's focus is not on the afterlife, but instead on the present ("Soul of Japan" 12). Over time, the coexistence of the beliefs became less distinguishable and led to religious tolerance in Japan (Canon 215). Most families practice Shinto and Buddhist rituals because Shinto rituals are more involved in daily life while Buddhist rituals are more commonly conducted at funerals and ancestral memorials (L. Brown 1).

The formation and spread of the early Shinto religion (which led to the building of the Ise Grand Shrine) is observed within the context of the socioeconomic status and geography of Japan. Spiritual revival is witnessed most throughout history during relief from times of hardship: the Hebrews fleeing Egypt, the Mormons moving west, the persecution of the early Christian church, and also in Shintoism. Furthermore, the beliefs of indigenous religions are usually reflective of their environment: the Aztec's sacrificial practices for blessed harvests in Tenochtitlan, the Native American ghost dance for the purpose of bringing prosperity, and also in Shintoism through the worship of nature. In an agricultural-based society, there is dependence on crop yield, which increases by people working together ("*Jinja Honcho*"). These dependencies - on the environment, weather, and interconnectedness of the society through work - are reflected in the Shinto kami and are the framework of their religion. The dependence on agriculture led Shintoists to enshrine *Toyouke-daijingu* - who is believed to bless the people with abundant harvests - at Ise Jingu in Ise Geku ("Soul of Japan" 42). Enshrinement deems the main place of worship of a kami and signifies their importance in the Shinto faith.

When Ise Jingu was built 2000 years ago, the location was chosen by the princess of the eleventh emperor of Japan. She received a revelation from *Amaterasu-Omikami*, the sun goddess, who was then enshrined at Ise. The two major shrines are Ise Naiku, dedicated to the sun goddess, and Ise Geku. Shintoists believe that *Toyo'uke-daijingu* provides the sun goddess with companionship and sacred food. Shintoists pilgrimage to Ise city to pay homage and worship the goddesses.

Shintoism shares similarities with pantheistic and panentheistic religions, such as Greek mythology, through the origination of the sun goddess ("Soul of Japan" 28). A child of Izanagi-no-kami and Izanami-no-kami, *Amaterasu-Omikami* was one of three venerable kami - comparable to the big three of Greek mythology (Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades). Another similarity between the religions of Shintoism and Hellenism was the presence of hostility between siblings ("Soul of Japan" 30). Susano'o-no-kami, the sun goddess's brother, was associated with the ocean, and after neglecting his responsibilities, *Amaterasu-Omikami* was so ashamed that she secluded herself in a cave. After a time of darkness in the world, the kami gathered and decided to hold a *matsuri* to cheer up the sun goddess using sacred objects such as the holy mirror. Both the *matsuri* and holy mirror have significant importance in Shintoism and are related to the Ise Grand Shrine.

Matsuri are the annual Shinto rituals that express gratitude for the harvest season. Followers of the faith participate with priests in praying for peace and prosperity at *Jinja*, a place of worship, and celebrate to entertain the kami ("Soul of Japan" 24). The prayers of Shintoists also include struggles and gratitude for food. Since the kami inhabit everything on earth, the participants are connected through their beliefs in Shintoism. People are also connected to

nature, and the annual rituals signify unity. The participants are believed to be rejuvenated through the celebration of their deity, as the kami are the divine energy found in all things.

Located in the divine palace of *Amaterasu-Omikami* is another pilgrimage site: the holy mirror (“About Ise Jingu”). The holy mirror is found in the innermost courtyard of Ise Naiku and is the religion’s most sacred object. Pilgrims are not allowed to enter the courtyard, but they instead participate in rituals. When visiting a *Jinja*, purification at the Torii must occur before entering the main sanctuary (“Soul of Japan” 50). The Torii separates the sacred world and the secular world in the Shinto faith, similar to the use of red doors in the Anglican Church (“*Jinja Honcho*”). At the Torii’s purification font, the hands and mouth are washed before entrance. A ladle is used to rinse each hand, and the left hand is used to rinse the mouth with water. After, the left hand is cleansed again before passing through the Torii (where many pause to bow). The process of Shinto purification is similar to Islam’s *Wudu*, along with its purpose: cleansing impurities and preparing the mind for worship. Orthodox Jews also use handwashing stations before eating meals. Handled water pitchers are used in Israel, and the purification processes dedicate time to God for thought and purity. In addition to sacred spaces, rituals are important in both religions.

Across from the divine palace of *Amaterasu-Omikami*, Shikinen Sengu occurs every twenty years on the empty site. The relation of Sengu to religion is observed through rituals. Shintoists have three different groups of rituals: daily and annual rituals, extraordinary rituals, and Sengu (“About Ise Jingu”). The rituals conducted at Jingu are Imperial rituals, and Sengu also occurs at Ise Geku. Sengu for Ise Naiku includes the cutting of trees for the new building, rebuilding the shrine, and the transportation of the holy mirror (“Soul of Japan” 46). The process takes eight years, and Sengu is the most sacred ritual. Beginning in 690, Sengu has maintained

the architectural heritage that comprises Shinto's sacred spaces ("Soul of Japan" 48). The technical skills are passed from generation to generation, and the use of wood expresses the importance of ancestors to Shintoists. While stone lasts longer, wooden shrines can be rebuilt and enable Shintoists to participate in the same rituals that their ancestors performed.

Furthermore, the use of wood and the importance of nature in the Shinto religion is reflected in their buildings. Contrary to other sacred spaces where concrete or stone is used for geometric perfection - such as the pantheon in Rome - the Shinto shrines coincide with nature. Each contains a *honden*, the innermost hall of a shrine, and the *Jinja* can be distinguished by their unique thatched roofs composed of X-shaped *chigi* that appear perpendicular to the *honden*. *Chigi*, of which the tops are cut horizontally, honor the sun goddess and can be found in Ise Naiku. While securing the roof, *chigi* also provide decoration and signify importance in the Shinto faith. Kami are believed to reside in the *honden* that only priests can enter. Furthermore, the *Jinja* are often surrounded by trees to provide rejuvenation to the life force through the kami's divine energy ("Soul of Japan" 24). *Hondens* also show the importance of the wilderness in Shintoism because they are made from wood and dry vegetation. Shintoists believe in the harmony of nature, and therefore, the forests of the Honshu Islands are preserved ("Jinja Honcho"). Sixty-seven percent of Japan is still forested, which contrasts with other countries and reflects the relationship between Japan's environment and religious beliefs ("Jinja Honcho").

Similar to religions such as Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Mormonism, Shintoism has sacred texts: the Engi Shiki, Kojiki, and Nihonshoki (D. Brown). The Engi Shiki was compiled from 907 to 927 and contains the rules of Imperial Shinto rituals. They honor the kami, and in 712, the Kojiki was compiled and includes the tales of the kami ("Jinja Honcho"). *Amaterasu-Omikami*'s holy mirror originates in the tale of Ama-no-Iwato, as it revives her from a time of

despair ("Soul of Japan" 28). In relation to Christianity, the sacred texts in both religions are essential in revealing the nature of a creator and involved in their worship. The Bible is the inspired word of God, and His character is revealed throughout studying Genesis through Revelation. Similarly, Shintoists believe the character of the kami are revealed in their stories. Many of the kami named in the Kojiki and Nihonshoki are enshrined and worshipped at the *Jinja* in Jingu.

In conclusion, the study of Shintoism is required to understand the significance of Jingu. The combination of the sacred objects, sacred texts, pilgrimage, and worship associated with the Ise Grand Shrine (Jingu) testify to its sacredness. Furthermore, the history and rituals of Shintoism that are expressed through the shrines make the Ise Grand Shrine a sacred space. Built 2000 years ago, its preservation is important to Shintoists, and sacred spaces are essential to study to respect other religions. Although the Christian worldview contradicts the idea of kami, Shintoism is a part of Japanese society, and ministering to others requires knowledge of their background. Jesus commands His disciples to “[g]o into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation,” and the study of sacred spaces enables connection to other cultures (Mark 16:15).

Works Cited

“About Ise Jingu.” *Ise Jingu*, www.isejingu.or.jp/en/index.html. Accessed 5 Nov. 2023.

“Soul of Japan,” www.isejingu.or.jp/en/pdf/soul-of-japan.pdf. Accessed 5 Nov. 2023.

Zondervan TNIV Study Bible. Zondervan, 2006.

Canon, Jon. *Secret Language of Sacred Spaces: Decoding Churches, Cathedrals, Temples, Mosques and Other Places of Worship Around the World*. DUNCAN BAIRD Publishers, 2013.

Brown, L. Kieth. “Buddhism and Shintoism.” *University of Pittsburgh*, www.japanpitt.pitt.edu/essays-and-articles/culture/buddhism-and-shint%C5%8D. Accessed 5 Nov. 2023.

“Jinja Honcho - Association of Shinto Shrines.” *JINJA HONCHO - Association of Shinto Shrines* | *About Jinja - Entering a Jinja*, www.Jinjahoncho.or.jp/en/shrines/index.html. Accessed 5 Nov. 2023.

Brown, Delmer. “Jhti - Engi Shiki,” *University of California, Berkeley*, jhti.berkeley.edu/Engi%20shiki.html. Accessed 5 Nov. 2023.