

The Rediscovery of “Sacred Space” in Contemporary Japan: Intrinsic Quality or Discursive Strategy?

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“The sacred” has long constituted one of the core concepts of the academic discipline commonly known as “religious studies,” “study of religion(s)” or “comparative religion.”¹ A hybrid patchwork of theology, philology, history, cultural anthropology and sociology, this discipline is defined by its subject matter—the abstract category “religion,” traditionally imagined as a universal and transhistorical phenomenon—rather than any particular methodological approach (see Capps 1995). Accordingly, it has been argued that scholars of religion have actively contributed to the reification of the categories they have used (Smith 1982; McCutcheon 1997). One of these is the “the sacred,” which is central to most classical theories produced within the context of this discipline: well-known scholars such as Rudolf Otto, Émile Durkheim and Mircea Eliade have devoted much of their work to discussions of “sacredness,” including the “sacred-profane” dichotomy and the subcategories “sacred space” and “sacred time.” Influential though they have been, some of these theories have been criticized for being essentialist, ethnocentric and/or ahistorical. Consequently, the notion of “the sacred” has a problematic status as an analytical category: after all, it is notoriously difficult (if not impossible) to conceptualize, quantify, or scientifically measure “sacredness.”

In recent years, however, the category has seen a bit of a revival. As the “religion-secular” dichotomy is increasingly problematized (e.g., Casanova 1994; Fitzgerald 2007), the notion of “sacredness”—no longer conceptualized as an intrinsic quality of certain places, objects and persons, but rather as a cognitively or socially produced category—has been reintroduced as a viable alternative by some scholars (e.g., Anttonen 2000; Lynch 2012). In addition, as the social sciences and humanities are experiencing a “spatial turn” (Warf and Arias 2009), spatial approaches to religion are resurfacing, leading to a new interest in the concept of “sacred space” on the part of scholars as well as religious actors (e.g., Bergmann et al. 2009; Knott 2005a, 2005b; Tweed 2006).

In this paper, I will examine the notion of “sacred space,” and look at ways in which it is reemployed in contemporary Japanese academic discourse as well as in popular practices. I

¹ The lack of a single term for the discipline reflects its inherent ambivalence; the diversity of labels used to address the discipline points to the diversity of normative positions regarding the nature of “religion,” and how it ought to be studied. In Japanese, the discipline is usually referred to as *shūkyōgaku* 宗教学.

believe that an examination of Japanese ideas and practices pertaining to “sacred space” can shed some new light on the concept, and offer an interesting comparative perspective. It may be argued that “the sacred”—both as an abstract academic construct and as a discursively and spatially produced social reality—is an important category in contemporary Japan, not only because it is related to inherently ideological notions of the nation and its territory, but also because so-called “sacred places” feature prominently in the cultural imagination. An exploration of notions of “sacred space” in Japan is interesting, therefore, for at least two reasons. First, Japanese scholars have found creative, at times provocative ways to adopt and adapt theories developed by European scholars, and reappropriate them in accordance with their own epistemologies. An examination of their work can show us the possible ideological implications an apparently “spiritual,” apolitical concept such as “sacred space” can have. Second, reports of religious decline notwithstanding, contemporary Japanese society is characterized by various processes of sacralization, ranging from attempts by conservative lobby groups and politicians to reintroduce sacred symbols and rituals into the public sphere to popular (re)constructions of “sacred places” that offer spiritual power to visitors. An examination of these processes can help us develop our understanding of ways in which “sacredness” is produced.

The paper consists of three parts. I will start by discussing classical and contemporary theoretical approaches to “the sacred.” I will give a brief overview of the intellectual heritage by which contemporary discussions are informed, and introduce some of the main points of critique. In particular, I will examine Eliade’s theory of “sacred space,” which not only has exercised profound influence on the development of “religious studies” in Western academia, but which also has been embraced and appropriated by a group of Japanese scholars. I will then move on to discuss some of the ways in which the categories “sacred place” and “sacred space” have been employed in Japanese academic discourse. I will argue that some of the work produced under the banner of *shūkyōgaku* in Japan consists of nihonjinron 日本人論-style reifications of an alleged transhistorical “Japanese spirituality,” often placed in binary opposition to supposedly “Western” religious worldviews. Classical Orientalist East-West dichotomies are reproduced in the work of some Japanese scholars of religion, who assert that Eastern/Japanese spirituality is characterized by the intuitive appreciation of the intrinsic sacred qualities of certain places in nature. In this paper, I will discuss the works of three representatives of this current of thought: Umehara Takeshi, Yamaori Tetsuo and Kamata Tōji. Discussing some of their work, I hope to show that notions of “spiritual matters” are not politically neutral; on the contrary, they are embedded within a larger discourse on national identity.

Finally, in the third part of this paper, I will examine some of the ways in which notions of “sacred space” influence, and draw upon, popular devotional practices. In particular, I will look at the recent trend to redefine certain worship places as “powerspots,” said to contain a strong spiritual energy, which have attracted large numbers of visitors in recent years. I will describe this trend, ask who are the main actors involved, and address the question as to how the recent popularity of so-called “powerspots” relates to other processes of sacralization taking place in

Japanese society today. Thus, I hope to show that the category “sacred space” continues to be relevant for understanding contemporary Japanese discursive and institutional practices.

“The Sacred”: Foundational Theories

In a recent discussion of the role of “the sacred” in the contemporary world, Gordon Lynch argued that the term “is still widely used today without clear theoretical underpinnings. Indeed, in much academic and popular usage, the ‘sacred’ is often treated as a simple synonym for religion” (Lynch 2012: 9). While it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss different uses of the term “religion,”² it is important to note that not all aspects of religion are necessarily sacred (e.g., institutional politics and regulations), nor are all sacred symbols or places necessarily religious (e.g., national flags and monuments). Accordingly, even though the two are often confused, the concepts “sacred” and “religious” do not completely overlap.

But what is it, then, that constitutes sacredness? According to Lynch, theories of the sacred can be divided into two types, which he calls “ontological” and “cultural sociological” (Lynch 2012: 10). The former are exemplified by the work of Rudolf Otto, in particular his well-known text *Das Heilige* (The Idea of the Holy) from 1917, in which he argues that sacredness (or holiness) is “an a priori category, ... a feeling of awe and mystery, an experience of something ‘wholly other’” (Morris 1987: 142; cf. Otto 1999 [1917]). This feeling is fundamentally non-rational and pre-discursive, and can only be known experientially (and not by everybody); it is brought about by an external object, the numinous or divine, to which the individual subject reacts. In other words, according to this view, sacredness is an intrinsic, sui generis quality, exclusively accessible to those who are capable of experiencing it (and willing to do so).

The most famous sociological interpretation of “the sacred” is probably the classical theory of Émile Durkheim, as outlined in his 1912 work *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (The Elementary Forms of [the] Religious Life) (2001). Like Otto, Durkheim considered the “sacred” to be an essential aspect of religion, which he defined as “a unified set of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite one single moral community” (quoted in Morris 1987: 115). Unlike Otto, however, he did not advocate the theological view that places or objects become sacred through some sort of intrinsic quality; rather, he argued, sacredness is socially produced, and serves to symbolize and legitimize social structures. In principle, then, anything can come to be regarded as sacred, for sacredness is something that is attributed rather than intrinsically present (Morris 1987: 117).

² In recent years, several scholars have criticized essentialist, non-reflexive notions of “religion” as a universally present, transhistorical entity (e.g., McCutcheon 1997; Fitzgerald 2007). Relevant though this critique is, the concept “religion” should not be abandoned from scholarly analysis altogether; while arguably problematic as a universal category, religion does figure prominently in contemporary law, (identity) politics and mass media. As such, it undeniably constitutes a significant presence in today’s world, if only as an “emic” category employed by a variety of institutions and individuals for a variety of purposes (cf. Beyer 2006). For a more in-depth discussion of the concept, and its applicability to modern Japan, see Rots 2013, pp. 41–65.

Durkheim developed the notions of “sacred” and “profane” as foundational, universally valid categories. Placed in binary opposition, “sacred” and “profane” are conceptualized as mutually exclusive; their dichotomy constitutes one of the core themes in Durkheim’s sociology. Sacredness, he stated, does not necessarily equal great power or moral perfection; rather, the sacred is constituted as such through its fundamental otherness vis-à-vis the profane (i.e., the ordinary) (Durkheim 2001 [1912]: 37–41). The realization that sacredness does not always correspond to the good and powerful, but can also be morally ambivalent, forbidden or, indeed, violent, has been of great significance for later theoretical developments (e.g., Douglas 2002 [1966]; Girard 2005 [1972]).

Eliade on “Sacred Space”

Durkheim’s understanding of the sacred-profane dichotomy as the foundational structure of religion (and, by extension, society) has exercised profound influence on later theories of religion. In particular, they were appropriated by Mircea Eliade, who combined Durkheimian dualism with Otto’s notion of “the sacred” as an intrinsic quality that is to be experienced intuitively rather than analyzed intellectually. According to Eliade, the task of the scholar of religion was “deciphering the deep meaning of religious phenomena” by discovering their alleged “essence” (Morris 1987: 177). His theories are controversial, however, and much recent critical scholarship in the field has been concerned with overcoming his ideological and methodological heritage—because of his reification of the historically constructed category “religion” as a universal, transhistorical category (see McCutcheon 1997); because of the lack of sound empirical foundations and historical research supporting his theories; and because of the methodological vagueness and “analytical naivete” of his “mystical” approach (Chidester and Linenthal 1995: 17). Most importantly, perhaps, by saying that religion and the sacred can only be described and understood by using religions’ own methods and vocabulary and not by means of analytical scrutiny, Eliade actively contributed to the discursive naturalization (and, hence, depoliticization) of religion—for “[t]o accept religion in its own terms is really to deny that it has any ideological function” (Morris 1987: 177). Consequently, until today, religion tends to be perceived as something essentially (if ideally) opposed to the realm of politics; likewise, few discussions of so-called “sacred places” take into consideration issues related to (competing) territorial claims, land value, property rights and so on.

As said, Durkheim’s sacred-profane dichotomy was adopted by Eliade, who introduced two subcategories of the sacred: “sacred time” and “sacred space.” “Sacred time” refers to the mythical primordial age; the cosmic time of creation, for which human beings are said to long. “Sacred space” is the other core concept introduced by Eliade. According to him, sacred places can be experienced by human beings, but are never constructed by them: “the place is never chosen by man; it is merely discovered by him; in other words, the sacred place in some way

or another reveals itself to him” (quoted in Cave 2001: 237). Sacred places, in this model, have their own agency; human construction and signifying practices, on the other hand, are hardly acknowledged. Accordingly, Eliade’s theory of sacred space is fundamentally ahistorical, as the following citation illustrates:

In Eliade’s conception, there are several components that make a place a “sacred” place: 1) the place has a quality or experience felt and interpreted to be distinctive and irreducible; 2) the experience is inherent to the place; 3) the experience, therefore, is not subject to human choice; 4) the place and what is done there (the rituals, for instance), are modeled on mythic patterns (on what the gods or culture heroes did in the beginning); and 5) the place is capable of transforming one. [... In sum,] sacred space is that space (or place) that commands excessive, discriminating attention and that orients and transforms a person or group such that their life, or a component of it, is perceived to be meaningful. (Cave 2001: 238)

Thus, in Eliade’s conceptualization of sacred places, there is no place for historical contingencies or sociopolitical configurations. Nor, incidentally, is there much attention to the physical and environmental aspects of the location, as the place is reduced to the “irreducible” spiritual experience it supposedly evokes. According to this model, it is the intrinsic sacred quality of a place that is capable of transforming human beings, instead of the contrary: human beings that are capable of transforming and sacralizing places (let alone de-sacralizing them; cf. Cave 2001: 238, n. 10).

Eliade’s influence on the study of religion has been considerable. Partly thanks to his work, the category of “sacred space” and the derived notion of “sacred places” have been employed widely in religious studies. That does not mean, however, that there has been much scholarly reflection on the various social, historical, ideological and environmental factors implicit in the construction and deconstruction of “sacred places”—the question, in brief, how “sacredness” is constructed and negotiated. Put differently, the terms “sacred space” and “sacred places” have been used widely, but often non-reflexively. While it may be true that “the investigation of spatiality and religion has a long history” (Corrigan 2009: 157), it is equally true that most studies of sacred space produced within the field of religious studies focus on the history and symbolic significance of particular “religious sites,” but do not take into consideration other aspects of spatiality such as landscape construction, spatial practices and tactics, or mental and representational spaces (Knott 2005a: 2; cf. Certeau 1984; Lefebvre 1991 [1974]).³ Likewise, despite the sizeable discourse on “sacred places,” until recently there has been remarkably little critical reflection on ways in which those places are constructed, contested and transformed, let alone on the territorial and identity politics implicit in sacralization processes. Fortunately,

³ For a more in-depth discussion of the potential significance of the spatial theories of Lefebvre and De Certeau for the study of religion and sacred space, taking into consideration more recent theories on religion and space such as those offered by Kim Knott (2005a, 2005b) and Thomas Tweed (2006), see Rots 2013, pp. 66–86.

this seems to be changing; the new interest in topics such as spatial practices, landscape construction, physical embodiment and territory has given rise to a number of studies tentatively (re)exploring issues related to the complex relationships between sacralization, religion, territorial claims, space and place (e.g., Gill 1998; Knott 2005a, 2005b; Smith 2004; Tweed 2006). Drawing on the work of these scholars, I would like to argue for a critical approach that takes into account the fact that places and landscapes are socially and historically constructed, as well as environmentally conditioned. Accordingly, I suggest that “sacred places” are produced and reproduced by means of a variety of discursive and spatial practices, and, as such, are historically contingent and particular rather than transhistorical and intrinsic (cf. Rots 2013).

“Sacred Space” in Japanese Academic Discourse: Umehara Takeshi

Eliade’s theories have exercised significant influence not only on American academic interpretations of religion (Gill 1998: 304), but also on Japanese academic discourse. In particular, as Inken Prohl makes clear, his ideas gave extra legitimacy to the study of “folk religion” and “shamanism” (Prohl 2000: 50, 57). Many of his works have been translated into Japanese, and his conceptual and theoretical contributions continue to define much Japanese scholarly discourse on religion (Prohl 2000: 60–61). In particular, his ideas have been adopted enthusiastically by a somewhat loosely defined group of scholars and authors referred to as “spiritual intellectuals” (*reiseiteki chishikijin* 靈性的知識人) by the prominent sociologist of religion Shimazono Susumu, a term later adopted by others (Shimazono 1996; cf. Prohl 2000). As the term makes clear, these authors—all of them men—share an interest in matters mystical and spiritual; in addition, all of them have written a great number of texts in which they discuss these matters in more or less scholarly fashion, using academic vocabulary (hence the term “intellectual”).

There are some problems with the categorization, however. First, the vague term “intellectual” arguably conceals the fact that most of these authors are not merely well-educated intellectuals, but prominent academics indeed, who are (or were) affiliated with some of Japan’s best-known universities and research institutes. Thus, their writings are normally classified as “scholarship” or “science”—as well as “philosophy,” “religious studies” and “history”—which gives them an air of truth and academic legitimacy. Philosopher and cultural theorist Umehara Takeshi (born 1925), for instance, used to be the director of the International Research Center for Japanese Studies (Nichibunken).⁴

Second, the adjective “spiritual” is even more diffuse, as it is a floating signifier that

⁴ Umehara’s controversial, outspoken views on a number of topics (such as homosexuality and organ transplants) as well as his romantic, arguably nationalistic historical narratives led to some bad international press for Nichibunken in the 1980s and 90s. For an overview of the debate, see Prohl 2000, pp. 98–104. In recent years, Nichibunken seems to have departed from these earlier ideological positions, and become more internationally oriented not only in name but also in practice.

can carry a wide variety of meanings. The term gives the suggestion of a “soft,” innocent topic, covering such things as experiences of the divine, communication with supernatural beings, meditation practices, esoteric ancestry theories and so on. In reality, though, most of the scholars euphemistically referred to as “spiritual” have been actively engaged in academic identity politics. Much of their work is devoted to the discursive differentiation of “the Japanese people” from “the West,” sometimes by means of classical pan-Asian rhetoric, sometimes in more narrowly nationalistic terms. Discursive constructions of “spirituality,” “original” and “essentially Japanese” (or “Eastern”) religious attitudes, a unique national heritage and utopian notions of a future world order (to be established by the Japanese) are all profoundly ideological, and reflect prewar narratives of Japan’s divine election and a fundamental East-West dichotomy (e.g., Rots 2010). Thus, the term “spiritual intellectuals” arguably conceals more than it reveals: while writing about so-called “spiritual” topics, these scholars have actively contributed to postwar ideological (re)constructions of Japanese national identity, and they have done so within the context of Japanese academia.

The aforementioned Umehara Takeshi is probably the best-known and most influential scholar of this group. Although he does not define himself as a *shūkyōgakusha* 宗教学者 (scholar of religion), he has written extensively about what he perceives to be the essence of Japanese religion (or, rather, Japanese religiosity). As Inken Prohl points out, there is an interesting paradox in the work of Umehara (and Yamaori Tetsuo, whose ideas I will discuss shortly): on the one hand, they assert the fundamental difference of “Japanese” religiosity vis-à-vis “the West”; on the other, their work is full of concepts (e.g., “shamanism” [*shāmanizumu* シヤーマニズム], “animism” [*animizumu* アニミズム], and so on) and theories selectively taken from the European scholarly tradition (Prohl 2000: 60–61). In particular, Eliade’s mystical-romantic reification of “sacred places,” and his theories of the possibility of interaction between this world and the other world through intuitive, pre-reflexive experience, have influenced ways in which “Japanese religion” was (and is) conceptualized.

For instance, Umehara argues that the essence of Japanese religiosity and culture can be found in the way of living of the primordial ancestors of the Japanese nation: the people of the prehistorical Jōmon period (*Jōmon jidai* 縄文時代), who supposedly lived in harmonious coexistence with, and worshipped the ancestral spirits dwelling in, the forest (and, by extension, nature as a whole). He calls this essence “animism,” which he describes as “the thought that says animals, plants and even inorganic things have a spirit that is connected to humans; and that, through this spirit, all living things can live. ... [It] is the thought that sees the spirits dwelling in and bringing to life places in nature” (Umehara 1989: 13–14). This description clearly echoes the ideas of early European anthropologists of religion, in particular Tylor and Frazer (see Morris 1987: 98–106), as well as Eliade’s theory of sacred places. However, whereas in early evolutionist models “animism” was often conceptualized as an early, “primitive” stage of religious development, Umehara reappropriates it in such a way that it becomes the purest, morally superior, and authentically Japanese way of relating to nature and the divine.

According to him, it is this “thought” (*shisō* 思想) that constitutes the core essence of Japanese religiosity; not only is “Shinto” perceived as essentially animistic nature worship (a notion that has gained much popularity in recent years, also among Shinto priests and scholars), Umehara also discovers many traces of animism in Japanese Buddhism (Umehara 1989: 19). Thus, in his account, the intuitive, “animistic” appreciation of sacred space is presented as the core characteristic of Japanese religion.

But Umehara’s theories are not merely phenomenological; they also have profound political implications. According to him, in the modern age, the worldview that prescribes human beings to conquer and exploit nature—supposedly caused by the “monotheism” of the “Judeo-Christian” heritage (cf. White 1967)—has led to widespread environmental destruction, and an erosion of traditional values. Animism may be the only way to overcome the current crisis, he suggests; and as Japan has acquired a unique synthesis of “Eastern” culture and values and “Western” technological and economical development, it is the mission of Japan to save humankind by spreading its benign animistic ideas:

During the past 300 years, the West has built an abundant world based on the domination of nature by thinking man. For most of that period, non-Western man—“the other”—was also subjugated. But the West’s abundance is now threatened by the limits of nature to absorb the consequences of its plunder and by the resurgence, particularly in Asia, of prosperous and competitive non-Westerners. ... Today, Japan’s goal should be to create another amalgamation—a new civilization—that blends the civilization introduced from Europe with the Japanese native culture of the forest. (Umehara 2009: 50, 53)

Thus, Umehara’s understanding of sacred space is by no means apolitical. He employs the harmony-with-nature trope—a central part of the modern Japanese nation-building project (Asquith and Kalland 1997; Morris-Suzuki 1998: 35–59)—as well as Eliade’s notion of the intuitive appreciation of the sacred to criticise modern Japanese society. By extension, he also criticises “the West,” which Japan allegedly has copied too much. As such, his theories have a clear political agenda: he wants to reform society in accordance with the principles of the ancient “forest civilization,” then spread this utopian model to other nations.

Other Japanese Theories: Yamaori Tetsuo and Kamata Tōji

There are significant similarities between the thought of Umehara and the ideas of scholar of religion Yamaori Tetsuo. Together, they published a book (Umehara and Yamaori 1995) in which they argued that “original Shinto” (*honrai no shintō* 本来の神道) was a nature religion (*shizen shūkyō* 自然宗教), the essence of which can be found among many “primitive” worldviews throughout the world (Prohl 2000: 26–27). Much of Yamaori’s work is devoted to a critical

assessment of the category “religion” (*shūkyō* 宗教) as it has developed in modern Japan; he argues that the Protestantism-derived notion of religion as faith-based and exclusivistic does not correspond to “traditional” modes of religiosity in Japan, which are said to have been characterized by a more inclusive, combinatory approach, and an intuitive appreciation of natural places. According to Yamaori, the negative image of religion in contemporary Japan (deteriorated by, but preceding, the Aum Shinrikyō subway attacks of 1995 [Okuyama 2000: 100]), and the commonly used self-definition *mushūkyō* 無宗教 (“non-religious”), do not mean Japanese people are actually secular or atheistic; rather, it means they have forgotten “traditional Japanese” practices and worldviews. These, he suggests, they need to rediscover (Yamaori 1996: 1–20; Okuyama 2000: 100–102).

Yamaori’s work is strongly nostalgic, drawing on an idealization of “traditional” ways of being religious, the loss of which he laments—as illustrated by the title of one of his best-known books, *Chinju no mori wa naite iru* (“The sacred forests are crying”) (Yamaori 2001). In this book, Yamaori addresses the topic of *chinju no mori* 鎮守の森, or sacred shrine forests. In recent academic and religious discourse, this is a popular topic: ecologists and conservationists have identified shrine forests as valuable patches of green space in concrete-filled urban landscapes, or even as biodiversity hotspots, and actively contributed to their preservation (e.g., Miyawaki 2000); Shinto organizations, meanwhile, have redefined their shrine forests as remnants of “ancient Shinto,” and as important environmental, spiritual and educational resources (e.g., Ueda 2004). Arguably, Yamaori’s book has further contributed to *chinju no mori* becoming a legitimate topic of scholarly inquiry, even though his book does not engage with actual, physical shrine forests, but rather with the relationship between deities, myths, and the Japanese nation. In true Eliadean fashion, Yamaori argues that at Japanese sacred places (*seichi* 聖地) such as Ise, through the practice of the *shikinen sengū* 式年遷宮 (the ritual rebuilding of the shrine buildings, every twenty years) a connection is maintained between the present and the mythical past (*shinwa teki jikan* 神話的時間; i.e., Eliade’s “sacred time”) (Yamaori 2001: 41).

Accordingly, Yamaori argues for the reestablishment of pre-Meiji *shin-butsu shūgō* 神仏習合 (the combined worship of Buddhas or bodhisattvas and local deities, usually called kami 神), and criticises scholars and politicians who seek to reconstruct post-Meiji imperial Shinto (“State Shinto,” *kokka Shintō* 国家神道) for frustrating the reestablishment of the “original” Shinto supposedly found in traditional nature worship. The revitalization of Japanese society, he suggests, cannot be found in explicitly political ideology and imperial symbolism, but rather in reestablishing a bond between people and local sacred places. One of the places he cites as an example of a sacred place going back to prehistorical times, where the natural element (the mountain) is seen as the body of the deity and takes the place of the main hall (*honden* 本殿) of the shrine, is Mount Miwa in Nara Prefecture, home to Ōmiwa Jinja (Yamaori 2001: 72–73). Significantly, this mountain is often referred to as one of the few remaining examples of primordial nature worship, and several scholars who combine a nostalgic view of “traditional” Shinto and Japanese nature worship with contemporary environmentalist interests mention this site as one of their prime examples.

Thus, Yamaori rejects explicitly political interpretations of Shinto, instead presenting the tradition as essentially mystical, intuitive and experiential. That does not mean, however, that his ideas are not political—like Umehara, he has adopted an idealistic view of a primordial golden age, the reestablishment of which becomes a necessary prerequisite for overcoming the present-day situation of cultural, moral and environmental decline. This narrative follows the so-called “triadic structure of nationalist rhetoric”—an idealized, mythical “old age” that becomes the blueprint for a utopian future, which is contrasted to the contemporary world, portrayed as morally and culturally corrupted—and, as Levinger and Lytle have demonstrated (2001), such a narrative can have significant mobilizing potential. At the very least, theories such as those of Yamaori contribute to an essentialist differentiation between, and reification of, the artificial categories “East” and “West”; as such, they are implicit in academic identity politics, as much as they engage with domestic political debates.

Interestingly, in several of his works, Yamaori writes about personal spiritual experiences to illustrate his arguments (Prohl 2000: 27). The same applies to Kamata Tōji, another prominent “spiritual intellectual,” who creatively (some might say: confusingly) combines scholarly theory, empirical data, mythmaking and personal accounts of spiritual experiences. An idiosyncratic person, he is a “Shinto songwriter” and rock singer as well as a professor at the famous Kyoto University. Here, he has set up the *monogaku* モノノ学 research centre: an interdisciplinary research centre that combines anthropological, (art) historical, psychological and religious studies-based research on a variety of topics, such as material objects, spirit beliefs and cultural traditions (note that the word *mono* can refer to things, people or spirits; as it is written in katakana, the term maintains this ambivalent quality). Like Yamaori, Kamata laments the “erosion” of “animism,” “shamanism” and other so-called “folk” traditions, and the artificial separation of Shinto and Buddhism; likewise, he argues for a revitalization of a “spiritual” worldview, and the reconciliation of science and religion (Prohl 2000: 30–31).

Kamata has also written several books on the topic of sacred places (*seichi* or *seinaru basho* 聖なる場所), combining ethnographic, psychological and theological approaches (e.g., Kamata 2008). He is particularly interested in traditions such as shamanism and Shugendō 修験道 (mountain ascetism), as well as local festivals and nature worship. He defines sacred places as “places where people can enter the world of the spirit, at the deepest level of their soul” (Kamata 2008: 43). Thus, as in Eliade’s work, these places are defined by their apparent capacity to evoke spiritual feelings, rather than by social or environmental factors. According to Kamata, “sacred places” in Japan, where human beings can experience a connection with a transcendental other world, include so-called “shaman mountains” such as those in Aomori Prefecture (Kamata 2008: 47–106); Mount Miwa, mentioned above (Kamata 2008: 108–139); and the shrines and pilgrimage trails of Kumano (Kamata 2008: 140–51). Significantly, much of Kamata’s narrative is devoted to a description of the atmosphere of these places, and an interpretation of their sacred qualities—using Otto’s classical phrase to refer to the experience of “the holy,” “*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*” (Kamata 2008: 74)—but there is little

attention to processes of historical change. Nevertheless, Kamata’s ideas clearly reflect popular notions of sacred places, spirituality, and Japanese traditional culture.

Sacralization in Contemporary Japan

It may be argued that, in contemporary Japanese society, several sacralization processes are taking place. This sacralization does not equal the return of “religion”—for the category “religion,” as we have seen, is not very popular in Japan today. Instead, in recent decades, shrines, temples and ritual practices have been reframed on a large scale as “(traditional) culture” and “(cultural) heritage.” We could refer to this development as the culturalization (or heritagization) of worship traditions. That is, places of worship, ritual practices (e.g., pilgrimage) and “sacred” buildings or objects are no longer primarily defined in terms of faith, ritual efficacy or available “religious merit”; nor are they necessarily framed as “religious.” Instead, they are redefined—in tourist publications, media texts, policy documents and so on—as important remnants of “traditional culture” and “cultural heritage.” As such, they also figure prominently in the national memory, and contribute to contemporary notions of nationhood.

This development has been referred to as “secularization” by some (e.g., Reader 2012), but this term is arguably problematic when analyzing the Japanese context, if only because in Japan “religion” is configured very differently from those European societies where the “religion-secular” dichotomy was developed (cf. Rots 2013: 41–65). In any case, this redefinition of worship places as “culture” or “heritage” is only part of the story. There has been a concurrent development in Japan, which we may refer to as the (re)sacralization of worship places: the discursive (re)construction (by mass media, institutional actors, popular-scientific authors and others) of certain places as “sacred” (i.e., transcendent and non-negotiable) and, indeed, as “divine” or “spiritual” (i.e., pertaining to, and/or inhabited by, deities and spirits). These places are not referred to as “religious,” contaminated as the category has become, but as “sacred”—or, alternatively, as “spiritual.” While the development concerns so-called religious institutions such as shrines and temples, it also applies to places not associated with “religion” in any way, but with popular culture: the term *seichi junrei* 聖地巡礼 (“pilgrimage to sacred places”), for instance, has now come to be used for fans’ visits to sites associated with TV dramas, anime and so on (Suga 2010: 234). Contrary to what Reader has suggested (2012), then, the reconfiguration of certain sites as “cultural heritage” has not been incompatible with their status as sacred sites somehow associated with devotional practices and supernatural beings. The crux of the matter is that the abandonment of the category “religion” can be an important strategy for adaptation, leading to the reinvention and revitalization of the very institutions and practices previously classified as “religious.”

In the past decades, then, a process has been going that we may refer to as the resacralization of the public sphere. As described by Mark Mullins (2012), certain “sacred”

symbols associated with Shinto, the nation and the imperial institution have regained new popularity, and the boundaries between “the state” (public) and “religion” (private) have been subject to continuous negotiation. Arguably, this development goes back to at least the 1970s or 80s, when it was referred to by scholars as the re-emergence of “civil religion” in Japanese society (e.g., Takayama 1993); thus, it is perhaps not as recent a development as sometimes suggested. In any case, attempts to challenge the constitutional separation of state and religion and to reassert the position of various Shinto-related symbols and practices in the public sphere continue to be made, and are often subject to heated debate. They typically concern issues related to the position of the emperor and war memory (as exemplified by the Yasukuni Shrine controversy)—but also, more in general, state patronage and sponsorship of shrines and other religious institutions (*shūkyō hōjin* 宗教法人) (Breen 2010; cf. Tanaka 2011: 14–16).

Politically and ideologically charged as they are, the Yasukuni debate and related issues have received ample scholarly attention. By and large, the (re)sacralization of Yasukuni Shrine and related institutions is a top-down process, involving high-ranking shrine officials, scholars and politicians in powerful institutions such as the Jinja Honchō headquarters, Kokugakuin University and the Liberal Democratic Party. Meanwhile, however, there are other examples of sacralization processes in Japan that are much more bottom-up, involving a variety of actors ranging from local authorities and travel agencies to shrine priests and journalists. I will conclude this article by examining one such development.

The “Powerspot Boom”

Paradoxically, while many small rural shrines suffer from depopulation, a lack of financial means and, in some cases at least, declining community participation (Fuyutsuki 2010), several well-known shrines report ever-growing visitor numbers and a renewed interest in shrine pilgrimage. Some mass media have even referred to the apparent new popularity of shrines as a “*jinja* [shrine] boom” 神社ブーム. For instance, the shrines of Kumano have experienced a significant growth in popularity in recent years, which seems related to the spiritual power attributed to its sacred sites as much as to its long history or natural beauty (e.g., Chiba 2008; Kamata 2008: 140–51; Kamata 2009). Likewise, the ritual rebuilding of two of the most famous and historically important shrines in the country, Izumo Taisha and Ise Jingū, has generated a lot of attention and interest.⁵

This renewed popularity of shrines as places not only of cultural-historical significance but also of sacred power is directly related to another trend, which has been going on for the last

⁵ In May 2013, Izumo Taisha celebrated the ritual rebuilding (*daisengū* 大遷宮) of its main hall, for the first time in sixty years. For this occasion, during several weeks, a large number of *matsuri* 祭, *kagura* 神樂 performances and other cultural events took place. In the same year, Ise Jingū celebrated its twenty-yearly *shikinen sengū*, which involved the ritual rebuilding of the main shrine buildings. Both Izumo Taisha’s *daisengū* and Ise Jingū’s *shikinen sengū* have received ample media attention, attracting visitors from all over the country (as well as, to a lesser extent, from abroad).

decade or so: the so-called “powerspot boom.” Shrines, temples and other “sacred places” have been reframed as places with significant spiritual energy, called “powerspots” (*pawāsupotto* パワースポット). The term “powerspot” was reportedly already used by Japanese scholars of religion in the 1980s to refer to “sacred places (*seichi*) where sacred energy (*seiki* 精気) and spiritual power (*reiryoku* 霊力) from the cosmos (*uchū* 宇宙) are clumped together” (Suga 2010: 243). However, it was not used commonly until the 2000s, when so-called “women’s magazines” (*joseishi* 女性誌) started advertising them as places with special spiritual power, where one’s energy or *qi* (Jp. *ki* 気) could be recharged. Using typical gendered discourse, they made the association between “powerspots” and women that lingers on (Suga 2010: 234–41). After *Asahi shinbun* (one of the country’s leading newspapers) picked up on the topic and declared a “powerspot boom” in 2005, the term spread more widely. Since then, it has been used by various popular guidebooks on “spiritual travel” and “pilgrimage to sacred places” (*seichi junrei*), as well as by travel agencies and PR organizations (Suga 2010: 241).

This is not completely new. There is probably a continuity between the pursuit of so-called “this-worldly benefits” (*genze riyaku* 現世利益) at certain designated shrines and temples (e.g., prayers for success in business at Inari shrines, or for success in entrance examinations at Tenjin shrines), well-documented by Reader and Tanabe (1998), and the contemporary popularity of “powerspots.” That does not mean, however, that it is old wine in new bottles altogether. At the very least, the “powerspot boom” has led to an increase in media interest in shrines, as illustrated by the large numbers of popular books, magazines, guidebooks, websites and TV programs devoted to the topic. It has also been advocated by local authorities and travel agencies for the purpose of attracting “pilgrims” or “spiritual tourists”—at various places (e.g., Izumo), they have set up “powerspot tours,” and made powerspot pamphlets and maps listing the sites in their locality considered to possess spiritual power. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these not only list the various sites and the particular qualities attributed to them, but also local culinary specialities (*meibutsu* 名物) and other commodities available for purchase.

Interestingly, many “powerspots” are associated with *en-musubi* 縁結び, a concept that refers to the connection (*musubi*) of ties (*en*); i.e., to finding a suitable (marriage) partner. Places especially associated with *en-musubi* (and, accordingly, regularly referred to as “powerspots”) include Izumo Taisha and many of its nearby shrines; Tokyo Daijingu, a popular shrine in Tokyo devoted to Amaterasu; and the Meoto Iwa in Mie Prefecture (two rocks in the sea, connected by a *shimenawa* 注連縄 rope). In all likelihood, there is a correlation between the recent popularity of these places among, especially, young women, and the ever-increasing number of young and not-so-young people who are single.⁶ In any case, although not all powerspots are shrines, the association between powerspots, *en-musubi* and shrines is very common in popular discourse—as illustrated by the fact

⁶ In recent years, the percentage of people getting married has declined steadily, while the average age of marriage has gone up. Accordingly, the birth rate has decreased significantly, making Japan one of the countries with the most rapidly ageing population in the world. For statistics on marriage, see the Portal Site of Official Statistics of Japan, <http://www.e-stat.go.jp/SG1/estat/ListE.do?lid=000001101888> (last accessed: June 20, 2013).

that many magazines and guidebooks explicitly refer to shrines as powerspots, calling them *pawā-supotto jinja* (e.g., Ichijō and Zō jimusho 2008).

Thus, although the term “powerspot” initially referred to particular selected and demarcated places that were considered to have a strong spiritual energy and to constitute some sort of Eliadean bridge between this world and the cosmos, in recent years it has increasingly come to be equated with shrines as a whole, at least by mass media (Suga 2010: 233).⁷ That does not mean, however, that all shrines define themselves as such. Some of the shrine priests I have talked to in recent years expressed their annoyance with the “powerspot boom,” calling it superficial and saying it has little to do with “real Shinto” (*Hontō no Shintō to chigaimasu* 本当の神道と違います). Others seemed more accommodating, suggesting that, while obviously not as important as matsuri and other shrine ceremonies, popular trends such as the “powerspot boom” might bring more people to shrines, and make them interested in learning more about Shinto. This, for instance, is the opinion of the current president of Jinja Honchō, who appreciates the positive PR generated by this trend: he has even suggested that it may help people relearn the intuitive awareness of sacred places that Japanese people supposedly possessed in the past, and, hence, may help them refind the faith of their ancestors (Tanaka 2011: 6–10). Many other shrine priests whom I have talked to were not quite sure yet whether they should condemn or condone the trend, and seemed undecided on the topic.

In any case, exceptions notwithstanding,⁸ shrines are generally promoted as “powerspots” by non-clergy outsiders such as journalists, local authorities and popular authors, rather than by the priests themselves. For instance, one of the country’s best-known powerspots, Kiyomasa’s Well, is located in the garden of Meiji Jingū—but it gained popularity thanks to a TV program, and the priests at Meiji Jingū were reportedly flabbergasted by the great number of visitors all of a sudden visiting their shrine garden.⁹ Nevertheless, the “powerspot boom” is transforming ways

⁷ Well-known shrines that have come to be identified as “powerspots” include Nikkō Tōshōgū, Meiji Jingū, Ise Jingū, Ōmiwa Jinja, Kumano Hongū Taisha, Kumano Nachi Taisha, Kibune Jinja, Shimogamo Jinja and Izumo Taisha (Suga 2010: 239). Although now more commonly associated with shrines than with temples, there are also temples that are framed as “powerspots” and considered good places for *en-musubi*; Kiyomizudera in Kyoto is a prominent example.

⁸ There are also examples of shrine priests who have embraced the “powerspot boom,” and actively redefined their shrines as such—or even established new “powerspots.” For instance, in the autumn of 2011 I visited a “recently discovered” powerspot in the vicinity of Mount Fuji. I was told that the priest of a nearby shrine went for a walk, then came across two trees with unusual shapes on their bark. Upon closer inspection, they turned out to be shaped like a womb and ovaries. The place was established as a “powerspot” with these trees as their main focus, received some media attention, and reportedly became popular among women trying to get pregnant (and their mothers). Two small shrine buildings were constructed, as well as a stand where *o-mamori* and various spiritual souvenirs can be purchased. In addition, a stone circle was created, which visitors circumvent three times in order to “feel the spiritual energy” of the place (while holding their hands stretched out in front of them to feel the spiritual vibration).

⁹ Kiyomasa’s Well (*Kiyomasa no ido* 清正井) is a well in the middle of a small pond, in the garden of Meiji Jingū. It is said to have been dug by Katō Kiyomasa (1561–1611), a general in the army of Toyotomi Hideyoshi responsible for the conquest of parts of Korea. On December 24, 2009, Shimada Shūhei, a famous TV personality, visited the well and declared it a “powerspot” with particular “profit” (*go-riyaku* ご利益); i.e., wish-fulfilling capacity. Literally overnight, the well became hugely popular, attracting thousands of visitors lining for hours in order to be able to see the well—and have their picture taken in front of it.

in which shrines—and, quite possibly, “Shinto” in general—are perceived, if not by priests, at least by a significant number of visitors. “Superficial” or “commercial” though it may be, it does lead to a renewed interest in shrines as “sacred places” (*seichi*) possessing spiritual power that can directly influence the lives of those engaging in worship practices (prayers, *ema* 絵馬 writing, and the purchase of ritual objects such as *o-mamori* お守り).

Thus, the reinvention of shrines as powerspots seems to constitute a process of sacralization, not primarily driven by the religious institutions themselves but rather by outside actors. This process takes place in parallel with and complementary to more top-down attempts to deprivatize Shinto and resacralize the nation, and may be influenced by academic reimaginations of “sacred places” as sites representing “traditional Japanese spirituality” (and, hence, continuity between the present and an idealized past). Clearly, this sacralization process is not antithetical to the pursuit of “this-worldly” interests and corresponding processes of commodification. But then, such things are not necessarily incompatible with devotional practices, faith, or “spirituality” (however defined). On the contrary, they may actually serve to enforce them. If we do not adhere to a normative-theological understanding of what “sacredness” constitutes, there is no reason to assume that sacralization is incompatible with commercialization, popularization, and various kinds of ideological appropriation.

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