

ISSUES

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Shinto Shrines or Shinto Temples?

DIFFERENT words are used in the Japanese language to refer to places of Shinto worship. The type and status of the worship facility determine the particular word used. In the English language, however, all such facilities, regardless of type or status, are conventionally referred to as *shrines*. By the same convention, Buddhist places of worship are referred to using the nobler word *temple*, though not always without problem.¹ This petrifact convention was established in order to distinguish conveniently between places of Shinto worship and their Buddhist counterparts, as the Japanese themselves seem to do. But does it not also betray a lesser regard for Shinto?

I have been unable to find out precisely where or when the words *shrine* and *temple* were first used as conventional translations respectively for *jinja* 神社, *yashiro* 社, *hokora* 祠, etc. on the one hand, and *tera* 寺, *-ji* 寺, *-in* 院, and *dō* 堂 on the other. I have encountered no article or book that advocated or suggested a particular usage. The Japanese-Portuguese dictionary *Vocabulario da Lingoa de Iapam* (Nagasaki, 1603–1604) offers nothing of use. It avoids giving direct translations of religious facilities, defining them instead by means of other Japanese words, as when it defines *jinja* as *kami no yashiro*. The third edition of HEPBURN'S dictionary (1886) is only a bit more helpful. On the English-to-Japanese side, Hepburn gives *mikoshi* 御輿, *sushi* 厨子, and *hokora* under *shrine*; *tera*, *miya* 宮, *dō*, *yashiro*, and *byō* 廟 under *temple*. On the Japanese-to-English side he gives the following definitions:

hokora (*hokura*): A small Shintō shrine; the treasure house of a *miya*.

jinja (*kami no yashiro*): A *miya*, or Shinto [sic] temple.

mi-koshi: The sacred car in which the mirror, the paper, or the idol, which represents the *Kami*, is taken out in processions and festivals.

miya: A Shintō temple where the *Kami* is worshiped . . .

yashiro: A Shintō temple, or shrine.

zushi: A small shrine in which idols are kept.

Thus to Hepburn *mikoshi*, *hokora*, and *zushi* are shrines; *miya* and *jinja* are temples; and a *yashiro* can be either a shrine or a temple. Clearly, he saw the difference as chiefly one of size.

Frustrated over the absence of clear documentation for the modern convention's origins, I discussed the matter with a few native Shinto scholars and visited the linguist Ono Susumu, but without result. Nor could a dozen or so Japanologists of various Western nationalities come up with an answer. Nobody knew! Nobody had even paid a thought to the matter! I was forced to conclude that, probably, the convention was established gradually, informally, through thought and discussion among many concerned Westerners, with no particular individual deserving or claiming credit for it. Probably very influential in the process, however, were William George Aston's writings.

I am given to suspect that the convention got a big boost during the early 1940s, when the "Shinto faith" came to be painted in have-lucks and putties and Shinto facilities became prime targets for Allied bombers. Nevertheless, the present-day usage of *shrine* and *temple* must have already been in the process of conventionalization at the turn of the century. It was in regular use by ASTON even before the turn of the century (1896), by Richard Arthur Brazabon PONSONBY-FANE during the early decades of the twentieth century (1957), and by Daniel Clarence HOLTOM at the time of his 1919 Ph.D. dissertation (1922). Yet CHAMBERLAIN, in his translation of the *Kojiki* (1882), preferred to use the word *temple* to refer to Shinto places of worship, while HEARN, writing in 1904, used the words *shrine* and *temple* ambiguously, indeed interchangeably.² As late as 1967 Jean HERBERT, like Hearn, used the two words interchangeably, though he seems to have preferred *temple* for Shinto facilities (1967). But Herbert was an exception, for by the end of the Pacific War, the English-language convention had been firmly set and was being rote-learned by each budding crop of Japanophiles.³

Moreover, the convention has gone so far that postwar works commonly use terms like *shrine worship* or *shrine Shinto* without first stating what *shrine* means, expecting the reader to already know—or to imagine! There are a few interesting exceptions. Robert Oleson BALLOU, writing just at the end of the war, offers a definition that wastes no words: A shrine, he writes, is a "god house" (1945, 14). Wilhelmus H. M. CREEMERS, in his 1966 dissertation, offers a translation of a simplistic definition for *jinja* that he plucked out of the *Kōjien*:

shrines, he quotes, are “places where the ancestors of the Imperial house, the *kami* of the mythological age, and people who performed meritorious deeds for the country are enshrined” (1968, 8). But Creemers’s word choice in his translation merely reflects his a priori opinion that Shinto facilities are “shrines.” And so it goes.

The disadvantages of the English convention appear to have brought about little concern among most Western Shinto scholars and the Shinto establishment has followed along without complaint. Among the disadvantages are: 1) as already adumbrated, the convention ignores distinctions among the various types of Shinto facilities; 2) Shinto and Buddhist elements are often so syncretized at a single place of worship as to render the Buddhist/Shinto distinction uninformative and even disinformative⁴; 3) while there are English words for places of worship, such as *synagogue* and *mosque*, that serve to distinguish between religious systems, *shrine* and *temple* are not among them and are not properly used in that way; 4) etymologically, the English word *shrine* has a different referent than most of the Japanese words to which it is equated—the English word originated in the Latin *scrinium*, which means “solander case” or “chest for books, papers, etc.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* does—at the bottom of its list of definitions—reluctantly allow the following meaning for *shrine*: “A place where worship is offered or devotions are paid to a saint or deity; a temple, church.” Surely this is in acknowledgement of the present, careless usage and of the historical fact that many European churches indeed were built around relics or saints’ tombs; but ordinarily the word *shrine* is not reasonably applied to anything much more elaborate than a cabinet or a shed, or by extension to an alcove or other specific area where a sacred object is repositated or displayed.

The fourth disadvantage is particularly telling. How on earth can the meaning of *shrine* possibly be so distended as to include even a minority of the following elements typically found at various places of Shinto worship?

- sacred mountains (*shintai-zan* 神体山), streams, and groves; symbolic gates (*torii* 鳥居); stone gate-guardians (*shishi* 獅子 or *koma-inu* 狛犬); avenues of approach (*sandō* 参道), frequently including staircases; processional ways; individual stones and trees that are especially sacred;
- sekos; gravel pavement in the temenos compound; lavabos or stoups (*mitarashi* 御手洗), which are often found under the roofs of lavatory structures (*temizu-ya* 手水舎);⁵ standing lanterns (*tōrō* 灯笼); stores for dispensing sacred lots (*omikujī* 御神籤), amulets or talismans (*o-*

mamori 御守り), and such written material as ritual calendars or liturgies;

- special-purpose structures such as garages for the festival arks (*miko-shi-gura* 御輿庫); ceremonial halls (*gishiki-den* 儀式殿) for wedding ceremonies and the like; abstention halls (*saikan* 齋館) in which priests prepare for ceremonies; wineries (*sakadono* 酒殿) where communion wine (*miki* 神酒) is made or stored etc.;
- thesauri; votive-picture galleries (*ema-den* 絵馬殿); halls or pavilions for sacred saltations (*kagura-den* 神楽殿); assorted subordinate and affiliated sanctuaries (*massha* 末社 and *sessha* 摂社); oratories (*haiden* 拝殿 or *yōhai-jo* 遥拝所) where worshipers interface with the deity; halls of offerings (*heiden* 幣殿 or *norito-den* 祝詞殿) where rites are performed and orisons intoned; main sanctuary (*honden* 本殿, *shinden* 神殿, or *shōden* 正殿) where the object of worship or spirit of the deity abides—sometimes in conjunction with a remote sanctuary (*okumiya* 奥宮);
- offertory chests; altars; subordinate altars (*aidono* 相殿); seat of the deity (*shinza* 神座); the objects of worship (*shintai* 神体, *mitamashiro* 御霊代, or *yorishiro* 依代).

And this is not to mention the cultural treasures, ornaments, utensils and instruments, furniture, festoonery, kitchens for preparing food offerings, libraries, museums, rectories or administration buildings, repair shops, and so on. Believe it or not, at Ise there is even a ghat, plus a sacred cave with a waterfall inside, and a sacred wind-cave (the ghat and caves being little known in the Occident). In fact, the vast wooded facilities at Ise, traditionally Japan's most hallowed, occupy a position in Japanese culture that is quite similar to the position of the Eleusinian temple complex in the Hellenic culture, and they are by no means inferior to the Eleusinian complex in such physical matters as complexity, layout, organization, or structure—or in the community of divinities celebrated there.

Not all of the elements in the long list above are found at a single Shinto facility, but depending on the case, many of them very often are. In any one place of worship the assorted elements function and are administered and maintained as a collective unit, and as a unit they are not reasonably denominated "shrine." The meaning of the word *shrine* simply cannot fit the variety and complexity here, and a point is reached where, essentially, only the word *temple* fits. Strolling about the expansive precincts of a major facility, such as Kitano Tenman-gū or Kamigamo Jinja in Kyoto, and observing people at their personal devotions or participating in solemn rites of one kind or another, one is

impressed with being in a *temple*—indeed not with being in a box or a cabinet or a shed.

The irritating point is that the English convention somehow seems to have been established by Western minds that were struggling to cope with the intricacies of Buddhist philosophy while unable to discover much of any significant meaning in the Shinto rituals. Shinto often has seemed to be considered a “survival” of a “simple” or quaint tradition of “primitive nature worship.” The learned scholar of the present day knows—or ought to know—that little could be so removed from the truth (see, e.g., KURODA 1981, 19). The English convention’s poor discrimination between types of worship facilities, its semantic gymnastics, and its prejudice in favor of Buddhism are problem enough; adding such an evolutionist implication into all that, casts the convention under thirteen glooms.

Scholars have been glad enough to apply the word *temple* to classical Greek facilities with little more to boast than a sanctuary the size of a beehive. Why should the standards differ for Japan? In any event, the English convention smacks of Western ethnocentrism, which all would grant ought to be expunged from respectable scholarship.⁶ One indeed can find little reason to perpetuate such a factitious and misleading convention, however ingrained, since the academically useful English literature on Shinto, though recently showing some signs of healthy growth, still is limited. It scarcely is too late to establish a more accurate convention, one that might promise to avoid distorting the image of, or hindering understanding of, Shinto. At the very least editors might cease insisting that the convention be rigorously and blindly followed.

One solution clearly would be to abandon the English terms altogether and apply the various native terms as appropriate. Actually, the merits and demerits of using native terms have been much discussed in the halls of anthropology as a means of reducing Western ethnocentrism in written works. In the case of Shinto places of worship, however, the proliferation of terms would be intolerable to nonspecialist readers, and would force writers to consume space defining their terms.

CONCLUSIONS

In future works dealing with Shinto for a general audience, preferred usage should reserve the word *shrine* for designating *mikoshi*, *hokora*, and reliquaries tabernacling local deities or venerated objects; for minor mausolea (*sorei-sha* 祖靈社, *otama-ya* 御靈屋, etc.); and for minor heroa. Perhaps also for household *kamidana* 神棚, although here “household sanctuary” or “household altar” would seem often appropriate.⁷ And

a *zushi* might be referred to as a “shrine,” “reliquary,” or “feretory” depending on its importance and purpose. Other places of Shinto worship should preferably be denominated “temple” or “temple complex” according to their structure; where showing a distinction between Shinto and Buddhist temples is deemed desirable or necessary, the appropriate adjective could be easily employed. A *honden*, *shinden*, or *shōden* within a large and complex temple precinct could be called “sanctuary,” “main sanctuary,” “inner sanctuary,” “holy of holies,” or “*sanctum sanctorum*” as needs be to make it stand out or to distinguish it from the rest of the temple complex.

Terms like *himorogi* 神籬 and *iwasaka* 磐境 pose a special problem for the translator, and will have to be explained to the general reader in any event.

In technical works, of course, the words *jingū*, *taisha*, *jinja*, *miya*, *yashiro*, *hokora*, *sorei-sha*, *iwasaka*, *mikoshi*, *kamidana*, *honden*, etc., etc. are best carried over into the English as prophyllaxis against confusion among specialists.

POSTSCRIPT

The argument above was originally written in 1983,⁸ when the late Fanny Hagin Mayer, a devout Catholic, was still very much alive. After reading a manuscript of the argument, she responded with a few memoirs, which I reproduce here:⁹

1. In a farmhouse in Niigata there was a very elaborate altar, [with] gold lotus flowers and leaves (Buddhist), and other ornaments. I exclaimed over what a *rippa na O-Butsudan*, but my old hostess corrected me by calling it *Senzo-sama*!
2. An old shopkeeper who went regularly in early morning to pray at the *jinja* told me that in bad weather or when he did not feel equal to it, he went to St. Ignatius Church because there was a *kami* there.
3. When an old neighbor on the campus at Gakugei U. asked me to take her to my church, I agreed. As she stepped inside, she clapped her hands and bowed to the *kami*! Incidentally, sometimes she was too busy to get fresh flowers for her *kamidana* and used to come to ask for a few in my dooryard—of course I divided with her. Then, the next time she got to a flower shop, she would come over with a few posies for Maria-sama, a little figure I had in my bedroom.

These memoirs give us a taste of the way many of the Japanese them-

selves regarded the position of their religion, especially *vis-à-vis* Western religions, and add a little perspective to the argument above. I doubt that anyone would want to call St. Ignatius Church a “shrine.”

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NOTES

1. Today the English word *temple* is by and large adequate for the uses to which it is applied in connection with modern Buddhist facilities. However, the word often seems inadequate, even mistaken, as an English rendering of historical Buddhist facilities. Buddhism originally was an entirely monastic tradition, and the monasticism was preserved by the missionaries who spread Buddhism across Asia to Japan, where it survived more or less intact until about the beginning of the Tokugawa period. Japanese Buddhist facilities up to then are better called monasteries than temples. But even today, although a main devotional hall within a facility might of course easily qualify as a temple, *temple* cannot comfortably be applied to an entire complex that includes gates (*sanmon*), groves, gardens, meditation hall, pagoda, bellframe, library, lavabo, dormitory, rectory, refectory, bath, outhouses, offices, and perhaps a flock of pigeons. For such an aggregate, I should prefer the term “temple complex.” Smaller branch facilities housed completely within a single structure, however, might safely be denominated *temple*, but even some of these would no doubt better be termed *hermitages*.

2. Hearn was a prolific writer. I am referring here specifically to his *Japan: An Interpretation*, which was first published in 1904. I have used the 1955 Tuttle edition as reprinted in 1971 (see, e.g., pp. 121–23).

3. In the April 1945 issue of *National Geographic*, the caption to a photograph of a war-battered *torii* on Tinian Island declares the same Shinto facility to be at once a “temple” and a “shrine,” as though to cover all possibilities (MOORE 1945, 467). Obviously there still was some confusion at the end of the war. Note, however, that the author here is a journalist, not a Japanologist, Shinto specialist, or historian of religions.

4. On the inseparability of Shinto and Buddhism, see KURODA 1981. Allan GRAPARD demurs, correctly questioning whether Buddhism and Shinto ever achieved true synthesis, and notes that monks and priests had their conflicts at common facilities (1992, 147); still, it is difficult to say what, by the convention, a syncretized facility ought to be called. Cf. BODIFORD 1993.

5. Sometimes a natural stream (*haraegawa*) serves for lavation.

6. On ethnocentrism among Western Japanologists, see MINEAR 1980.

7. In careful usage, a *kamidana* within a shrine or temple often becomes an “altar,” or sometimes a “feretory shelf.” The literal translation “god-shelf,” which often has been given for *kamidana*, might seem quaintly poetic but is uninformative beyond suggesting that the shelf relates to divine matters.

8. A quick check of the literature on Shinto since 1983 has shown little change in usage of the terms *temple* and *shrine* in that time.

9. Personal communication, 1983.

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