

EVENT SUMMARY:

Shrines, Kami, and the Future: Shinto in the Digital Age

Talk by Professor Kikuko Hirafuji and Niall Hill

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Professor Kikuko Hirafuji's Talk:

Thank you very much. Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Kikuko Hirafuji. I am currently on sabbatical as a visiting scholar at SOAS for a year and a half in London until this September. London has given me many wonderful experiences, and speaking here this evening is certainly one of them. I am deeply grateful for this opportunity, and I extend my sincere thanks to Niall and the team at the Daiwa Foundation.

My research field is mythology, specifically, how Japanese myths have been read, interpreted, and adapted across different times and contexts. Tonight, Niall, the immersive artist with us here, has created a VR experience of the world of Japanese shrines. As someone who studies how the sacred is imagined and represented, I find this a fascinating endeavor.

To tell the truth, many Shinto priests hold quite conservative views, and it is not always easy in Japan to speak freely about these topics, especially when it comes to digital technology. Being here in London, however, gives me a certain freedom to be candid. I am very much looking forward to our conversation.

First of all, I would like to show you this photo. This was taken at Kanda Shrine in Tokyo. The small figure dressed up for the occasion is AIBO, Sony's robotic dog. It has come to the shrine to receive a blessing at the *Shichi-Go-San* ceremony. In Japan, we often treat robots with the same courtesy we show to humans. Today, I'd like to explore the reasoning behind this.

I will take you through four main themes. Let me begin with some basic facts about Shinto shrines.

There are approximately 80,000 Shinto shrines in Japan today. To put that in perspective, when you look at the density of shrines relative to the population, it is remarkably similar to the density of Christian churches here in the UK. For international tourists, shrines are distinctly Japanese attractions, much like Meiji Jingu in Tokyo or Fushimi Inari Taisha in Kyoto. For Japanese people, however, shrines are places that are deeply integrated into everyday life.

The clearest example of this is *Hatsumode*, the traditional New Year shrine visit. Around 70% of the population in Japan visits a shrine when the New Year begins. Meiji Jingu alone receives approximately 3 million visitors in just the first three days of January. To put that in perspective, that is roughly comparable to the total number of pilgrims who travel to Mecca each year for the Hajj, the pilgrimage that every Muslim is obliged to undertake once in their lifetime. Yet, the global Muslim population is two billion. Here, we see one shrine, across three days, drawing the same number of people.

Shrines are also the setting for major life-cycle rituals. *Omiyamairi* brings newborn babies to the shrine around one month after birth to express gratitude and pray for health. This photo on the screen shows a family celebrating *Shichi-Go-San*, which literally translates to "Seven-Five-Three." This is a traditional ceremony held for children at the ages of three, five, and seven to thank the deities and pray for their continued health and growth. When I ask my students whether they have experienced *Shichi-Go-San*, about 80% to 90% say yes. Even when I surveyed students at Rikkyo University (a Christian university in Tokyo), 80% to 90% answered yes, regardless of whether they consider themselves Shinto believers.

Does this mean that most Japanese people are active followers of Shinto? According to a survey of university students across Japan conducted by my institution, Kokugakuin University, alongside an academic association, only about 3% of students identify as Shinto believers. Furthermore, when asked whether they hold any religious faith at all, only about 10% say yes.

To complicate this picture further: generally speaking, 80% of funerals in Japan are conducted in the Buddhist tradition, while around 60% of weddings are held in a Christian style, even though practicing Christians make up only about 1% of the Japanese population.

This can be quite puzzling for observers outside Japan. For Japanese people, this is a very natural way of living, but religion in Japan tends to be situational rather than doctrinal. Scholars have described this attitude with phrases like "practice without belonging" or "practice without belief." For many Japanese, visiting a shrine is not an act of dogma or faith; it is closer to a cultural reflex, a way of marking the seasons, celebrating milestones, and staying connected to their community.

Shrines are a part of everyday life in Japan, and yet most Japanese people rarely stop to describe them in words. Let me try to do that for you now.

At the entrance of a shrine stands a *torii* gate, a gateway that marks the boundary between the ordinary world and the sacred space. Visitors purify their hands and mouths at the *temizuya* (a stone water basin) before approaching the *haiden*, the hall of worship, where they offer their prayers. Behind the *haiden* lies the *honden*, the main hall where the *kami* (spirit or deity) is said to dwell.

But here is something essential to understand: in Shinto, the building itself is not the essence. The *kami* does not belong to the architecture. *Kami* originally dwelt in natural objects: mountains, rocks, trees, and waterfalls. The buildings came much later as a way of marking and honoring that natural presence.

A striking example of this is Omiwa Shrine in Nara, one of the oldest shrines in Japan. It has no *honden* at all. Instead, the object of worship is Mount Miwa itself, the beautiful conical mountain lying directly behind the shrine precinct. People stand before the open sanctuary and pray directly to the mountain. This is not a relic of the ancient past; it is a living practice happening today.

In Shinto, it is believed that *kami* can reside within or manifest through physical objects. This brings us to the nature of *kami* itself. If you translate *kami* simply as "god," something fundamental gets lost. The God of the Abrahamic traditions is a singular, transcendent creator who stands apart from and above the physical universe. *Kami*, by contrast, are fundamentally different.

The linguistic gap between *kami* and "God" actually has its roots in a historical moment about 150 years ago, when the Bible was first translated into Japanese and the word *kami* was chosen as the translation for "God." As a result, the Japanese concept of *kami* expanded even further, and it now encompasses the Christian God, the deities of Greek mythology, and much else besides.

The boundaries of *kami* have always been fluid. In the Japanese tradition, the line between what we might call a *kami*, a ghost, or a supernatural folklore creature (a *yo-kai*) is not clearly drawn. These categories naturally bleed into one another. Furthermore, the things in which *kami* can dwell are not limited to specific mountains, rocks, or trees. They can dwell in people, and they can dwell in man-made objects.

This fluid animism makes the concept of *kami* highly complex. For example, there is a concept in Japanese called *tsukumogami*, which translates literally to "the spirit of old tools." The folk belief is that an object that has been used and cared for over nearly a hundred years will eventually acquire a soul. An old iron kettle (*kama*) or a teacup, it is said these things will, in time, develop a personality of their own.

This is why many people in Japan feel hesitant about simply throwing away old tools. Instead, they are given a proper farewell. There are dedicated ceremonies (*kuyo*) for worn-out sewing needles, old calligraphy brushes, and kitchen knives. These rituals are acts of gratitude toward the everyday objects that have served us. There are monuments created to express gratitude to things like hair, kitchen knives, brushes. It is precisely this cultural foundation, the belief that even inanimate, man-made objects can possess a spirit, that explains the rituals performed for modern robots today.

Since I am in London, let me be entirely frank. The administrative bodies and priests who run shrines tend to be deeply conservative when it comes to the digital age. The first major collision between Shinto and digital technology occurred in the late 1990s. In 1996, Atago Shrine in Tokyo launched a "virtual visit" on its website. Users could virtually walk through the *torii* gate, purify themselves at the *temizuya*, and click on an icon of the offering box to make a donation.

According to the shrine, this virtual interface actually succeeded in drawing more physical visitors to the site. However, in 1997, the *Sankei Shimbun* ran a major feature debating whether "virtual worship" was spiritually acceptable. The debate caught fire.

Years later, in July 2006, the Association of Shinto Shrines (*Jinja Honcho*), the governing body that oversees the vast majority of shrines in Japan, issued an official notice to all member shrines. The message was uncompromising: divine spirits do not exist on the internet. The divine spirit resides within the physical shrine itself. True worship requires physical attendance; to worship is to stand bodily in the sacred space. In the Association's view, virtual visits threatened the very existential purpose of shrines.

However, there were dissenting voices from priests on the ground. Some asked: if Shinto teaches that divine spirits dwell in mountains, rivers, trees, and grass, in all things, why should the internet be the single exception where they cannot be present? This is a theological contradiction that has never been fully resolved.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, attitudes softened out of sheer necessity. Kanda Shrine famously recreated its entire precinct inside the video game *Animal Crossing*, offering a virtual space for New Year worship. However, this was widely understood as a temporary emergency measure, and the Association's fundamental theological position remains unchanged.

The same conservatism applies to cashless payments. At almost every shrine in Japan, ritual offerings must still be made in cash. There is, however, one notable exception: Atago Shrine in Tokyo. The very same shrine that pioneered virtual worship now accepts electronic payments for offerings, though only during the busy New Year season. This represents the cautious reality of how the Shinto establishment engages with the digital age.

While the shrine establishment has been cautious about digital technology, it cannot remain indifferent to the massive demographic shifts taking place in Japanese society, most notably, the dramatic decline in the birth rate. In recent years, the combined population of domestic dogs and cats in Japan has exceeded the population of children aged 15 and under. As the number of children declines, an increasing number of people are welcoming animals into their homes as family members, not simply as pets in the traditional sense, but as companions or even children.

Kameoka Hachiman Shrine in Ichigaya, Tokyo, has been offering New Year visits and *Shichi-Go-San* ceremonies specifically for pets since 2008. In one recent year, around 50 human children took part in *Shichi-Go-San* at the shrine, compared to roughly 350 pets. The shrine completely reached its capacity!

On this very same continuum of companionship, we find robots.

Let me tell you a little more about the *Shichi-Go-San* ceremony for AIBO at Kanda Shrine. Sony has organised an annual blessing ceremony for AIBO owners since the launch of their latest robotic model. The demand has been so overwhelming that participation is allocated by lottery. The owners arrive carrying custom business cards printed with their AIBO's name. They refer to their robots as *uchino ko*: "our child." Just like parents dressing up their children for a milestone, AIBO owners dress their robots in beautifully tailored miniature kimonos.

Robot companions like AIBO were once envisioned primarily as products for the elderly. Today, they are embraced by a much broader demographic: single-person households, and people living in urban apartments where live pets are strictly prohibited.

What lies behind this phenomenon? I suggest two things:

1. A shift in the definition of family: As the human birth rate declines, animals and now robots are being welcomed into the domestic sphere to fill that emotional space.
2. An ancient cultural resonance: The traditional Japanese belief that inanimate objects can acquire a soul, just as *tsukumogami* were believed to do.

It is perhaps no coincidence that compassionate, emotional robots like *Astro Boy* have long been among the most beloved characters in Japanese manga and anime. The concept of a robot that feels and possesses a heart is not strange to Japanese people; it has been culturally familiar for generations.

Is this phenomenon uniquely Japanese, or does it point to something more universal: a societal shift that Japan is simply experiencing ahead of the rest of the world?

Many people in the UK feel deeply attached to their pets in ways that go far beyond traditional animal-human relationships. Some churches here even hold annual pet blessing services. However, ritual baptism is a different matter; that is a line that has not been crossed. In 1997, a Church of England dog owner became convinced that her pet possessed an immortal soul and persuaded a vicar to hold a baptismal service. The plan was canceled only after it was leaked and reported in the local newspaper. The Judeo-Christian tradition, which places human beings in a spiritual category entirely distinct from all other creatures, draws a firm theological boundary there.

Yet, religious ideas, forms of prayer, and conceptions of the divine have always evolved; they shift in response to the emotional and practical needs of the people who practice them. Japanese Shinto shrines are no exception.

Is what we see happening in Japan a glimpse of where the rest of the world is heading, or is it something that can only emerge from a culture with this specific animistic understanding of the soul? I hope that is a question we can explore together in our discussion tonight. Thank you very much for listening.

Niall Hill's Talk:

Hello, everyone. Thank you, Professor Hirafuji. That was absolutely fascinating. In light of all that wonderful context about Shinto and its evolution, I'd like to share a bit about a project I've been working on in virtual reality.

My name is Niall, and I'm a lecturer at UCL on the Immersive Factual Storytelling MA program. I've been working on various virtual reality projects for about 12 years. Previously, I worked at the BBC on VR projects for BBC News. Our academic program at UCL is very closely related to that work: we teach students how to technically and creatively use these emerging tools to tell stories in entirely new ways.

The virtual reality film I have made is titled *8 Million Gods*. It is a 360-degree VR exploration of Shinto. For those of you who haven't experienced 360-degree video or VR before, it is a medium where you are physically situated within the scene: it completely surrounds you.

The film is intended as an experiential, felt taste of Shinto. It is deliberately lighter on dense factual lectures and heavier on the sensation of "being there," giving viewers a felt sense of the sacred atmosphere. That is the defining quality of immersive storytelling.

"Immersive" is a word that is heavily debated and sometimes controversial in certain media circles, but I define it simply as stories where the audience is physically located within the space of the narrative. This is most commonly achieved using a VR headset: the goggles you place over your eyes, but it can also take place in a physical space like a museum using panoramic projection, spatial audio, and environmental design. It is simply a spatial mode of storytelling.

Often, people equate immersive stories with interactivity, which is one flavor of the medium, much like a video game where you control the environment and directly affect the world. However, the type of virtual reality we are utilising for this project is 360-degree film. It is captured using a specialised multi-lens camera. Each lens captures half of the surrounding environment, similar to a ultra-wide fisheye lens, and those views are digitally stitched together to create a seamless, high-resolution spherical panorama of the entire space.

A natural question to ask is: why did I decide to explore Shinto through 360-degree VR?

There are a few key reasons. First of all, virtual reality possesses what I call "superpowers." Beyond being anecdotally engaging when people try it, there is a substantial body of psychological research showing the profound effects VR has on an audience.

One of these effects is presence. On a preconscious, neurological level, the human brain genuinely believes it is in the simulated environment. People react unconsciously to virtual surroundings in ways that prove a deeper part of their mind accepts the illusion as reality. A related phenomenon is body transfer, where a participant adopts a virtual avatar or body and will unconsciously protect it from incoming virtual hazards.

Because of these unique cognitive qualities, I always teach my students that stories where a "sense of place" is vital to the narrative work best in virtual reality. It is about establishing a spatial relationship between the viewer and the environment.

During my first visit to Japan, I had only vague notions of Shinto. But as I learned more, it dawned on me that the Shinto worldview, the belief that *kami* are immanent in everything, is inherently spatial. You see this in *shimenawa* (sacred straw ropes) wrapped around ancient trees or rocks, marking them as the dwelling places of *kami*. Shinto is a deeply spatial arrangement of sacred geography.

This aligns perfectly with the strengths of virtual reality. We can place a viewer directly into these sacred environments and let them experience a worldview rooted in the voices of the practitioners, priests, and artisans we interviewed. Our hope is that they leave the headset with a genuine, felt sense of Shinto.

There is also a personal reason behind this project. It is probably fair to describe me as the "son of a witch." I grew up in the UK with a slightly unarticulated, intuitive sense of spirits in nature, but I never really had an accessible vocabulary or cultural framework for it. When I traveled to Japan and experienced Shinto, I was struck by how materially visible and intuitively accessible these concepts are. It offers a very practical, tangible way to relate to the spirits and *kami* of the natural environment.

Finally, I believe there is a real "crisis of meaning" in contemporary Western culture. An increasing body of sociological and psychological research suggests that having a shared cosmology and a sense of meaning is absolutely vital to mental health and holistic well-being. I am very interested in how we can use technology to allow people to experience that sense of the sacred and connect with these ideas without having to fly all the way to Japan, which can be prohibitively expensive.

Regarding our approach to the documentary, I want to emphasise that I am very much an outsider to Japanese culture and Shinto, albeit a deeply appreciative one. Since I do not speak Japanese, I was highly dependent on English-speaking collaborators whom I met along the way, such as Professor Hirafuji.

Because of my outsider status, it was vital to take a participatory approach. Wherever possible, I actively participated in the rituals: I bowed at the *torii* gates, I joined in carrying the *mikoshi* during local street festivals, and I made formal offerings. Experiencing these rituals bodily was essential for me to gain a felt sense of Shinto, which I hoped to translate into the final film.

Furthermore, I filmed the entire documentary completely alone, without a camera crew. This streamlined, solo approach felt incredibly appropriate for the subject matter because it allowed the process to be unhurried and meditative. I didn't have to worry about crew logistics or scheduling lunch breaks for an audio engineer. It allowed me to establish a deeply personal, respectful connection with the people and sacred places I encountered.

Over the five weeks of filming, I met a wonderful array of individuals: Shinto priests, academics, and traditional craftspeople. For instance, I interviewed Miyata-san, a master *mikoshi* maker in Yokohama who is actively internationalising this traditional art. He frequently brings his family's historic *mikoshi* to Europe to run traditional *matsuri* festivals, including an upcoming event in Germany.

The final chapter of the film actually returns to the UK, where we meet Megan (who is here with us in the room tonight) to explore how Shinto is being practiced outside of Japan. We look at the fascinating parallels between Shinto and Western pagan or animist traditions, concepts very similar to those I felt in the air during my own childhood.

Through a Facebook group Megan established for Shinto practitioners in the UK, which now has well over a thousand members, we discovered a vibrant community of people engaging with Shinto, adapting and translating its practices within a British cultural context.

As an example of Shinto's accessibility, I often think of Olivia, a Shinto priestess in Yokosuka. She was incredibly encouraging of my work. When I asked her how I should respectfully approach filming at various shrines, her instruction was wonderfully simple: "Go and ask the *kami* of the shrine for permission before you ask the priest." I did exactly that, making my offering and speaking to the space, and it opened up a very intuitive way of working.

Another major insight from this project is how dynamically Shinto interfaces with contemporary popular culture. We see *ema* (wooden tablets) adorned with hand-drawn anime characters, and modern media franchises like *Pokémon* drawing direct inspiration from Shinto mythological figures. Rather than viewing popular culture as a threat, Shinto seems to have an incredibly adaptive, morphing relationship with these modern cultural elements.

This extends to Japanese folklore as well. The boundary between *yo-kai* (folklore spirits) and *kami* is highly fluid, as seen in the sacred status of *kitsune* (Inari foxes), which exist at the intersection of myth, folklore, and active shrine worship.

Lastly, I had some fascinating conversations with Dr. Kaitlyn Ugoretz of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture in Nagoya. We discussed how Shinto is adapting to cyberspace. If you look online, there is a "Second Life Shrine Register" containing lists of virtual shrines that people have meticulously constructed and interact with daily in virtual worlds.

To conclude, I believe Shinto and immersive technology represent an incredibly rich intersection. Immersive tools can provide people with deeply meaningful, sacred experiences of place. This Friday, we are actually visiting a Shinto shrine community here in the UK to discuss how Shinto's formal practices might influence future immersive design. We want to understand how we can translate the profound, spatial experience of visiting a physical shrine into the virtual realm.

Thank you all very much.