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Eddies in the Stream: Networked Flows of Spiritual Commodities in Global Shinto

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Abstract

Studies have examined the circulation of material religious objects such as amulets (*omamori*), talismans (*ofuda*), and other lucky charms in Japan from a variety of perspectives. Previous scholarship has predominantly focused on the creation, consecration, distribution, and disposal of these items in a closed circuit delimited by the borders of Japan. In actuality, alternate currents of globalization carry Shinto religious practice in a multitude of directions and across national borders through the delicate orchestration of the movement of bodies, technology, ideas, money, media, and objects. Shrines in the United States and Canada play a crucial role as mediators of this movement, highlighting the importance of looking beyond the borders of Japan and mainstream patterns of circulation to see a much broader and more complex whole. This article expands our view of Shinto materiality by examining the transnational circulation of sacred items in global Shinto networks. Based on multisite digital ethnographic research in transnational Shinto communities, I focus on how negotiations of religious objectscapes—in particular, the flow of talismans needed to connect with the divine through one's domestic altar—shape relationships between Shinto shrines, their deities, practitioners, and other intermediaries. I argue that obstructions, interruptions, and diversions in the circulation of these sacred materials, rather than their free and continuous flow, create eddies in circulation, necessitating digital Shinto networks to manage them.

Keywords

Shinto, Globalization, Religious Practice, Material Religion, Digital Technology

As I climbed the imposing stone staircase leading up to Kameoka Hachimangū 亀岡八幡宮, a centuries-old Shinto shrine located in Sendai in Japan's northern Tōhoku region, my friend Nyri pointed out various areas of interest and explained the shrine's history. Together, we paid our respects at the main worship hall and visited the shrine office to request an *ofuda* 御札, a paper or wooden talisman imbued with the power of the resident deities called kami 神. For a small donation of coins, Nyri received the material object needed to enshrine her guardian kami, Hachiman Ōkami 八幡大神, for veneration in her home altar (*kamidana* 神棚). The two of us took a quiet moment as Nyri was overcome with emotion, shedding tears of joy and gratitude at her spiritual homecoming. After seventeen long years away from her home shrine, she had finally returned, though not in the way she had hoped for so long. While I was able to make the trek in person because I was living in Japan, Nyri visited virtually from her home in the United States through a wireless internet connection, a video chat application, and my smartphone's camera.

Nyri had attempted to receive a new *ofuda* for her home altar from the shrine several times in the past. She worked hard and tried to save up enough money and improve her health to make the pilgrimage in person. She waited through several long years during the height of the global COVID-19 pandemic, when the borders of Japan were closed to foreigners. Finally, she sought to rely on the kindness and mobility of close friends and willing strangers she met in transnational Shinto communities on social media who planned to travel to Sendai on her behalf. Yet each time, some obstacle arose that left her and her home altar feeling enervated, though not empty, as for years she had fashioned her own *ofuda* replicas as a focus for her devotional practice. After our visit, I received the precious *ofuda* in Nyri's place, packaged it carefully, and mailed it to her via post. Nyri celebrated on social media: "Thanks to a friend, after seventeen years I finally—*finally*!—got to bow before my gods in the place where they live. . . . Praying to my gods with an actual *ofuda* on my household altar sure feels different. Someday, somehow, I *will* make it home" (emphasis in original).

Nyri's story is deeply personal, but it is also incredibly familiar to many Shinto practitioners living outside Japan. For Japanese residents, receiving an *ofuda* from a shrine for domestic ritual practice is a relatively simple matter; one only has to take a short walk, or train ride, to one of the more than 100,000 shrines spread across the archipelago to receive the talisman directly from a Shinto priest. The general taboo in the contemporary shrine world against the bestowal of religious materials outside of physical person-to-person exchange on shrine grounds presents little obstacle to those seeking *ofuda* and other sacred items, and the easy circulation of sacred resources is taken for granted. But people like Nyri who seek to venerate kami outside of Japan often find themselves hundreds, if not thousands, of miles from the nearest Shinto shrine and unable to physically travel to it

frequently, whether it is located in Japan or elsewhere.[1] As a result, to begin or continue their religious practice at home, global Shinto practitioners must rely on digital and transnational networks, both formal and informal, involving the priests of overseas Shinto shrines and other sympathetic laypeople.

Studies have examined the circulation of material religious objects such as amulets (*omamori* お守り), talismans (*ofuda*), and other lucky charms in Japan from a variety of perspectives. Scholars have argued that these things help constitute the common religion of Japan,[2] exert their own agency in more-than-human networks,[3] and serve as sources of spiritual capital and aesthetic self-exploration.[4] Yet this body of research has predominantly focused on the creation, consecration, distribution, and disposal of these items in a closed circuit delimited by the borders of Japan. The unexamined boundaries of such inquiry, a product of "methodological nationalism," unintentionally yet implicitly reify definitions of Shinto as a religion limited to the modern Japanese nation-state.[5] This article seeks to provide a corrective by shifting the gaze of Shinto scholars overseas.

As Shinto studies can be productively expanded by taking a global perspective, research on globalization—particularly the globalization of religion—has much to gain from greater attention to the roles played by objects. Arjun Appadurai's framework for studying the cultural dimensions of globalization explicitly recognizes the impact of the movement (or "scapes") of bodies (ethnoscape), technology (technoscape), ideas (ideoscape), money (financescape), and media (mediascape).[6] Archaeologists Martin Pitts and Miguel John Versluys call for scholars to account for the movement of objects (i.e., the "objectscape") and the complex "human-thing entanglements" that these flows facilitate across time and space.[7] This proposal may seem obvious to scholars of Asian traditions such as Buddhism, in which the significance of the movement of sacred objects, such as manuscripts, sculptures, and relics, across borders is indisputable. The concept of the objectscape is

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[1] For more on the rise of contemporary global interest in Shinto and the development of transnational communities of Shinto practice online, see Kaitlyn Ugoretz, "Do Kentucky Kami Drink Bourbon? Exploring Parallel Glocalization in Global Shinto Offerings," *Religions* 13, no. 3 (2022): 257, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13030257; Kaitlyn Ugoretz, "Consuming Shinto, Feeding the Algorithm: Exploring the Impact of Social Media Software on Global Religious Aesthetic Formations," in *Introductions to Digital Humanities: Religions in Asia*, eds. Cornelis van Lit and James Henry Morris (De Gruyter, 2022), 289–316; and Kaitlyn Ugoretz, "Shinto Overseas and Online," *Bulletin of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture* 48 (2024): 45–53.

[2] Ian Reader and George J. Tanabe, Jr., *Practically Religious: Worldly Benefits and the Common Religion of Japan* (University of Hawai'i Press, 1998).

[3] See Inge Maria Daniels, "Scooping, Raking, Beckoning Luck: Luck, Agency and the Interdependence of People and Things in Japan," *Royal Anthropological Institute* 9 (2003): 619–638; Inge Maria Daniels, "Beneficial Bonds: Luck and the Lived Experience of Relatedness in Contemporary Japan," *Social Analysis* 56 (2012): 148–164; Fabio R. Gygi, "Things that Believe: Talismans, Amulets, Dolls, and How to Get Rid of Them," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 45/2 (2018): 423–452.

[4] See Ugoretz, "Consuming Shinto"; Laura Miller, *Occult Hunting and Supernatural Play in Japan* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2024), particularly chapters 4–6.

[5] See Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller, "Methodological Nationalism and the Study of Migration," *European Journal of Sociology* 43, no. 2 (2002): 217–240; Aike P. Rots, "Beyond Methodological Nationalism: Three Directions for Japanese Studies," *The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies* 41 (2023): 9–35, 11–12.

[6] Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 33.

[7] Martin Pitts and Miguel John Versluys, "Objectscapes: A Manifesto for Investigating the Impacts of Object Flows on Past Societies," *Antiquity* 95, no. 380 (2021): 367–381.

useful for discussing how both mainstream and "alternate currents"[8] of globalization carry Shinto religious practice in a multitude of directions and transform it in the process.

This article expands our view of Shinto materiality and the globalization of religion by examining the transnational circulation of sacred items in global Shinto networks, made up of Shinto shrines, practitioners, other intermediaries (like myself), and deities.[9] I introduce the rules and concerns that typically govern the circulation of these materials in Japan and examine how global Shinto practitioners and shrines contribute to the increased flow of these spiritual commodities overseas. My findings are based on multisite ethnographic research in transnational Shinto communities that I have conducted over the last eight years, in person in Japan and North America as well as digitally on several social media platforms such as Facebook and Discord. This article is informed by my personal experiences of helping dozens of Shinto practitioners outside Japan source the sacred items required for personal worship at home, either by traveling to shrines on behalf of someone (as in the case with Nyri) or serving as a source of information for which shrines ship overseas, the provenance of their enshrined deities, and what sacred items and services they have to offer. My work is indebted to the decades of hard work, dedication, and generosity of everyone in the global Shinto community who has helped establish the flows I follow here.

Tracing Alternate Currents

In his study of the transnational circulation of Reiki in the North Pacific, Justin B. Stein proposes an analytical framework for understanding "alternate currents" of religious practice. Stein draws attention to how the circulation of religious ideas and practices between East Asia and North America fundamentally transforms that which circulates as well as the agents involved in the process of the exchange. He identifies several interdependent aspects involved in the transnational circulation of religion that are particularly salient for tracing the movement of Shinto sacred items, namely, alternation, alterity, adaptation, and oscillation.[10]

Attending to the *alternating* nature of the flow of *ofuda* and *omamori* from shrines in Japan and overseas to practitioners around the globe reveals not only bidirectional but also *multidirectional* roots of circulation. The process of circulation is a reciprocal one in which religious "producers" (e.g., priests, teachers) and "consumers" (e.g., laypeople, students) influence the relationships between them as much as the flow of ritual practices and sacred items. A second meaning of alternation that Stein draws our attention to is *alterity*, the

[8] Justin B. Stein, *Alternate Currents: Reiki's Circulation in the Twentieth-Century North Pacific* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2023), 6–7.
[9] Pitts and Versluys, "Objectscapes," 368.
[10] Stein, *Alternate Currents*, 6–11.

definition of certain religions in certain contexts as "other." As Stein notes, alterity is "a kind of double edged blade: a value so honed that it is capable of surgery as well as violence."[11] For centuries, Shinto has at times functioned as a weapon wielded against the "other," both by and against those marked as "Japanese," and at other times, as in the current moment, offered an appealing alternative to correct the perceived flaws of mainstream Western religion and culture. One other nuance layered in the interplay of alternation and alterity that I highlight in this article is the alternative channels, which I call eddies, that religious practitioners and institutions may create when circulation is blocked.

These alternative channels tie directly into *adaptation*. Strategies to selectively transform practices, ideas, and structures to better suit a particular context are essential for the transmission of religions, regardless of whether this transmission takes place over geographical distance or time. However, these strategies are continuously negotiating between different agents—including Shinto organizations, shrines, priests, and lay practitioners—to manage authority and authenticity in the face of change. Finally, as we will see, these agents oscillate between theological, legal, historical, and practical claims to support their particular approach to shaping the flow of Shinto spiritual commodities.

Descriptions of globalization in general often rely on metaphors drawn from fluid dynamics, such as "circulation," "current," and "flow,"[12] which may conjure images of unrestricted and continuous movement across national borders. However, in recent decades scholars have emphasized the fundamental unevenness of globalization and the moments of friction (as theorized by Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing) produced in translocal encounters.[13] To attend to the friction present even amid flows or scapes, I propose that another fluid concept, the *eddy*, is productive for thinking about the transnational circulation of religion. Eddies are circular currents of water or air that flow counter to the dominant current they are situated in.[14] They are created when the dominant current encounters an obstacle and is redirected back on itself. Eddies are distinct formations that can be seen and felt and yet are still part of—and affect the motion of—the whole. If the obstacle to the general direction of flow is not removed, eddies may persist or dissipate, only to later reform. I demonstrate that it is often the obstructions, interruptions, and diversions—eddies in the stream—that drive innovation, in this case, the creation of digital, transnational Shinto networks. The constituents of these networks form alternative systems of circulation as needed in response to obstructions and turbulence in the flow of Shinto spiritual commodities. Though these currents often run counter to the mainstream

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[11] Stein, *Alternate Currents*, 8.
[12] See Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*; Stein, *Alternate Currents*.
[13] See Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Duke University Press, 1999); Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton University Press, 2005); David Harvey, *Spaces of Global Capitalism: A Theory of Uneven Geographical Development* (Verso, 2006); Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor* (Duke University Press, 2013).
[14] *Encyclopedia Britannica*, "Eddy," June 1, 2006, https://www.britannica.com/science/eddy-fluid-mechanics.

system of circulation proscribed by the shrine world in Japan, they continue to feed back into the fluid body of practices that is Shinto.

Circulating the Sacred

Juyohin 授与品 (lit. "bestowed item") is a term used by Shinto shrines to refer to a broad category of religious materials granted in exchange for a "donation" or "offering" (as opposed to a "fee"; see more discussion of ritual language later in this article). Through ritual purification and prayer, Shinto priests invest these items with the power of the enshrined deities to bless the holder. The most ubiquitous *juyohin* bestowed by shrines are *omamori* and *ofuda*. *Omamori* are consecrated amulets whose efficacy typically rests in warding off disaster (*yakuyoke* 厄除) and in attracting luck/fortune in all its varieties. This good fortune is often related to economic prosperity, good health, safe travels, achieving one's goals, guidance in the face of hardship, and making or strengthening relationships (particularly romantic ones). *Omamori* are designed to be kept on one's person: in a pocket, tied to a purse or backpack, or affixed to a surface like a car or even a computer. *Ofuda*, as illustrated in this article's opening ethnographic vignette, are talismans used to enshrine a portion of the specific kami of a given shrine for veneration in a personal altar, most often found in homes and places of business. In the ideal situation in which a person has received both an *omamori* and an *ofuda*, they remain in contact with the divine everywhere and at all times.

Attempting to translate *juyohin* into English presents a bit of a conundrum. On the one hand, these materials clearly function as "spiritual commodities" bound up in sacred economies where they are "destined for circulation and exchange."[15] In his work on the social lives of things, Arjun Appadurai draws on the work of George Simmel to define an economy as "a particular social form" that consists of "the exchange of sacrifice and gain."[16] Those things—material and immaterial—that are sacrificed and gained are "commodities," that is, objects of value. And in this framework, value arises from a subjective desire to possess a particular commodity and the relative difficulty in acquiring it.[17] Inge Maria Daniels similarly argues that sacred items such as *omamori* blur the boundaries between the economic and the spiritual, the gift and the commodity, posed by theologians and philosophers including John Calvin and Karl Marx.[18] It may be said that these objects' value is created by the interplay between pilgrims' desire for divine blessings and shrines' control over their creation, circulation, and destruction. *Omamori* and *ofuda* act as spiritual

[15] Patrick Geary, "Sacred Commodities: The Circulation of Medieval Relics," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge University Press, 1986), 169; Daniels, "Scooping, Raking, Beckoning Luck," 621.
[16] George Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, trans. Tom Bottomore and David Frisby (Routledge, 1978); Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), 4.
[17] Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*, 3.
[18] Daniels, "Scooping, Raking, Beckoning Luck," 632–633.

commodities that circulate in a sacred economy of exchange between shrines and laypeople. On the other hand, Jinja Honchō 神社本庁 (the National Association of Shrines, a private umbrella organization to which most Shinto shrines in Japan belong) and Shinto shrines in general explicitly resist using commercial language to discuss the circulation of *juyohin*. Although cash is exchanged for goods and services, the objects are not officially "bought" and "sold" for a certain "price"; rather they are "bestowed" in response to an "offering" (*osonae* お供え) of "first fruits" (*hatsuhoryō* 初穂料), a reference to historical offerings of rice and other crops or resources predating cash offerings.[19] This distinction is as mundane as it is sacred. As I explain in greater detail later, the definition of *juyohin* as noncommercial items has profound legal and economic implications for Shinto shrine operations.

In this article, I use the term "spiritual commodities" to describe *juyohin*, in spite of emic claims by actors like Jinja Honchō or etic claims like Daniels's that they "are neither sacred nor secular . . . [challenging] the supposed divide between the aesthetic value and utility of objects."[20] I do so not to trivialize the religious significance of *juyohin* nor to disprove Shinto theology, but rather to highlight the complex systems of value exchange—including, but certainly not limited to, currency—and networks of circulation in which they participate. Today, shrines choose from a variety of types and designs for *omamori* and other sacred items from catalogs showcasing the wares of manufacturing companies. They then invest the objects with religious value through rituals and advertise these objects on their websites and social media. In some cases, shrines even collaborate with manufacturers to produce bespoke items. Considering that this whole process is intended to capture the interest (and donations) of visitors and engage them in processes of transfer, I think it is fair to analyze *juyohin* as spiritual commodities.

As Daniels has also argued, spiritual commodities not only circulate within sacred economies but also act as circulators themselves through their divine agency. They are part of extended networks of human and nonhuman agents, but "through their various trajectories they also retain an independent agency rooted in their material properties."[21] They create a relationship between the bestowing shrine and the receiver, influencing the flow of bodies and objects to and from Shinto shrine sites. As extensions of the divine, they command respect and make demands on those who create, possess, and dispose of them, even if those demands may not always be met.

These spiritual commodities are "ephemeral objects which should be replaced regularly in order to remain effective."[22] That is, the efficacy of *juyohin* is considered to

[19] "Dairi sanpai nado ni chūi kanki ryūi jikō o kakuken ni tsūchi Jinja Honchō" 代理参拝などに注意喚起　留意事項を各県に通知　神社本庁, *Jinja Shinpō*, July 12, 2010: 1.
[20] Daniels, "Scooping, Raking, Beckoning Luck," 619.
[21] Daniels, "Scooping, Raking, Beckoning Luck," 619.
[22] Daniels, "Scooping, Raking, Beckoning Luck," 620.

diminish over time. The typical lifespan of *omamori* and *ofuda* is one year, and many take the first new year's visit to the shrine as an opportunity to return their old items and receive new ones.[23] Shinto orthopraxy dictates that these spiritual commodities should ideally be returned to the shrine and its enshrined deities from which they were originally received. Most shrines have a receptacle for collecting sacred items after they have fulfilled their purpose. Shrines then hold a ceremony to express gratitude for the blessings of the kami distributed through the sacred commodities and ritually dispose of the expired materials, often by burning them in a great bonfire. This ephemeral quality of *juyohin* encourages the ongoing circulation of sacred commodities as well as the maintenance of the relationship between an individual person and a particular shrine.

Safeguarding the Sacred

Although this article is mainly concerned with the postwar, particularly contemporary, circulation of sacred Shinto items, it is worth taking a moment to historicize these flows to avoid any misunderstanding that the globalization of Shinto ritual practice is a recent phenomenon. On the contrary, the spread of Shinto has been aided by migration for centuries (since at least the mid-nineteenth century, but possibly as early as the sixteenth century): Japanese emigrants physically brought their tutelary kami with them to the places they settled, such as Hokkaido, Brazil, and Hawai'i, and either imported materials or built new shrines, smaller sites for veneration called *hokora* 祠, and *kamidana*.[24] In the twentieth century, Shinto sects (*kyōha* 教派) and Shinto-based new religions also dispatched overseas missions, founding Shinto "churches" (*kyōkai* 教会) such as the Izumo Taishakyo Mission of Hawaii established in 1906.[25] The modern Japanese imperial project involved the widespread establishment of Shinto shrines and the requirement that citizens and colonized subjects alike participate in certain ritual performances of deference to the Japanese emperor and his divine ancestors.[26] After Japan's surrender and postwar occupation, the overwhelming majority of colonial shrines were dismantled. However, Shinto practice among Japanese diasporic communities continued, though in a diminished capacity. The situation was especially fraught in North America because of prewar suspicion. The surveillance of shrine communities, wartime confiscation or destruction of Shinto shrines, deportation of Japanese priests, and the forced incarceration of Japanese

[23] John K. Nelson, *A Year in the Life of a Shinto Shrine* (University of Washington Press, 1996), 155, 311.
[24] Suga Kōji, "A Concept of 'Overseas Shinto Shrines': A Pantheistic Attempt by Ogasawara Shōzō and Its Limitations," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 37, no. 1 (2010): 47–74; Nakajima Michio, "Shinto Deities that Crossed the Sea: Japan's 'Overseas Shrines,' 1868 to 1945," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 37, no. 1 (2010): 21–46; Frank Usarski and Rafael Shoji, "Buddhism, Shinto and Japanese New Religions in Brazil," in *Handbook of Contemporary Religions in Brazil*, eds. Bettina E. Schmidt and Steven Engler (Brill, 2017), 279–294, 280; Karli Shimizu, *Shinto Shrines Overseas: Religion, Secularity and the Japanese Empire* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2022).
[25] Izumo Taishakyo Mission of Hawaii, "History," accessed February 15, 2026, https://www.izumotaishahawaii.com/about/history.
[26] Suga, "Concept of 'Overseas Shinto Shrines'"; Michio, "Shinto Deities"; Todd A. Henry, *Assimilating Seoul Japanese Rule and the Politics of Public Space in Colonial Korea, 1910–1945* (University of California Press, 2014), 62–91; Helen Hardacre, *Shinto: A History* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 431–434.

Americans effectively stigmatized Shinto ritual practice.[27] As the borders of the Japanese empire collapsed to match those of the nation-state after World War II, the official administration of overseas Shinto shrines was dismantled. The attention of Shinto priests in postwar Japan, now organized under Jinja Honchō, focused inward on domestic recovery and the preservation of Shinto practices in the face of great political and social changes.

Returning to the present, it is a popular axiom that contemporary Shinto has no dogma nor doctrine.[28] In fact, Jinja Honchō codifies certain tenets and theological positions that the majority of shrines observe, at least nominally.[29] For example, in its 1980 charter, Jinja Honchō established several objectives for its membership. These include promoting reverence for the Shinto gods (particularly the divine ancestors of the Japanese emperor enshrined at Ise); preserving tradition, rituals, and moral principles; supporting the prosperity of all Shinto shrines; training Shinto priests and educating the public; and contributing to world peace.[30]

Jinja Honchō also seeks to regulate the circulation of spiritual commodities. An opinion piece published in Jinja Honchō's weekly publication *Jinja Shinpō* 神社新報 in 2000 traces formal guidelines for handling sacred materials from shrines with due reverence to the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Home Affairs during the Meiji period, when most shrine activities were overseen by government agencies as part of the unification of civil ritual and rule.[31] On November 27, 1979, Jinja Honchō sent a notice to its member shrines entitled "Matters Regarding the Proper Handling of Ofuda and Omamori":[32]

> As you have been informed several times prior to this notice, we consider it the responsibility of the priesthood to handle sacred items with the utmost care and protect the dignity of the [Shinto] faith. However, it appears that the business world's use of charms and talismans in commercial campaigns and the like has been on the rise in recent years. Therefore, we call for continued vigilance so that from now on the dignity of *ofuda* and *omamori* will not be defiled, and in order to prevent

[27] Bob Kumamoto, "The Search for Spies: American Counterintelligence and the Japanese American Community 1931–1942," *Amerasia Journal* 6, no. 2 (1979): 45–75; Duncan Ryūken Williams, *American Sutra: A Story of Faith and Freedom in the Second World War* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2019), 41; David K. Abe and Allison Imamura, "The Destruction of Shinto Shrines in Hawaii and the West Coast During World War II: The Lingering Effects of Pearl Harbor and Japanese-American Internment," *Asian Anthropology* 18, no. 4 (2019): 266–281.
[28] Jinja Honchō, "What Is Shinto?", accessed July 2, 2025, https://www.jinjahoncho.or.jp/en/shinto/; Stuart D. B. Pickens, *Historical Dictionary of Shinto*, 2nd ed. (Scarecrow Press, 2010), 1.
[29] Shimazono Susumu, "State Shinto and Religion in Post-War Japan," in *The SAGE Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, ed. James A. Beckford and N. J. Demerath, III (SAGE Publications, 2007), 704.
[30] Jinja Honchō, "Jinja Honchō kenshō" 神社本庁憲章, May 21, 1980. A copy of the charter can be found on the Mie Prefecture Gokoku Shrine website. See "Jinja Honchō kenshō ni tsuite" 神社本庁憲章について, Mieken Gokoku Jinja, accessed July 2, 2025, https://www.miegokoku.org/honchokensho; Shimazono, "State Shinto and Religion," 704.
[31] Akiba Yoshiaki, "Omamori to jōhōka shakai," *Jinja Shinpō*, March 20, 2000, 2.
[32] "Shinpu shusatsu nado no songen goji wo Jinja Honchō ga kasanete tsūtatsu," *Jinja Shinpō*, December 10, 1979, 2.

their disgraceful mishandling by common vendors, we request that you attend to and inform all those under your supervision of the following points:

1. As a rule, *ofuda* and *omamori* are to be bestowed directly by the shrine to worshippers individually and shall not be conferred to commercial enterprises in large quantities, as they may easily be treated as commercial goods.
2. These items shall not be bestowed at places outside of the shrine grounds, such as department stores and shops, as they may easily be mistaken for merchandise.
3. For-profit enterprises and other third parties are prohibited from brokering the distribution of *ofuda* and *omamori* to product buyers and sponsors.
4. It is prohibited to offer *ofuda* and *omamori* as accessories to general merchandise or used as promotional materials.
5. *Ofuda* and *omamori* shall not otherwise be bestowed in cases in which they would be indiscriminately given to unknown people, regardless of whether the persons have reverence for them, or if there is a risk that they may be treated impurely or disrespectfully.

The impetus for the document appears to have been a rash of cases of businesses mishandling sacred items, such as one in which a large department store procured an unprecedented number of *omamori* from a shrine, enshrined an *ofuda* in one corner of the building, and held a promotional sales event in which the *omamori* were sold commercially, presumably at a significant markup.[33] In 1980, Jinja Honchō officially incorporated the policy that "the handling of *ofuda* and *omamori* shall not defile (*yogoshite* 汚して) the dignity of the [Shinto] faith" as Article 8, Section 3 of the organization's charter. Since then, cautions against improper handling of *ofuda* and *omamori* and calls to take greater care appear regularly in clerical publications, including *Jinja Shinpō* and the monthly *Wakaki* 月刊若木. This discourse is particularly prevalent when many people in Japan traditionally receive prayers and sacred items, such as in December around the start of the Gregorian calendar's new year's season and in March during the period of academic exams.[34]

In summary, the official position of Jinja Honchō is that shrines must confer *juyohin* directly to worshippers in person on shrine grounds to protect the items' efficacy and the dignity of Shinto shrines and their resident kami. Though left unstated, it is safe to assume that there is an expectation that the items will be returned in a similar fashion. An important underlying presumption here is that people seeking *juyohin* live in Japan and either reside within the bestowing shrine's precincts or are able to travel to the shrine

[33] See also Kawamura Tadanobu 河村忠伸, "Kyōbushō-tachi kara hyakugojūnen shinpu shusatsu toriatsukai no Ayumi," *Jinja Shinpō*, February 12, 2024, 5.
[34] One such article published in *Jinja Shinpō* in 2021 notes that twenty-three articles on this topic had appeared in *Wakaki* since 1983 and that Jinja Honchō had made them available on a website used by members of the priesthood. "Shinpu shusatsu ni kansuru tsūchi nado aratamete shinshoku sen'yō saito ni Jinja Honchō," *Jinja Shinpō*, March 8, 2021, 2.

annually. Jinja Honchō does not comment on the popular practice of people receiving spiritual commodities on behalf of, or to be given as gifts to, friends or family, nor on their bestowal on overseas visitors.

The rise in popular use of the internet at the turn of the twenty-first century added another layer of complexity to handling the distribution of Shinto sacred commodities. Some shrines were quick to adopt the technology and construct websites, exploring the new affordances of the World Wide Web and social media platforms like Yahoo! Groups. However, in the early 2000s there was a significant conservative reaction in the shrine world against internet use that would not simply provide information about a shrine and advertise its services or enable communication with parishioners, but rather mediate Shinto ritual practice (*intānetto sanpai* インターネット参拝). In 2006, Jinja Honchō made its position on internet-mediated worship clear to its member shrines in a notice entitled "On Preserving the Dignity of Shinto Shrines as Related to the Internet."[35] One of the organization's concerns was the use of the internet to distribute *ofuda* and *omamori*:

> Recently, on certain shrine websites, there can be found cases in which the dignity concerning this aspect of belief has been corrupted. One example of this is the veneration or distribution of talismans and amulets. These cases cannot be overlooked because of the influence they have on other shrines. The pursuit merely of the utility and functionality of Internet use without considering the effect on Shinto shrine faith has given rise to this situation and, consequently, we fear that it is possible that shrines will lose the trust of parishioners and worshippers . . .
>
> Problems in the preservation of the dignity of Shinto shrines as related to the Internet [include] . . . [t]he distribution of talismans and amulets over the Internet in the same manner as the sale of commercial merchandise (taxable merchandise—i.e., not religious items), which is against the basic principle that talismans and amulets are distributed in front of the shrine building.[36]

Considering the earlier prohibitions by Jinja Honchō in the 1970s and 1980s, it is clear that concerns about the distribution of sacred items were not created, but were certainly transformed and exacerbated, by the popularization of the internet.

Over the last two decades, arguments in the shrine world opposing the distribution of sacred items through the internet have oscillated between the theological to the legal and logistical. The critique that treating sacred items, imbued with a portion of the spirit or power of the kami, without reverence as mere commodities offends the dignity of shrines and the gods is consistent. Jinja Honchō recommends that shrines keep the distinction

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[35] Kurosaki Hiroyuki, "Preserving the Dignity of Shinto Shrines in the Age of the Internet: A Social Context Analysis," in *Japanese Religions on the Internet: Innovation, Representation and Authority*, eds. Erica Baffelli, Ian Reader, and Birgit Staemmler (Routledge, 2011), 67–68.
[36] Kurosaki, "Preserving the Dignity," 68–69.

between *juyohin* and commercial goods crystal clear on their websites in several ways. For example, shrines should refrain from posting pictures of the sacred items they offer to avoid communicating the image of an online store. Descriptions of the sacred items should carefully explain that they are not common goods or souvenirs. While Jinja Honchō holds great sway over its member shrines, because the organization is technically voluntary, shrines are relatively free to choose whether to follow these guidelines.

Another reason for the shrine world's preservation of a difference between sacred items and merchandise is the protection of the shrine's legal status as religious juridical persons (*shūkyō hōjin* 宗教法人). According to the Religious Corporations Act (*Shūkyō hōjin hō* 宗教法人法) promulgated in 1951, shrines are exempt from paying taxes on income gained from donations for religious services.[37] Actions such as creating an online shrine "store" with clearly listed "goods" and "prices" that can be added to a digital shopping cart and purchased could be legally construed as a commercial transaction and endanger Shinto shrines' nonprofit, tax-exempt status. This would have profound ramifications for shrines' already-strained financial circumstances.

Finally, the creation and upkeep of a shrine website for distributing sacred items and managing requests from all over Japan require significant resources. Running a successful operation takes a lot of time, energy, expertise, and money that most shrines do not have at their disposal, whereas circulation centered on the physical shrine grounds, typically the shrine office, simply requires someone to be available during operating hours to receive visitors and exchange sacred items in return for a cash donation. Although web design and domestic on-demand shipping and delivery have become more easily accessible and less costly in recent years, managing scores of individual packages and the personal information of the recipients is no simple task, particularly if a shrine does not have multiple staff or volunteers to handle the task. In addition, if a shrine were to entertain requests from overseas Shinto practitioners, they would also have to take on the burden of providing foreign-language translations on their website and in online messages and international shipping. The majority of shrines understandably are not aware enough of the global community, willing, or able to do so.

The discourse around the circulation of *omamori* and *ofuda* suggests that these various concerns are resolved by shrines carefully following the principle that sacred items should only be distributed on shrine grounds upon an individual's in-person visit and their offering of a cash donation. Internet use should be limited to only raising public awareness of a shrine and its deities, traditions, and blessings in such a way that does not stray into advertisement and lead to the confusion of sacred items with common goods. While some shrines continued to distribute *omamori* and *ofuda* through the internet, most complied

[37] "Religious Corporations Act," Japanese Law Translation, accessed July 2, 2025, https://www.japaneselawtranslation.go.jp/en/laws/view/3898/en.

with Jinja Honchō's prohibition.[38] Instead, shrines tended to use their websites to advertise their spiritual commodities, often providing photos and descriptions of charms and talismans and, less commonly, the requested donation amount. Few shrines manage an online store connected to their website, but those that do are careful to draw a clear distinction between commodities and sacred items. In some cases, they will ship spiritual commodities, but only domestically, whereas in others, shrines will gather the items to be picked up by the recipient in person.

Shinto shrines under the umbrella of Jinja Honchō in postwar Japan have established a framework for the "proper" circulation of sacred materials by oscillating between theological claims on the ontological status of items imbued with the divine essence of the kami, as well as tensions with the legal status of shrines as private noncommercial organizations. Generally speaking, there has been little in the way of public opposition to these principles up to the twenty-first century. As a result, the supposedly "natural" flow of *juyohin* from shrine to worshipper and back again tends to be taken for granted, obscuring how quickly this system of circulation can break down because of a number of factors, including disaster, disability, and distance.

Rerouting the Sacred

As illustrated by Nyri's story in the introduction to this article, international travelers are welcome to receive *omamori* and *ofuda* from shrines upon their visit, but there are practically no official routes for circulation beyond Japan's borders, which forecloses the possibility of participating in an ongoing relationship with a particular shrine and renewing the *ofuda* required for veneration at one's home altar. My conversations with Shinto priests in Japan about this dilemma suggest that they are not particularly concerned with retrieving the spiritual commodities that foreigners receive after they return to their home countries. These sacred items are simply considered removed from circulation. It is difficult for many clergy to imagine that there is a significant number of people outside Japan who desire to venerate their deities and seek their protection abroad. At best, priests in Japan envision foreigners returning to Japan regularly to return and renew their sacred materials. Meanwhile, overseas practitioners often care a great deal about handling *ofuda* and *omamori* with respect and returning them to a shrine for proper ritual disposal. And for those who for one reason or another, including financial hardship and mobility issues, cannot travel to Japan to receive these sacred items in person, acquiring and installing an *ofuda* in one's home altar for worship is a nonstarter.

[38] Kurosaki, "Preserving the Dignity," 72–73.

To overcome the fundamental lack of overseas access to spiritual commodities from shrines in Japan, transnational Shinto practitioners around the globe carve new channels and establish alternate currents for material circulation out of necessity. These currents are flexible and multidirectional, involving the collaboration of a handful of overseas Shinto shrines, their members, individual practitioners, and digital networks that sprawl across various web pages and several social media platforms. Some of these currents are ad hoc and temporary, evaporating when individual needs are met, whereas others are institutionalized over time to build relationships between shrines and practitioners and ensure reliable circulation for the foreseeable future.

Personal Flows

Like the arrangement Nyri and I made, transnational Shinto practitioners form personal relationships with each other online and create networks of mutual aid. Members of online Shinto communities living in Japan or planning a trip there often serve as proxies for others, offering to make time to visit particular shrines on their behalf, receiving sacred items, and then sending these materials to the distant party after they return home. These requests may be made in public or on community forums, but they are typically negotiated over direct messages between the two parties involved, which can make these relationships difficult to track. Some may post messages of celebration and gratitude on receipt of Shinto spiritual commodities in a shared forum, leaving textual traces—even photographic evidence—that circulation is taking place.[39]

Digital Shinto communities create their own resources to help interested people navigate these complex flows.[40] For example, the most active private Shinto community (or "server") on the instant messaging social media platform Discord provides guidance on how to acquire spiritual commodities in its Frequently Asked Questions and Sacred Items channels. The FAQ file shared by the Facebook group Shinto, Religion of the Forest similarly addresses several common questions such as: What items must I get from a shrine, and what may be obtained elsewhere or handmade? I live in a country where there are no shrines—how do I obtain an *ofuda*?

One key issue that veteran digital community members seek to address is the obtaining of sacred items through unorthodox channels, such as online vendor platforms like eBay, Amazon, and Etsy. Echoing Jinja Honchō's policy as set out in "Matters Regarding the Proper Handling of Ofuda and Omamori," community guidelines prohibit the purchase of spiritual commodities through resellers and state that *ofuda* and *omamori* must be obtained

[39] Ugoretz, "Consuming Shinto," 307.
[40] Here I identify by name only public Facebook groups and Shinto priests and other individuals who are publicly active in the global Shinto community and have given permission to be identified. To protect the privacy of private social media groups and users, some of whom would be put at risk by being identified as Shinto practitioners, I have omitted or changed relevant identifying information.

directly from a legitimate shrine and helpfully provide lists of such shrines overseas (though how global Shinto communities authenticate the legitimacy of shrines is a topic beyond the scope of this article). This position is somewhat complicated when overseas shrines like Kannagara Earth Shrine in Kissimmee, Florida, use platforms such as Etsy to advertise their spiritual commodities and streamline the order process.[41] Not all advice is strictly orthodox and remains contested among overseas shrines and in the global Shinto community. For example, community members share tips for overcoming shipping limitations set by shrines or national governments, such as when one finds a shrine in Japan or another country that ships domestically, they can use an international mail forwarding service to receive the items from the shrine on the person's behalf and then send them to their home address.[42] On one occasion, to overcome international shipping blockades between the United States and Russia, a Shinto practitioner received permission from a certain priest (after being rejected by another) to use a mail forwarding service to ship an *ofuda* from the United States to a country from which the service provider could forward the package to Russia. These alternate currents of circulation run contrary to the maxim that sacred items should be received directly from a shrine and may reveal smaller eddies that form within larger eddies owing to specific national contexts and disagreements in the global Shinto community.

Another central focus is shrine etiquette. Digital Shinto communities often provide guidance for new members who are reaching out to shrines to request sacred items for the first time to improve their chances of success, as well as to preempt any potentially rude or otherwise inappropriate communications from reflecting badly on the global Shinto practitioners as a whole. These community resources include explanations for how to set up a home altar, contact information for overseas shrines that ship *ofuda* (to be installed in the altar for worship) domestically or internationally, email templates for inquiries, lists of respectful terms of address for Shinto priests, and explanations for how to use noncommercial language when discussing requests and donations.[43]

Aided by the connections and capabilities afforded by social media platforms, individual Shinto practitioners worldwide form networks of mutual aid to sustain their ritual practice. These digital communities are born out of necessity: to help members access and navigate systems of sacred material circulation that are not designed for transnational participation. When certain channels are blocked, global Shinto practitioners work together to redirect the flow of spiritual commodities, either temporarily or more permanently.

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[41] Kannagara Inari Salon (store), accessed September 1, 2025, https://www.etsy.com/shop/KannagaraInariSalon.
[42] Discussion on sacred items and international shipping, private Discord server, March 23, 2025; May 17, 2025; June 28, 2025.
[43] For example, see the guide compiled by Rev. Olivia Bernkastel, a Canadian Japanese Konkokyō priestess living in Japan and pillar of the global Shinto community, with assistance from Rev. Kuniko Kanawa based in the United States. Olivia Bernkastel, "Shinto Home and Overseas Worship Guide (in a General Sense)," Living with Kami, May 8, 2023, accessed May 10, 2025, https://www.livingwithkami.com/worship.

Institutional Flows

Shinto practitioners living outside Japan are not the only agents involved in shaping these transnational flows. A few dozen Shinto shrines in active operation outside Japan act as key nodes in the network facilitating the circulation of spiritual commodities around the world. The majority of these shrines are "branch shrines" (*bunsha* 分社) of "main" or "parent shrines" (*hongū* 本宮 or *honsha* 本社) based in Japan. Many, but not all, of these shrines are indirectly affiliated with Jinja Honchō as branches of member shrines. In some cases, these branch shrines are able to receive the unconsecrated raw materials for spiritual commodities in person or by mail from the main shrine or from one of the companies that manufacture the bags and other objects, as they have not yet been invested with spiritual power and do not yet require special handling. In other cases, the priests of the branch shrines periodically return to Japan to receive sacred materials directly from the main shrine, carefully conveying these items home, from where they are then distributed. As many shrines in Japan do, overseas shrines design their own distinct *omamori*, votive prayer boards (*ema* 絵馬), and other spiritual commodities to adapt to local cultural and historical contexts and promote the unique characteristics of their enshrined deities, even attracting the interest of those who enjoy collecting different items. For example, Hawai'i Kotohira Shrine/Hawai'i Dazaifu Tenmangū offers an "808" *omamori*, a reference to the local telephone area code, with an image of the Hawai'ian Islands and a rainbow on the front of the pouch.

Most overseas shrines willing to ship spiritual commodities only do so domestically, often because of the high price and complexity of international shipping. A handful of shrines located in North America are vital for the transnational circulation of spiritual commodities. Shinto Shrine of Shusse Inari in America (hereafter Shusse Inari Shrine) in California, Kamunabi Ban'yū Ko-Shintō Shrine (hereafter Kamunabi Shrine) in Maryland, Kannagara Earth Shrine in Florida, and Tsubaki Grand Shrine of North America in Canada accept requests to send sacred items internationally. As these shrines in the United States and Canada are willing to serve international practitioners, they play a disproportionate role in the global Shinto community. This has many interesting effects on kami worship outside Japan that deserve greater examination, such as how the variety of kami that can be enshrined for home worship through an *ofuda* is functionally limited to the deities of these four shrines.[44]

In Japan it is sometimes considered improper to return expired spiritual commodities to a shrine different from the one from which it was originally received, and the return must be

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[44] Kamunabi Shrine is unusual in that, in extreme circumstances, resident priest Rev. Kuniko Kanawa will invest an *ofuda* with the sacred essence of the kami of another shrine for installation in one's home altar. See Kuniko Kanawa, "Amulets," Atelier Kanawa, accessed July 7, 2025, https://www.atelierkanawa.com/amulets.

made in person at a dedicated receptacle. However, overseas shrines readily accept old *ofuda* and *omamori* obtained from other shrines for proper ritual disposal. Practitioners can mail these retired items to the shrine, collected in advance of the new year, typically with a small donation to support the ritual bonfire event. Offering this service also provides overseas shrines with an opportunity to encourage people to request new items and establish an ongoing relationship.

Overseas Shinto priests are aware of the logistical and theological issues in Japan concerning shipping spiritual commodities to people who are unable to visit their shrine in person. Ensuring due reverence for these items and appropriate handling to preserve their sanctity continues to be a priority for them. But rather than decline to actively participate in the transnational circulation of sacred items, these priests devise practical and ritual methods to resolve these problems. For example, Rev. Hasegawa of Shusse Inari Shrine wraps *ofuda* and *omamori* in several protective layers of paper, cardboard, and bubble wrap so that even if the outer layers become dirty and damaged, the items within remain clean and free of any wear and tear. In addition, she marks the outside of the packaging with bright red stickers that say "Fragile: Please Handle with Care" and "Do Not Bend" to communicate to the couriers that they need to use extra care in handling the parcel. Rev. Hasegawa even posts photos of the packaging process online to allay shrine supporters' anxieties that the sacred items will arrive with their blessings intact.

Several priests in North America with whom I spoke explained that they hold an additional purification ceremony to spiritually protect the virtue of the items in transit. "After all," one priest explained to me in 2023, "Shinto ritual is about purification and protection. So we take proper precautions. We find new aspects of our lives that need a little help from *kami-sama*, like cars and air travel, but the ritual always stays the same. Why should the postal service suddenly be a problem?" As we worked late one night in a cramped apartment to prepare for one shrine's fall festival in 2022, another priest told me that the challenge for them is preparing so many packages for delivery: "I don't have a dedicated shrine office or staff. It's just me, filling dozens, sometimes hundreds, of requests each month. I often need to work late into the night just printing, cutting, sealing, and packing."[45]

Another remarkable difference between shrines in Japan and those in North America is the way that they handle payment (i.e., the transfer of monetary donations) to facilitate the circulation of spiritual commodities. The vast majority of shrines in Japan do not, or cannot legally or practically, accept "cashless" (i.e., electronic) payment.[46] This issue continues to be a topic of concern for member shrines of Jinja Honchō. The landscape is quite different for shrines abroad, depending on where they are located. For example, the

[45] I conducted these interviews in 2022 with Shinto priests in the United States and Canada.
[46] In the last few years, especially since the outbreak of COVID-19, there has been a slow shift toward enabling shrines in Japan to use prepaid electronic services like PayPal. See David Chart, "Cashless Payments Revisited," *Mimusubi* (blog), March 21, 2025. https://www.mimusubi.com/2025/03/21/cashless-payments-revisited/.

state and federal restrictions placed on religious groups registered as 501(3)(c) nonprofit organizations in the United States, as well as the user agreements of many financial corporations and money transfer platforms, allow registered Shinto shrines to receive tax-exempt electronic donations. Overseas shrines are often at such a distance from their supporters that cash donations are simply out of the question. As a result, overseas shrines often accept payment via credit card or PayPal.

Overseas shrines also differ on how exactly they facilitate the receipt of orders for sacred items and electronic payment. Some maintain the majority opinion among Japanese shrines that the use of electronic "shopping carts" constitutes a commercial transaction and must be avoided. As a result, shrines including Shusse Inari Shrine and Hawai'i Kotohira Shrine/Hawai'i Dazaifu Tenmangū provide a request form that one can fill out and submit electronically and then send payment separately. Other shrines do not see implementing electronic "carts" or "shopping bags" as necessarily degrading to the exchange; like eBay, their use is purely practical as online shopping services offer a ready-to-use solution for accepting orders, receiving customer information, processing payment, and even printing shipping labels.

Flows Interrupted

These alternate currents are not always stable. For example, when Tsubaki Grand Shrine of America (formerly located in Washington state) suddenly announced its closure in the summer of 2023, one of the immediate concerns of Shinto practitioners with long-standing ties to the shrine (and others who relied on, or planned to rely on, the shrine as a source of *ofuda* and *omamori*) was where to return their old sacred items and replace them with new ones at the new year.[47] Other shrines in North America stepped in to fill the void, particularly Tsubaki Grand Shrine of America's sister shrine in British Columbia, Canada. In response to the increased international demand for spiritual commodities, particularly *ofuda* to enshrine the kami of Tsubaki in one's home altar, Tsubaki Grand Shrine of Canada significantly expanded its services and offerings.[48] Shusse Inari Shrine in Los Angeles also saw an influx of new supporters. Later in 2023, the former priest of Tsubaki Grand Shrine of America Rev. Lawrence Koichi Barrish founded the aforementioned Kannagara Earth Shrine, reestablished old channels for the circulation of sacred Shinto materials, and created new ones (such as the Etsy store mentioned earlier).

Though overseas Shinto shrines and practitioner networks work together to maintain the transnational flow of spiritual commodities, some circumstances are simply beyond their

[47] Nyri Bakkalian, "Tsubaki Shrine of America Closing Abruptly, Stunning US Shinto Community," Unseen Japan, May 4, 2023, accessed May 7, 2025, https://unseen-japan.com/tsubaki-grand-shrine-closure/.
[48] Private correspondence, October 30, 2024.

control. The outbreak of the global COVID-19 pandemic was one such circumstance that has had a profound impact on Shinto shrines. Suddenly, governments closed inter- and intra-national borders and established social distancing protocols. Global tourism and supply chains were stymied. The flow of people and sacred materials in and out of Japan was obstructed, and even those global Shinto practitioners who had the means and intention to physically travel to domestic shrines were largely rendered unable to do so. Shrines around the world, including those in Japan, adapted and innovated their operations and practices to meet the moment and restore the circulation of sacred materials.[49] Many shrines that had previously only conducted prayer services for in-person worshippers began to explore virtual, hybrid, or even asynchronous options, at least temporarily. Shrines in Japan and overseas took precautions to protect shrine staff and visitors, reducing the need for proximity and exchange of cash and goods that could become a vector for disease transmission by creating or updating their websites to showcase their spiritual commodities and receive requests for delivery. Though some shrines discontinued shipping *juyohin* after a few years, once the pandemic had passed its peak, others continue to offer these services that they began during the COVID-19 pandemic era.

Shifts in international relations can also significantly affect the transnational flow of Shinto spiritual commodities. For example, one practitioner living in Russia explained that they cannot receive sacred items shipped from shrines in the United States because of the suspension of mail service to the region since March 2022 in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and ongoing war.[50] Their only option to overcome these restrictions is to use an expensive commercial mail forwarding service or to rely on the assistance of other global Shinto practitioners. Another practitioner in Europe worried that the recent US trade war and tariff policy, after the second inauguration of President Donald Trump in 2025, will hike the price of international shipping from the United States. They mused that if the shipping and customs costs did not decrease before the new year, they might have to send the sacred items they had received from shrines in the United States to another shrine in Europe for proper disposal. During a discussion on receiving *ofuda* via post in the Shinto Discord group, members living in the United Kingdom and the Middle East observed that American practitioners enjoy a sort of privilege, as there are several overseas shrines located in the United States, making the reception of spiritual commodities less expensive (though still prohibitive for some Americans). In addition, several of my interlocutors explained in interviews that they planned to hold onto their *ofuda* and *omamori* past the new year so that they would still have some material connection to the kami they venerate

[49] For more on the adaptation of digital technology by Shinto shrines in Japan, see Kaitlyn Ugoretz, "Shrines at a Distance: Shinto Ritual Practice and Technology During COVID-19," *Nagoya shiritsu daigaku ningen bunka kenkyūsho nenpō* 19 (2024): 58–62.
[50] Discussion on receiving and returning sacred items overseas, private Discord server, June 27–28, 2025. See United States Postal Service, "International Service Disruptions," accessed July 2, 2025, https://about.usps.com/newsroom/service-alerts/international/welcome.htm.

until they can secure replacements. This is a common strategy for dealing with lack of access to sacred items that predates more recent obstacles such as epidemics and war.

Like the flow of water through a river, which diverts in new directions when the way forward is blocked, global Shinto networks adapt to disruptions by creating alternate currents to sustain their practice. At first, the current turns back on itself, creating eddies. But over time, as contingency becomes routinized, the pressure produced by consistent circulation may carve new, more permanent channels. Individual people and shrines form digital communities on social media to overcome perennial obstacles, such as physical distance, as well as unforeseen complications like pandemic restrictions. These online platforms facilitate synchronous communication, allowing members to problem-solve in real time, as well as asynchronous communication, developing over time an archive of members' discussions and solutions for future reference. Members help each other to mitigate the unreliability of access to Shinto spiritual commodities they experience as a result of practicing Shinto outside Japan. These adaptations may quickly dissipate, but they also have the potential to persist.

Conclusion

In this article, I have examined the significant impact that alternate currents created in response to obstacles have on transnational religious communities. Eddies in the circulation of sacred materials arise in response to moments of friction or blockage, reconfiguring the relationships between humans, things, institutions, and deities and challenging mainstream doctrine and practices. I have examined the transnational circulation of two specific kinds of Shinto sacred materials—*ofuda* and *omamori*—and the networks, both physical and virtual, that Shinto shrines and practitioners around the world have established to support it. The ongoing globalization of Shinto is uneven, providing greater access to practitioners in the Global North, especially the United States, and favoring certain shrine lineages. Access is contingent on several factors, both personal (e.g., socioeconomic status) and impersonal (e.g., international conflicts). The unreliability of access to Shinto religious materials is partly because the vast majority of Shinto shrines under the umbrella of Jinja Honchō and the rules that govern their handling of spiritual commodities at the very least overlook, if not reject, ritual practice abroad. To maintain due reverence for the objects imbued with the essence of the kami and avoid the appearance of engaging in commercial transactions, Shinto priests tend to emphasize the importance of receiving such objects directly on shrine grounds after worship.

The circulation of *ofuda* and *omamori* domestically in Japan is susceptible to many of the same disruptions faced by shrines and practitioners in other countries (though perhaps not to the same degree), such as disasters, distance, and disability. It is these obstructions, interruptions, and diversions that drive innovation, by creating the opportunity for new

modes of circulation and practice. Particularly since the global COVID-19 pandemic, shrines in Japan have slowly begun to explore alternate currents as well, such as creating websites to help ship sacred items domestically or internationally and performing private ceremonies remotely and online.[51] There is even growing awareness of people who want to receive *ofuda* and *omamori* overseas and support shrines in Japan through more direct channels.[52] Global Shinto communities and the networks they have formed online offer potential solutions for when these problems arise. These include ritual practices such as the performance of additional modes of purification and protection for items sent in the mail, the use of online platforms to structure the exchange of sacred items, and the acceptance of cashless donations. It is conceivable that there may come a day when global Shinto communities' alternate currents become the mainstream. Or perhaps yet more unforeseen obstacles will crop up, inspiring new eddies to form.

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[51] See Kaitlyn Ugoretz, "Patching the Pandemic: Digital Technology in Shinto Shrines' 'New Normal,'" in *Lived Religion in Japan*, eds. David Quinter and Barbara Ambros (Bloomsbury Academic, forthcoming).
[52] David Chart, "Shinpu shusatsu no atsukai," *Jinja Shinpo*, May 6, 2024, 5.