In 1970 scientists and administrators of Japan’s Space Development Agency were ready to launch the country’s first satellite. Under great pressure to succeed and thus further demonstrate to the world Japan’s continuing postwar recovery, they carried out their plans meticulously. Then they took one final precaution. Shortly before the launch, senior representatives of the agency visited Chichibu Shinto shrine located near Tokyo. Their goal: to petition its deity Myōken (the North Star) that their endeavor might succeed. When the rocket blasted off and placed a satellite in its intended orbit, these same individuals made a return trip to express their gratitude before moving on to other projects (Sakurai, Nishikawa, and Sonoda, 1990:14).

By the end of the tumultuous 1960s, the Japanese people had much to be proud of in addition to their new space program. They had successfully staged the 1964 Olympic games in a rebuilt capital city, and they had the most advanced high-speed train system on the planet. Their economy was growing at a double digit rate as corporations like Sony, Datsun/Nissan, and Toyota became household words around the globe. Significantly, they had managed these accomplishments while dealing with labor protests at leading manufacturers and disruptive student demonstrations at most major universities. As other developed countries took notice of these achievements and with Japanese-produced consumer goods reaching markets worldwide, people wanted to know just how the Japanese had managed
to do it only thirty years after one of the world’s most devastating wars had left their major cities in ruins. What made Japan’s society and culture so “unique” that the nation and its people could rise from the rubble in phoenixlike fashion?

It is now apparent that many of the domestic explanations offered little save a diverse range of theories together called “nihonron” or “nihonjinron”—theorizing about contemporary “Japaneseness.” Beginning in the early 1970s, publishing houses fed what seemed an insatiable public appetite for information on how the Japanese people (or their culture, language, or history) had turned out as they did (see Yoshino 1992). What appeared to Western (and, to be fair, many Japanese) observers as contradictions in the drive toward a rational industrialized society on a par with those in the West—the fact of rocket scientists petitioning a Shinto deity or a democracy that still retained an emperor—worked as a kind of reverse orientalism. Part analysis and part homily, explanations about success as well as contradictions were attributed to Japan’s fabled groupism, homogeneity, community-as-family bonds, the prevalence of spirits in material objects, and so on. The more totalizing the theory, the better it sold.

While targeting domestic audiences, the content of nihonjinron publications not only shaped popular discourse but also had an impact on governmental policymakers and trade negotiators. Seeking to deflect critical analysis of key power relations within state and corporate bureaucracies, spokesmen deftly combined ahistorical and cultural reifications with Western misconceptions and stereotypes about Asia and Japan. Aided also by a number of U.S. and European academics, called “the Chrysanthemum Club” (Patrick Smith 1997) for their emphasis on innate Japanese virtues that stress harmony, peaceful coexistence with nature, and mystical religious sensibilities, Japan’s success appeared to be the “sanitary consequence of altogether agreeable [social] arrangements” (ibid.:18). As for those rocket scientists visiting the Shinto shrine, nihonjinron writers might have answered that, unlike their Western counterparts, Japanese rocket scientists see no opposition between their physics and computations, and the spirits of powerful deities (kami) that animate life, influence physical phenomenon, and enhance creativity. After all, this perspective is part of Japan’s cultural heritage, and besides, what does it hurt?

The trend of quick-and-profitable theorizing about what constitutes Japaneseness has abated, as has the Japanese economic “miracle” that engendered and sustained it, but the concern with cultural identity remains an integral part of social discourse. If anything, the Japanese today are
searching for answers and directions like never before. The passing of an emperor, the prolonged economic recession, the Gulf War, delinquency and violence in Japan’s lauded educational system, a series of corruption scandals among politicians, terrorism within Japan, rising unemployment—the list could go on. In each case, fundamental assumptions about the order and stability of social life in Japan have been shaken and dislodged. And if socially related turmoil wasn’t enough, the Kobe earthquake in 1995 (in which over five thousand people died in an area thought safe) added a harsh, physical dimension to the rush of paradigm-shifting events. After two decades of economic growth and relative political stability, citizens were now forced to confront what it means to be Japanese in a land where change and uncertainty are as much a part of social realities as they are of geological instabilities.

In times like these, precedent has shown that people frequently turn to religion. One might suppose that Buddhism would enter the picture, with its existentially soothing philosophies of impermanence and transience. But as these situations and incidents played out in the early 1990s, the Japanese were less enamored with Buddhist philosophy than with their other, and older, tradition of reassurance: Shinto. While cultural and religious trends come and go, shrine Shinto remains one of the most long-lived of all Japan’s institutions, largely because (after nearly fourteen centuries) it continues to help form, orient, and empower a sense of local and ethnic identity. Still relevant in the shaping of contemporary cultural identity as well, Shinto’s social presence—amplified by seasonal festivals, the influences they have on communal dynamics, as well as the rituals provided by local shrines to mark life transitions and manage anxieties—is an institution that is “culturally loud” (Parkin 1992:15). Shrines large and small are found everywhere one goes. Both urban and rural shrines stage numerous festivals, requiring significant resources and many participants, that delineate certain kinds of activities as falling within the realm of deities. And yet the “volume” of these events might never reach the level of conscious awareness among their participants about exactly why they are carried out. In fact, an event that a scholar might interpret as representative of cultural values and religious sensibilities—such as a local festival—might be so taken for granted among its participants that it is not even considered to be a “religious” activity.

Consider the following further examples: one of the world’s most powerful electron microscopes (at Osaka University) until recently had a Shinto amulet attached to it (Sakurai et al. 1990:11); Japan’s first and
highly controversial nuclear waste repository was dedicated by a Shinto priest waving a purificatory wand over the site in 1992; after a small shrine was relocated for a runway expansion project at Narita International Airport, one of its torii gateways remained for years because local people feared reprisals from the shrine’s agitated deities (*Asahi shinbun* 1998). Many companies and corporations continue to venerate in-house shrines whose deities include the company’s founder, are specific to the geographical place of business, or are related to the product in some way (Uno 1987; Lewis 1993). Ise Grand Shrines spent over two billion yen (U.S. $16 million) between 1990 and 1993 to rebuild their imperial sanctuaries, which were in no actual need of physical repair but which, following a custom at least 1,200 years old, are thought to require spiritual rejuvenation every twenty years in order to keep the imperial institution (and, by extension, the nation) strong. Additionally, millions of average Japanese continue to visit shrines and petition an array of deities for everything from purifying a new car, to asking for a marriage partner (or a baby, or success in school), to prayers in gratitude for *goriyaku*, those benefits received thanks to the intercession of *kami*, Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and, very possibly, certain demons as well.

In addressing what appears to Western eyes as an exotic and incongruous blending of reason and superstition, often displayed in photogenic juxtapositions of present and past, this study will look in depth at one important Shinto shrine (*jinja*) in the city of Kyoto: Kamo Wake Ikazuchi Jinja, more commonly called Kamigamo Jinja. What began as a project to document and interpret this important shrine’s yearly cycle of rituals and festivals became an exploration into the connection between overt activities that, depending on the interpreter, may or may not be religious but that seem to be of continuing relevance for the cultural identities of contemporary men and women.

A number of English-language works provide research and commentary on particular rituals and festivals (Casal 1967; Ellwood 1973; Sadler 1976; Yanagawa 1988; Ashkenazi 1993) or historical and cultural overviews of Shinto traditions (Hardacre 1989; Brown and Araki 1964; Earhart 1989). This study, rather, encompasses fifteen months of firsthand observation of a variety of shrine rituals, exploring the often problematic manner in which such rituals are staged, the day-to-day functioning of the shrine as an institution and the people who work there, and how a repertoire of traditions becomes involved in the economic, political, and social discourses of modernity. Although some of these topics can be found
in my exploration of Suwa Shrine in Nagasaki (Nelson 1996b), here I take a more sustained anthropological tack in assessing these themes.

At the time of my fieldwork, a particular juncture of politics, culture, and economics was once again reshaping the institution of shrine Shinto, not to mention the way in which Japanese regarded the social significance of these institutions and their ritual activities. An example of this book’s ethnographic focus, identification as a member of the shrine’s founding clan, the Kamo, is based on lineage and genealogy but also on control of certain ritual activities and historiographic representations validating this control. But because of demographic change and occupational mobility that has affected northern Kyoto and displaced a number of key Kamo households, there are growing challenges to this privileged position. Pressure from non-Kamo individuals, many more than willing to make substantial financial contributions to both clan and shrine, aims to gain them participation in ritual affairs as a way of validating their own identity (or enhancing their status) as Japanese or as residents of Kyoto. For a young man to ride a horse at full speed in Kamigamo’s kurabe-uma ritual of early May (discussed in Chapter 7), if traced to its historical origins, is akin to traveling a path that lands back the early sixth century, predating the city of Kyoto itself.

Such maneuverings of agency reference themes including the symbolic construction of communities and the role of social memory, what constitutes the nature of locality, how both of those themes may (or may not) be sacralized, and the way they intersect with the politics of historical representation and cultural nationalism. Taken as a whole, these “cultural productions of public identity” (Fox 1990:4) actively shape conceptions of what it means to be Japanese in the modern world. As such, they may be seen as part of worldwide movements to reclaim, refashion, and otherwise realign one’s identity in societies that have, until recently, afforded little latitude for doing so. To paraphrase Clifford Geertz, people today want to hold beliefs about religion, locality, and the value of work rather than be held by them (1968:17).

As might be expected, these efforts are all too often appropriated into nationalistic agendas where ready associations concerning history, values, and consensual meanings serve as blueprints for imagination and social action. But some caution is advised before jumping to the conclusion that contemporary Shinto rituals and shrines contribute directly to nationalism as they did so dramatically from the 1930s to the end of the war. Rather than thinking of Shinto rituals as representing ideologies operating
through single ideas addressed to specific social classes, Kenneth Thompson believes that ideologies are better understood as operating through discursive chains, symbolic clusters, and semantic fields that find their expression in social and cultural practices as well as intellectual doctrines (1986:33). For example, Western scholars long assumed that, from the 1870s onward, emperor worship was pervasive throughout Japan and central in people’s lives. However, the meticulous scholarship and new perspective offered by Carol Gluck (1985) and others reveals this ideology less as domestic imperialism and an inescapable center of gravity than as a contested system of imposed silences, conflicting discourses, and decades-long center-periphery tensions. Nationalism may still be present, but how people see and respond to it takes on variability and affords a personal negotiation of its intended messages.

My thinking on culture and its use throughout this book in assessing the organizational structures and strategies of Shinto is strongly influenced by this kind of dynamic. Instead of holding culture to be a “heavy weight of traditions, a set of social configurations, or a basic personality constellation” that coerces and compels individuals (Fox 1990:10), it can be thought of as an ever-changing set of understandings within a consciousness under active (but not always self-aware!) construction (Fox 1990; Dirks et al. 1994). Based on a combination of class, gender, racial, or religious factors (to name only a few of the possibilities), people inherit scenarios within which they must act. How individuals interpret their roles and the degree of success they have in carrying them out or subverting these roles into new applications are very much dependent on their intentionality and creativity within specific social settings. From this perspective, change and innovation (whether for individuals or society) can never be anything but constant and ongoing.

In attempting to posit a society’s innermost meanings and values, scholars have long looked to ritual performances as “windows” or “texts” that open into understanding. But ritual cannot be isolated as a text any more than a war, political campaign, or parade. There may indeed be significant correspondences and associations expressed through ritual events, but we must nuance our interpretations with a kind of checks-and-balances approach that avoids essentializing or reducing complex social phenomena to one particular reading. I will have much more to say about these issues in Chapter 6, after introducing specific examples in the next several chapters. Though more demanding for the analyst, we need to consider rituals as “context-markers” (Hastrup 1996:20) that propel
us into more complicated webs of significance, which must reference if not fully engage the entire range of social scientific approaches to reality.

Just as early attempts to classify the animal world met with specimens like the warm-blooded yet egg-laying duck-billed platypus, so have similar taxonomic endeavors in the fields of religion and anthropology been faced with “curiosities” like Shinto. Most writers dealing with the subject, and I should probably include myself, feel compelled at some point to offer their versions of its inner characteristics. Shinto (usually referred to in a reified, monolithic sense) is all about sincerity (makoto; Ross 1965), or about festivals and matsuri (Mayumi 1989), or about a fusion of religion and politics (matsurigoto; Murakami 1970), or comprises an amalgamation of “isms” such as imperialism, realism, and purity-ism (Muraoka 1964). These attempts usually reveal more about the predilections and agendas of the writers than the complexity of multifaceted, historically complex, and conceptually shifting traditions grouped together under the rubric “Shinto.”

To Western missionaries, businessmen, and governmental officials in Japan in the mid-nineteenth century, Buddhism fit any number of categories thought to constitute a religion. It had a charismatic founder, lineages of schools and teachers, sacred texts, transcultural appeal, and established moral and ethical codes that, if followed, could help an individual attain salvation. But Shinto? Where were the worship services or the leader preaching to a congregation? Where were the texts promoting an organized eschatology? And, in the midst of a frenzied rush to build an industrial, economic, and educational infrastructure to modernize and compete with the West, surely the Japanese were not serious about venerating the emperor as a living deity? How could a person who called himself or herself a “Shintoist” be said to believe in anything? “To say a man is a Shintoist [because he is] an ardent believer in the kami,” summarizes Creemers, “would be almost as much of an exaggeration [as] to say that he is a fervent Christian because he went to a Christmas party” (1968:xvi).

A number of Buddhist sects have maintained intellectual and aesthetic appeal to those interested in Japanese culture and the application of some key ideas to Western contexts. Neo-Confucianism as well, with its philosophy of correct conduct for the individual and the interpenetration of society’s civil and political elements, has been proposed as having a more timely relevance to contemporary life than the often confusing, semi-mystical wanderings of Shinto (see Dore 1987; De Vos 1984). Even W. G. Aston, one of the early transmitters of Japanese mythology and beliefs,
delivered in 1921 the following elegy on the relevance of Shinto to modern society: "Without a code of morals, or an efficient ecclesiastical organization, with little aid from the arts of painting, sculpture and architecture, and with a sacred literature scanty and feeble compared with those of its foreign rivals, Shinto is doomed to extinction. Whatever the religious future of Japan may be, Shinto will assuredly have little place in it. Such meat for babes is quite inadequate as the spiritual food of a nation which in these latter days has reached a full and vigorous manhood" (1921:81).

And yet, wherever one goes in contemporary Japan, there are refutations of Aston's prediction; it is almost impossible to avoid bumping into little or large shrines at the heart of neighborhoods or overlooking entire communities. It is thus surprising that after more than fifty years of post-war scholarship on Japan, one of the most prevalent institutions in Japanese cultural, religious, and social life remains so understudied and enigmatic. There is certainly no shortage of available research sites, with at least six hundred shrines employing full-time staff and with 81,400 offering periodic priestly services. One of the few areas in the world with a comparable richness is India's Punjab. There, more than twenty thousand local Sikh shrines (called gurdwaras) form a well-established network to disseminate information, mobilize social and political action, and function as local points of access to the spiritual benefits of venerated saints and gurus (see Fox 1985). The parallel to shrine Shinto is more than institutional, since many of the ethnic and nation-building characteristics of Sikh shrines are familiar in the histories of local Shinto shrines, especially from the 1930s on to the end of the war in 1945. Shrines were designated as government institutions responsible for fostering national consensus and patriotism under the themes of prosperity, purity, and the promotion of Japaneseness, all to counter threats perceived as issuing from Western imperialist powers.

Societies where present-day political power is fashioned to appear as an extension of mythical and spiritual worlds (the very situation transpiring in prewar Japan) exist in a number of examples (Bloch 1974:79; see also Gluckman 1962). Since 1990 the government of Kyrgyzstan in the former Soviet Union has been promoting the cult of Manas—through postage stamps, empty tombs, and official rites—as a way to recall a past unfettered by economic and political difficulties (LeVine 1996). Although scholars say Manas never existed, he has come to stand as a founding grandfather of the nation and worthy of ancestral veneration. In Nicaragua, re-
casting Jesus as a guerilla and the Bible as a revolutionary text in the 1980s helped to infuse meaning among the poor that their actions were not only expressing faith but furthering the revolution against the U.S.-backed dictator Somoza (Lancaster 1988). Those who think that only developing nations are prone to this kind of strategy need look no farther than the Bush administration’s invocation of God and His power—both of which were on the side of “righteous” allied forces—in the Gulf War of 1991.

Using whatever relevant institutions, symbols, experts, and resources are available, this “reenchantment” of the world is often an effective way to attempt an authoritative ordering of cultural understandings and social orientations. Not only a matter of marking or enhancing the importance of what is symbolized, ideological orientations can also evoke and sustain an emotional commitment to what is decreed to be important (Needham 1979), though not all such efforts are successful and many are ambiguous at best. Still, it is possible for the social and psychological significance of even commonplace actions—such as making a fire for cooking, washing one’s hands, or positioning one’s body for sleeping—to be recast so as to resonate with cosmic or religious importance. To bolster, interpret, and maintain these values in the minds and practices of the people, “proper” ritual observances must be conducted periodically by legitimate figures of authority and transmitted far and wide. Early Confucianism held that the “natural” order itself would be put at risk should change occur in the social status or political role of individual actors such as the emperor or other significant officials. Therefore, it was better for each citizen to mind his or her own business, fulfill social responsibilities, and thus ensure the stability of the realm.

A growing number of scholars have come to see an explicit political connection between a religious institution and the social enactment of its practice. Politics refers to more than simply opportunism or imposing one’s will upon others. According to Vivienne Kondos (1992), politics can provide an umbrella to assemble related activities that attempt to bring about desired transformations in persons, social relations, and natural or “supernatural” phenomena. To politicize the analysis of religious institutions extends the scope of possibilities for exploration. Each religion and the rituals it sanctions deal in some way with problems both existential and social: how to live, how to coexist with others, or how to access transhuman powers that are thought to animate all life. This broad-based perspective on politics is an essential referent for analysis because, as Asad
notes, both micro- and macrolevel politics frequently impose the conditions for experiencing institutionalized religious truths in the first place (1983:245).

This has certainly been the case throughout the religious history of Japan, where ruling elites had the military capability to enforce social and religious practices consonant with their interests. What is thought of as Shinto in historical terms is, as Allan Grapard has pointed out (1991), a flexible combination of several religious systems that can be understood primarily through their rituals, which, in turn, are notable for their enhancement of political power. Citing the symbiotic relationship between Kōfuku-ji temple and Kasuga Shrine in Nara, Grapard notes that both were used by the Fujiwara family to legitimize and maintain their position as the dominant clan in the early Heian period. Grapard traces an intimate association between Shinto and Buddhism at the institutional, ritual, doctrinal, and philosophical levels (see also Kuroda 1981; McMullin 1989). Through most of Japanese history, he argues, Shinto and Buddhism were two aspects of a single sociocosmic reality, informing and shaping not only Japanese religious life but the culture as well. And yet, as Sonoda maintains, although there was considerable sharing, they never fused into one religion, nor is there a recorded case of an entire shrine for kami-worship being transformed into a Buddhist temple (or vice versa) (1990:4).

At the time of Buddhism’s arrival in Japan in the early sixth century C.E., it seems quite likely that Kamigamo Shrine was already in existence. With such a long history, a dominant feature of the shrine’s present-day image of itself as well as its image in larger shrine and political circles is its status as an elite organization. Ranked second only to the Grand Shrines of Ise by the Imperial Household Agency, Kamigamo integrates folk beliefs, priestly expertise, and imperial affiliations into an ideology stressing (among other things) over 1,400 years of historical and institutional continuity. The shrine has been ranked second to Ise since the Heian period, and indeed it continues to receive imperial messengers (chokushi) at its Aoi Festival in mid-May. Although the shrine’s founding date is disputed (possibly 678 C.E.), documents from the Nara period acknowledge its already considerable power and influence, and a highly popular festival (keiba shinji) wherein horses are raced for the entertainment of the Kamo clan’s kami. It later became the tutelary shrine of Kyoto in the early ninth century, contracted by the imperial court to protect the region from flooding by controlling, through ritual and petition, its powerful kami of thunder and lightning, Wake Ikazuchi (see Inoue 1985; Tanigawa 1986).
The shrine has also served to block malevolent forces that were believed to enter the imperial capital from the inauspicious northeast. Based largely on ritual reenactments of alternatingly popular, historical, and mythic associations, allegiance to and alliance with the shrine becomes rich with status-enhancing possibilities for a variety of individuals and interest groups. These range from descendants of the founding Kamo clan, to community women’s groups, electric utility companies, elementary schools, local politicians, Kyoto’s famous tea ceremony schools, Boy Scout troops, and, most significant economically, the local tourist industry. Although in the pages that follow I do not provide extensive comparative data with other shrines, I believe that most major shrines throughout Japan provide similar legitimizing and status-enhancing opportunities.

But by far the largest of any shrine’s many constituencies are “just folks” who turn to the gods in times of trouble, illness, indecision, frustration, or any of the other anxiety-provoking situations confronting human beings. While this theme encompasses much of the religious history of Japan and will therefore figure largely in the following discussions, one must keep in mind that the Japanese also turn to shrines in times of celebration or gratitude, to maintain a reciprocal bond established with the shrine’s kami (see Reader 1991:27), or for leisure or cultural pursuits. One might also include transitional junctures (such as baby dedications, coming-of-age ceremonies, marriages, and so forth, with funerals generally the exception), times of tangible crisis (school entrance exams, launching new enterprises, casting out misfortune), or involvement in a shrine’s annual festival. Although attitudes have changed from the Meiji (1868–1910), Taishō (1910–1921), and early Shōwa periods (1921–1945) when Shinto was promoted as a “national faith,” participation by individuals with some part of a shrine’s ritual cycle remains high among the general public, with an estimated 86.9 million people (72 percent of the entire population, 220,000 more than the previous year) turning out to visit shrines and temples during the New Year holidays of 1998.

In contrast to conventional notions of ideology and institutions (as in Aston’s elegy on Shinto earlier in this discussion), I will stress throughout this book how shrine Shinto’s lack of centralized dogma, charismatic leaders, and sacred texts serves to promote both an institutional flexibility and a broad-based public participation. Neither doctrine nor institutional demand overshadows the sociocultural gardens of practice. History shows, however, that the same malleability that has empowered generations of Shinto priests is also responsible for a number of problematic
identifications and associations that endure at any Shinto shrine in Japan, and especially one of high status such as Kamigamo. Not only do these associations and complicities endure, they must also be endured by those who regard the shrine from more traditionally religious (that is to say, pre-1868) or spiritually progressive perspectives.

For example, the question is often raised, both by scholars and through legal challenges in Japan, whether what goes on at a shrine is really “religious.” Can public money go to pay for offerings at a ritual or festival benefiting the community at large? Can Shinto priests be used as functionaries in a municipal ceremony to dedicate a new airport by waving a wand of purification? According to a priest at Yasukuni Jinja (where the military dead are enshrined), rituals are sometimes “beyond” religion. Until recently, decisions by the Japanese Supreme Court in 1977 and 1988 ruled that certain ritual activities of shrines (such as land-claiming rites or offerings to the military dead) should be considered “social protocol” or “customary practices” (see Takayama 1990; O’Brien 1996). Though this decision was overturned in 1997, shrines could have been classified as institutions embodying secular folkways and thus become eligible again to receive governmental sponsorship of their agendas and affairs. To do so, however, would bring shrieks of protest from small but very vocal Christian, Korean, and other minority groups in Japan. Equally loud would be the outcry from many scholars, private citizens, radical students, and those in Asian nations Japan once occupied. All would be concerned with formal state-shrine ties that might summon from the past the insidious specter of state Shinto.

A sustained look at the shrine system in Japan shows that many of its priests (and especially its Central Association of Shrines in Tokyo, the Jinja Honchō) harbor strategies that would permit a more active and visual role in promoting national unity and prewar moralities. These attitudes and positions, expressed in a number of controversies since the end of the war, have encouraged a wide range of conservative and ultraconservative groups. They include causes such as resisting a governmental apology by Japan for starting the Pacific War, Japan’s stance as a sovereign nation in international trade and territory disputes, the issue of “Japaneseness” fostered in part by millions of tourist and business-related encounters overseas, a revision of the constitution to allow Japan’s military to protect its interests overseas, and so on. While highly vocal, well-organized, and sufficiently financed, these groups and the priests that sup-
port them do not make up a complete portrait of shrine Shinto’s political dimensions. There are also many within the shrine system itself—priests young and old—who either remember firsthand the jarring experience of state or kokka Shinto, or who are embarrassed and feel constrained by the reputation of the wartime years from which shrine Shinto has yet to recover.5

Consider, for instance, the continuing relationship of shrine Shinto with the imperial household. There would likely be even greater controversy were more Japanese aware that the emperor remains the supreme Shinto priest for all shrines in Japan (see T. Lebra 1997). The trappings of imperial regalia (such as the lacquered clogs, the vestments, the headgear, and a number of important rituals) were adopted by important shrines such as Kamigamo during the Heian and Kamakura periods and, as I will show in the next section, help to bridge the centuries as well as the gap between the palace and the shrine community. In chapters 4 and 5, I will present in more detail the mixed feelings of Kamigamo priests and local historians about this association. Just as priestly emotions vacillate between attraction and resistance at a shrine whose long history is intimately involved with the imperial court, so do the sentiments of the general population.

Thanks to the present emperor’s younger sons coming of marriageable age and the media attention their weddings have generated, it can be said that the imperial family is enjoying the greatest popularity they have had since the end of the war.6 However, other less adulatory feelings periodically manifest themselves in radical ways, as in the 1993 protest of Emperor Akihito’s first trip to Okinawa. Although the trip was billed as a gesture of healing and reconciliation by a new emperor who personally had nothing to do with the war borne so heavily by Okinawa, a striking response emerged. Three imperially affiliated Buddhist temples and one Shinto shrine were firebombed in Kyoto in the early morning hours of April 26. It is difficult to gauge the public reaction this attack was supposed to generate (no group has yet come forward to claim responsibility), and it was downplayed by the major papers. Although two of the temples (Ninna-ji and Sanzen-in) are national treasures, many Japanese viewed the attack with cool equanimity. After reading a Yomiuri news article highlighted by a photo of Nakata Shrine’s totally incinerated outer hall of worship, one woman said casually, “Well, at least there wasn’t much damage.” When I remarked that the photo in front of her pointed otherwise, her
response was: “I mean damage to the temples. What do you expect with a shrine? The real question is why they didn’t bomb the old imperial palace (Gosho).”

ASSESSING THE GUISES OF SHRINE SHINTO

As a way of coping with the associations of shrine Shinto, a majority of shrines and the priests in their employ have assumed, created, or revitalized a number of guises for operating in rapidly changing sociopolitical climates. Looking at some of the ramifications of the term “guise” itself helps clarify an array of shrine Shinto’s institutional characteristics and managerial strategies, rendering it less “anthropologically mysterious” (Pye 1989: 188). The Oxford English Dictionary (1989) says a guise is first of all a “manner, method, or way.” The characters for Shinto mean literally “the way of the kami,” a concept borrowed from Chinese Taoism in the sixth century to distinguish local kami-worship from Buddha-worship. Like many traditions, ethnic groups, or ideologies, Shinto is often defined in opposition to what it is not. It is the “way of the kami” and not of the Buddha or the Tao; it is involved with enhancing the vitalism of life through particular practices conducted by priests in special sacred places (Brown 1993: 10–13) but avoids as best it can life’s mortal impermanence; it is a term first used by people in the sixth century to express their self-awareness and promote local traditions (Sonoda 1987: 15) but with apparently little recognition of the origin of these practices in the Korean peninsula, China, the southern Ryūkyū islands, or the northern regions of today’s Tōhoku and Hokkaido.

Though attempts have been made to set forth a specific ideology or doctrine (Ueda 1991), Shinto has been centered on ritual practices aimed to attain pragmatic benefits for imperial, state, clan, or communal petitioners. Shrine Shinto’s second guise in historical as well as contemporary society is “a characteristic manner, custom, habit, or practice” that is marked by a certain “carriage or conduct” (OED 1989). Characteristics associated with ritual such as propriety, formality, and etiquette are all basic to Shinto-style acts of reverential or respectful behavior toward the kami. These acts may manifest themselves along a wide spectrum ranging from idiosyncratic spontaneity to strict priestly codes handed down for centuries. Norbeck suggests that etiquette is found in its greatest elaboration in societies such as Japan, where individuals have long functioned through distinctive and hierarchical social categories (1977: 73).
How one acts, the way one carries and directs one’s body into certain formalized gestures, and the overall environment of venerating the deities are other important features of shrine Shinto. These are in turn enhanced by its third guise, a “fashion of attire or personal adornment” (OED 1989). Using the imperial court of the Heian period as archetype, the vestments of priests and female shrine attendants have been altered very little. Colorful arrays of silken robes, pantaloons, kimono, and headgear distinguish Shinto ritual attire from the more somber, workaday garb of Buddhist priests. Not only the outward appearance of priests but the very public face of shrine rituals and festivals in general are posited (and usually marketed) as traditions representing Japanese cultural heritage and ethnic identity in relation to other Asian or Occidental peoples. Yet these events and the shrine itself complement the lifestyles of many men and women, adorning their individualistically motivated desires for entertainment, community involvement, or as opportunities and arenas to display social status. Though clothes don’t always make the man (or woman), the guise they provide fashions a continuity with the refinement and aesthetics of a romanticized high culture.

Finally, as “guise” is the root of the word “disguise,” shrine Shinto has used its more apparent attributes to cloak a recent past and present complicity with nationalism, ethnic purity, and authoritarian means to enforce compliance within a hierarchy of rank and deference. Recent rulings by the Japanese Supreme Court (1997) regarding separation of religion and the state — based on cases concerning the legal status of ground purification rites and the state’s enshrinement of familial ancestral spirits at Yasukuni Shrine — have only recently begun to problematize the relevance of postwar Shinto rituals to state interests (Nelson 1999). Thus, although each shrine appears to function independently of others, the Central Association of Shrines in Tokyo works behind the scenes to orchestrate and align the overarching structure of a shrine’s yearly ritual practices, the nenjū gyōji, with patriotic agendas aimed to enhance national and communal solidarity.

What appears a classic tension between internal and external forces, each representing different interests, will be shown below to be mediated and occasionally resisted by Kamigamo’s leadership at the level of daily practice — often generating considerable controversy among the shrine’s competing interest groups. There are also intermediate forces, such as local governments or tourist agencies, that (as in Kamigamo’s famous hollyhock festival) have their own interests to promote through the activi-
ties of local shrines. I hope to engage throughout this book a tension be-
tween the structuring efforts, the “networks of communication, webs of
affiliation, and intimately shared cultural spaces” (Dissanayake 1996:xiii)
of these organizations and institutions, and the ability of individual actors
to exert personal desire and intentionality within these arenas.

Key to my discussion of agency and mediation are Kamigamo’s four-
teen male priests and two female attendants (as well as its groundskeep-
ers and other hired hands), individuals who represent a cross-section of
Japanese society in all its complexity. Chapter 5 shows how the priests
in particular, as employees, salarymen and women, wardens of tradition,
and religious virtuosos, embody the shrine in the eyes of its parishioners
and visitors. And yet, during the time of my fieldwork, they were fre-
fently at odds with decisions made by the elderly head priest (especially
those related to finances), with pressure from the Tokyo association of
shrines and its local representative, with priests from other shrines, and
with attempts made by civic, business, and political groups to sacralize,
legitimize, or otherwise authenticate their own agendas through formal
and informal association with the shrine. I will emphasize that a shrine’s
viability and credibility as an institution is strongly influenced by the qual-
ity, intelligence, and inventiveness (to mention only the positive attrib-
utes) of the people in its employ. This influence does not, however, nec-
essarily translate into social or cultural power to effect changes in a
Shinto-related manner in the community at large. For such influence to
be felt, very large sums of money or particularly close political alliances
would be needed.

But there are other ways to make a difference, provided an institution
can assume a tactical guise that not only suits its local environment but
responds to national discussions or capitalizes on social trends. A Shinto
priest or scholar may bristle internally at the questions of a young maga-
azine editor concerning which shrines his fashionable readers should visit
during New Year’s, but suggestions will be forthcoming and the crowds
will come. A shrine visit that begins as “an accessory to modern life” (Saku-
rai et al. 1990) may, with time, assume a more central importance in an
individual’s development as a social being. Ishida Ichiro has likened the
phenomenon of Shinto to a doll whose form remains basically the same
through time yet is amenable to having its outer accoutrements changed
according to the tastes (usually shaped by economic or political power)
of whoever plays with it (Ishida, cited in Brown 1990). That this “doll”
remains attractive, interesting, useful, and status-enhancing for many Jap-
anese indicates that their own symbolic repertoires have been influenced by a casual yet still significant participation in the ritual worlds and orientations of Shinto.

Since the end of World War II and the resulting push to modernize, many of the world’s societies have seen their cognitive and cosmological maps slowly erode and in some cases finally collapse under the weight of what is now valued as new and essential. Once thought likely to share the same fate, especially immediately after the war, when much of the nation lay in charred and twisted heaps of rubble, Japan not only has managed to adapt to the present world system but is struggling to become one of its leaders for the future. Providing continuity and enhancing cultural identity as well as spiritual efficacy, Shinto ritual orientations might be considered inherently optimistic vehicles conveying the fundamental metaphysics of the Japanese people (Takayama 1988:310). Notions of power as indefinite and always dynamic (the kami), of bilateral nonconfrontation as a part of an essentially harmonious unity (purity and impurity), of a situational rather than fixed conception of morality, the human body, and the sacred all lend themselves to a variety of contemporary contexts. Whatever one’s scholarly interest in Japan, the dynamism and flexibility of this tradition so adept at reinventing and reimagining itself, and empowering men and women to see the cosmos as reciprocal and responsive, warrant further exploration.

A NOTE ON FIELDWORK

In many ways, as Clifford (1988), Geertz (1988), Marcus and Fisher (1986), Hastrup (1996), and a host of others have made abundantly clear, any ethnographic endeavor is skewed by the logistics of time and space; the personalities, politics, and defense mechanisms of one’s informants and sponsors as well as oneself; and the pressure that the intersection of the above conditions exerts on what questions are asked, what discoveries are made, and what conclusions are drawn. The challenge of doing research in Japan occupies its own niche when placed under the umbrella of “anthropological fieldwork.” One need not worry about being shot (unless hanging around gangsters), falling ill from epidemics, or any of the expected deprivations that fieldwork frequently entails in underdeveloped areas of the world that were, during the first half of the twentieth century, the site of most anthropological research. In Japan as well as other developed countries the researcher has telephones, computers, and copy
machines at his or her disposal, not to mention a superb public transportation system, adequate shelter from the elements, and a highly developed infrastructure of institutions and funding. So where’s the difficulty? one might ask.

As I make clear in my discussion of the priests of Kamigamo Shrine, economic factors weigh heavily upon their careers and activities. In my own case as well, I was daunted by the economics involved in conducting a long-term study in one of the world’s most expensive countries. Because my family and I could not find affordable housing in Kyoto at the time we needed it, we opted to live some two hours distant from the area in northern Kyoto where the shrine was located. Graduate student one moment and “visiting researcher” the next, I simply did not have the funds necessary to make the large outlays of cash required for shikikin, or “key money,” followed by the dreaded (because nonrefundable) reikin, or “thank you money.” Nor did my family have adequate personal connections to those who might have been able to assist us in our search for housing. Although this strategy represents a departure from the traditional fieldwork strategy of living elbow-to-elbow with one’s informants, I gained many insights into non-Kyoto Japan that have helped to reposition and qualify much of what occurred in the somewhat rarefied atmosphere of that ancient and once elegant city.

Thus, to “do research,” I would wake at the crack of dawn, grab an umbrella and bag laden with tools of the observer’s trade, then ride two trains and a bus during morning rush hour, frequently arriving only minutes before a ritual was to begin. Like the priests themselves, I would then enact my own transition from secular to sacred worlds, rushing behind a building to change clothes (if I had been rained on), put on a tie (an excruciating ordeal when one is drenched with sweat during summer or the rainy season), and attempt to smooth out an appearance ruffled from two hours of commuting. While hard for me, a two-hour commute is not unusual in the major urban centers of Japan. Needless to say, I did not come to the shrine every day.

Nor was it necessary or even advisable to be a full-time presence at the shrine. I mention this because of a double-edged sword I encountered early on. In one of my first interviews, I remarked on how little information and documentation there was for a shrine of Kamigamo’s long history and high status. “Ah, well,” the priest answered with a stern face, “that’s because of the curse (tataki) that the deity inflicts on people poking around who lack the right attitude. Do you have the right attitude, Mr. Nelson?”
All I could do was nervously mutter something about how time would tell, but I acknowledged both the challenge and the threat.

At a shrine where the primary deity has at his disposal a formidable arsenal including thunder, lightning, and rain, the nature of the threat can be left to the imagination. The continual challenge was to conduct myself with the proper decorum when at the shrine so that the institution’s wide-ranging constituents would not feel as if a bull had just entered their china shop, nor would the shrine’s leadership be held accountable for harboring a disruptive influence.

As the first foreign researcher to have negotiated permission to conduct long-term research at Kamigamo, I was conscious of my ethical responsibilities as well as my hard-won privileges, neither of which I wanted to compromise. For example, on several occasions, a ritual mentioned to me by a junior priest as being worthy of my time and attention was made problematic simply because of my presence. Shortly before the appointed hour of 10:00 A.M., I would be rushing to take my place (always at the rear) in front of the shrine offices where the procession to the main shrine began. Suddenly, a designated priest would sidle up to me and say in a low voice that, because of the “difficulty” of the people involved today, would I please not participate? (Kō no sanpai-sha-tachi wa chotto muzukashii no de, Nelson-san wa go-enryo o shite itadakena deshō ka?). (The Japanese indicates it is not really a question at all.) To protest such a turn of events would have been worse than pointless. I would not only have demonstrated the bad manners and selfishness for which many Westerners in Japan are (not undeservedly) notorious, I would also have jeopardized the rest of my study by elevating my interests above those of the shrine.

Deference to authority is a sign of learning and loyalty, Confucius wrote, especially when that authority has the power to curtail completely or further one’s own interests. I could never discern whether my periodic exclusions were a spur of the moment decision or whether the decision had been reached beforehand. I never asked for apologies or explanations, nor were any offered, other than that the sponsors of the ritual in question were not “regular” shrine patrons. Thus excluded from participation, I would watch from the innermost gateway and try to reconstruct the event from interviews with the priests at a later date. Fortunately, this situation did not occur often; in retrospect I must admit my gratitude to the priests for the considerable degree of access I was usually given.

The second side of the sword was the necessity to be aware that the priests’ own positions and reputations could be called into question were
they seen talking to me at the wrong moment (which is to say in any of the public areas of the shrine precincts) by, say, an influential and wealthy patron who disliked Americans. One must never think that World War II is completely a thing of the past or that, because of the number of foreigners in Kyoto, all are equally tolerated. The priest might be teased good-naturedly by his superiors (who would have heard about the incident secondhand) or by the accusing individual himself during a postritual reception at which sake and beer serve to free tongues and opinions—yet the coerciveness of the joking worked effectively to sanction future contact.

In part because of the position of Shinto shrines within Japanese society today and the defensive nature of many of those who gain their livelihood by working as priests, I never felt that, in spite of the considerable kindness I was shown on occasion, I had a protector or benefactor who would jump in to defend my interests. The vulnerability felt by many priests in trying to perform their tasks in front of a wide-ranging and highly critical audience that is increasingly willing and able to shift loyalties at the slightest provocation more than explains their defensiveness and caution. However, I was encouraged by a senior member of one of the shrine’s lay organizations, which is frequently at odds with the administration, to “stand up” to the priests and assert myself more. When I suggested that such behavior could very well end my research, he promised that “his” organization would “back me up all the way.”

Like many researchers in status-conscious Japan, I assumed initially that my institutional affiliations would imbue me with a kind of armor protecting my research interests. I soon discovered that while my connections with various sponsoring institutions (Kyoto University, the Fulbright Commission) gave my research an aura of legitimacy, there was little translation of this legitimacy into personal power relevant to those within the worlds of shrine Shinto. I found, for example, that the cooperation I was being shown at first was not consensual but coerced—younger priests were ordered to show me around or answer my questions despite their protests that they “didn’t know enough” or that they preferred not to be seen with me on the shrine grounds.

I had assumed that, because of numerous letters and faxes between me and senior priests, my presence and research interests had been explained to everyone, but I found out shortly before the end of my research that again I had been mistaken. In interviews with both junior and senior priests as well as with members of lay organizations and people in the

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community at large, my requests for information were often (though po-
litely enough) refused outright, stonewalled, or diplomatically deflected
by taking the party line straight from nihonjinron-style ideologies. I could
try to appeal to some objective “deity of research” (benkyō no kamisama,
which actually “exists” in the form of Tenjin-sama) as a lighthearted at-
tempt to elicit a response in an informant’s moment of hesitation, but this
tactic could easily backfire, such is the reticence of many Japanese to take
a clear stand in dialogues liable to reach beyond spheres of influence
within which they have control. Unlike some ethnographers in the past,
I choose not to conceal these difficulties in my accounts of shrine affairs.
Rather than seeing the challenges as impediments, I regard them as highly
representative and instructive parts of an internal cultural debate about
personal agency within institutions as well as tactics employed to main-
tain one’s status and objectives in the face of a foreign researcher hungry
for information.