

Historical Momentums at Nagasaki's Suwa Shrine

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Since “place” is so crucial to both the origins and contemporary manifestations of shrine Shinto, it is important to focus on some of the historical background of the “where” and “when” of Suwa Shrine. What will emerge in the following discussion is a particular style of Shinto practice rooted in historical precedents. But we will also see how political, economic, and cultural innovations have always had a bearing on the way the shrine operates. To traditionalists, a religion only qualifies as a religion if it has remained “true” to its “original” inspirations or teachings. However, any close examination of history shows that to expect religious institutions to somehow remain unchanged and “pure” is to misunderstand the embeddedness of a religious tradition within the social worlds that surround and nurture it. A religion may take aim at social, physical, or political situations and offer formulas or doctrines said to address, balance, or transcend these worldly concerns, but the relationship between ends and means is always symbiotic. The complexity and diversity of human beings attempting to find meaning, avoid suffering, and gain power in this lifetime ensures a continuing engagement with both new and established religious traditions that, for better or worse, provide venues for achieving these goals.

But it is not always so easy to talk about what has gone into making a place (or its institutions and people) significant. Many times a struggle is required to distinguish the “past” from “history,” or at least to take note that there can be a difference. Harold Isaacs considers the “past” to be a created ideology designed to motivate societies, inspire classes, or control individuals. “History,” on the other hand, is the discipline that aims at “cleansing the story of mankind from deceiving visions.” Leaving debates about historiography and historicity aside for now, we will see that the “past history” of Suwa Shrine is as full of multiple interpretations as is the place it presently occupies in the lives and psyches of the people of Nagasaki.

Most shrines in Japan trace their origins back to either a mythological or semi-historical incident (as at Ise and Izumo), as acknowledgement to the sacred essence of a place (the Nachi Falls, Mt. Fuji, the seaside cave of Udo), or as reverence to the “divine” qualities of an actual historical personage (as at Kyoto’s Kitano Tenmangū Shrine, in honor of persecuted scholar Sugawara no Michizane, or at the Toshogu Shrine at Nikko, built for Tokugawa Ieyasu.) But in the case of Suwa Shrine (I will hereafter use both the English word “shrine” and the Japanese *jinja* to refer to the same entity), its founding is in a special, often-overlooked category. Neither mythically nor ancestrally based, the reason Suwa Shrine exists at all is partially due to the influence of Christianity in southern Japan in the 16th and 17th centuries and the subsequent struggle by the authorities to win back the loyalties and obedience of the local populace. A brief capsulization of an extremely complicated story might help to set the stage for the shrine’s founding date of 1625. To help frame the following discussion, a brief directive from Foucault seems appropriate:

History has no meaning, though this is not to say that it is absurd or incoherent. On the contrary, it is intelligible and should be susceptible of analysis down to the smallest detail—but this must be in accordance with the intelligibility of struggles, of strategies, and tactics.

As long as we keep in mind that we are dealing primarily with the strategies and tactics of political rather than spiritual affairs, we can avoid glossing over the true beginnings of what has become one

of Nagasaki's most powerful religious institutions.

Midway through the 1500's, during a time of civil war in Japan, three Portuguese adventurers found their way via a Chinese ship to the island of Tanegashima south of Kyushu. The Japanese authorities were naturally curious about these white-skinned men but they were equally fascinated by their arquebus rifles, which were purchased, copied, and manufactured in record time. Saltpeter and gunpowder were soon needed, but so were more rifles, apparently because the strategic impact of this new technology was significant in deciding the outcome in clashes among warring clans. Rifles were bought as fast as they could be made available in the hope that these weapons would favorably influence a dramatic shift in the balance of power, territorial claims, and trading networks. As Portuguese ships began to ply the waters between their colony in Macao and the southern island of Kyushu, Jesuit priests, led first by Francis Xavier, used their papal and royal connections to link this trade to missionizing activities. If a local lord wanted the Portuguese to use a port city in his fief, whereby he would reap substantial profits, he had to permit the Jesuits the freedom to preach and establish small churches and permanent communities. Not surprisingly, competition among the lords was fierce for this "privilege." The local people, largely fishermen and poor farmers but also samurai as well, were often forced by their rulers to adopt the Catholic faith as a way of increasing the likelihood of attracting Portuguese trading vessels.

It was a mutually convenient, mutually exploitative relationship that developed initially. However, in spite of the Jesuit goal of converting the ruling class first, many farmers and fishing communities saw in the transcendent message of loyalty to an omnipotent God a way to liberate themselves from centuries of oppression and submission. Converts learned to view traditional institutions such as temples and shrines as having been in collusion with the feudal lords who had so long kept them in abject poverty. Inspired by the zealous preaching of certain Jesuit priests (and later, those from Franciscan and Augustinian orders who came from Spanish Manila), the new religion's fervor spilled over into violent action, as numerous temples and shrines throughout what is today Nagasaki and Kumamoto prefectures were put to the torch. Christianity, or what approximation the Jesuits were able to transmit of its practices and dogma, became the people's main religion for several decades in this part of Japan, reaching 750,000 adherents by the year 1605. But that it was tolerated at all needs to be seen in the larger context of local profits as well as the hegemonic maneuvering among the powerful warlords in the north.

The first ruler to succeed in temporarily unifying Japan under one military government, Oda Nobunaga, knew very well that the growing assertiveness of Nagasaki-area Christians was a small price to pay in exchange for the rewards of trade with a Western power, bringing in firearms and Chinese silk in particular but also medicines, spices, and mechanical devices such as clocks. However, upon Nobunaga's untimely assassination in 1582, his successor, Hideyoshi, slowly changed the government's policy regarding the Jesuits and their religious freedom. Due partly to his deep suspicion of foreigners and a fear of domination growing from the widening sphere of sacred and secular influence exerted by the Portuguese, he proscribed all Christian proselytization in 1587.

Still, it was a long way from Hideyoshi's court in Kyoto to Nagasaki, and in spite of the 1597 decree which prohibited Christianity, Hideyoshi's disastrous Korean campaign and the sympathy of local administrators allowed the "Kirishitans" to hold on well after his death in 1598 and into the early years of the Tokugawa era. Tokugawa Ieyasu, however, having witnessed the entire progression

of Christian entrenchment from 1560 onward, was shrewd in his dealings with the Christians. He still permitted the missions to function and trade to grow, but he allowed in the English, Dutch, and Spanish to increase competition and keep prices low. Due in part to the advice of the Englishman Will Adams, whose Protestant world-view saw the Catholics as “papist pirates” and warned of (using today’s terms) their role as “fifth columnists,” Ieyasu gradually became more hostile to the Portuguese and Spanish interests. An expulsion order of 1614 was only sporadically enforced, but after Ieyasu’s death, his son Hidetada actively promoted the suppression of the Christian faith all through Japan beginning in 1616. In 1619, for example, over fifty Japanese Christians were executed in Kyoto and Nagasaki, although no foreign-born Christian perished until 1622. Priests who refused to leave or recant were imprisoned, Japanese converts were likewise exiled, imprisoned, and (beginning with the administration of Iemitsu, the third Tokugawa shogun in 1623) tortured. Also in 1622, a system of monetary rewards were offered for informing upon or turning in hidden Christians. Thus a century-long campaign to stamp out the “barbarians’ belief” began in earnest.

There was no doubt by this time that, after years of conflicting policies, the government meant business regarding the total suppression of Christian activities, yet it also needed ways to exert its authority in non-military ways to the people of Nagasaki. After all, this city’s tactical importance was already established as the one port through which to deal with the outside world, fully ten years before the edicts that would close the country for almost 200 years. It was argued that further persecutions, military intervention, or heavy-handed intimidation would only heighten local levels of tension and mistrust, giving the foreign merchants and diplomats (who were thought to be waiting for the chance to implement what they had learned from the mistakes of the Portuguese and Spanish) the ounce of confidence needed to challenge the Tokugawa with armadas pulled in from Indonesia or India.

But the Tokugawa rulers were not mere dictators, having developed a certain flair for crafty manipulations that diffused potentially explosive situations. Using what skills in social engineering they had at their disposal (thanks in part to scholars like Hayashi Razan, versed in neo-Confucian principles of “benevolent” rule), the government began a policy which stressed that a revival of traditional Japanese beliefs and institutions was essential in restoring centralized control to the Nagasaki region. Since the Christian values of individual worth were so obviously inflammatory and hostile to the plans of stability which the Tokugawas had charted as essential to national peace, a return to communal values promoted by Buddhist and Shinto temple/shrine complexes could only enhance local and regional compliance with the “beneficence” of the government’s authority. It began contributing heavily to the reconstruction of destroyed temples and shrines throughout the area, but nowhere more so than in the center of Nagasaki. The first temple to be rebuilt was Shokaku-ji in 1604, but due to acts of sabotage during its construction, additional rebuilding plans went slowly. Still, plans were set in motion around 1610 for an institution that would embody the myths of the founding of the Japanese nation and promote vigilance, purity, and unity. Named after one of the deities of valor and duty, Suwa-no-kami, the shrine would be strategically located on the side of a mountain overlooking the lower regions leading out to the harbor. Its official date of conception is listed in the shrine’s annals as 1614 (the same year as Ieyasu’s edict against Christianity) and a small structure is thought to have been completed soon after, but frequent harassment by Christian urban guerillas and the lack of a powerful personality to guide development kept the idea of a central shrine little more than an idea.

The man who would become the first priest of Suwa Shrine, Aoki Kensei, came to Nagasaki in 1623 from Saga prefecture. His career to that point had been of a wandering monk in the tradition of Shugendō, famous for its yamabushi ascetic-priests who were given license by the military government to roam freely, dispensing cures, charms against demons, and Buddhist doctrine influenced by Shingon metaphysics and ritual practices. Although there is no evidence that he was directly employed by the Tokugawa government, the missionary zeal with which he attempted to revive Shinto in Nagasaki, and the logistic as well as financial support these efforts received, indicate a close working relationship. One of his first reports to the government listed the number of shrines and temples that had been destroyed by the Christians starting around 1567. He tried to find people to help him in his rebuilding efforts and solicited help from local carpenters and administrators, but even at the height of the persecutions he made little progress. Deciding to go to Kyoto, he sought advice and legitimation from leaders of Yoshida Shinto, a powerful institution that stressed a revitalized religious nativism. They invested him with the authority to rebuild shrines in Nagasaki but stopped short of naming him a priest.

In 1624, he and his sons went to work against considerable odds. The government's policy at this time, while sympathetic to Aoki, was focused more on rebuilding Buddhist temples as instruments of the state wherein a population of former Christians could be registered and their activities monitored. Nonetheless, Aoki procured materials, workmen, and guarded the construction from sabotage until the completion of a modest structure in 1625. One of the first rituals held was the dramatic yutate-sai, a theatrical staple of the yamabushi tradition known for priests plunging their hands into scalding water to ward off demons. Unfortunately, despite the added entertainment value of a sumo match that followed the ritual, no one came.

Soon after this initial attempt, Aoki and his sons again went to Kyoto and explained their frustrating situation, returning this time with full status as Yoshida-sect priests. Aoki would serve as chief priest, his second son as kannushi or senior priest, and his first son as shasō, a kind of Buddhist monk whose ritual duties included both Shinto and Buddhist deities and concerns. We can imagine that Aoki must have felt like a trapeze artist on a high wire forced to juggle balls of differing sizes and weights at the same time. He was surrounded and harassed by closet Christians hostile to the very idea of a shrine, while being watched by the military government breathing down his neck and trying to manipulate policy from far off central Japan. There were also relations with the strange-looking but important "barbarians" as the oddest ball to juggle. They too were part of the audience he felt obliged to impress with the power of Japan's native tradition. With all of these factors, plus the shrine's Kami to serve at the same time, it is likely he had many long nights trying to fashion ways to implement the restrictive and expressive set of social codes and conventions the new shrine was to embody—and to somehow avoid falling into a space where there was no safety net.

In 1633, the government instituted harsher measures designed to resolve the Christian/foreigner problem by effectively closing the country's ports to all sailing vessels, whether arriving or departing. To oversee this radical policy, a specially-tailored system of administration for the Nagasaki area, known elsewhere in Japan since Heian times as bugyō, had begun a year earlier. It was generally the case in this system that a single representative of the government would be placed in charge of a particular region; in the hot spot of Nagasaki, however, two high officials were given the task of implementing and enforcing policy. Part of the reason behind this extraordinary dual posting of officials was that the government simply could not determine to what extent it had been successful

in eradicating Christianity. Its new laws were being followed and assertions came readily from the people that their minds and religious habits had changed, but social practices common elsewhere in Japan lagged behind. At the shrine, Aoki quietly confirmed what the bugyō authorities already knew: there were far too few people visiting Suwa Jinja to perform the gestures of worship (omairi).

The year 1634 was in many ways a major historical landmark not only for the city and shrine but for the nation as well. The closed-country (sakoku) edict of 1633 was fully enforced in 1634, followed by another declaration in 1635. These directives ordered that any Japanese returning from overseas was to be put to death, while the second order extended capital punishment to those trying to leave as well. Additionally, all foreign residents and commercial activities were now restricted to a single, small artificial island in the Nagasaki harbor known as “Dejima.” Constructed with funds collected from local merchants, the island symbolized the subjugation of the once proud and defiant local leaders to the authority of the Tokugawa regime. Amazingly enough, trade still continued, even though forced to operate in a repressive and increasingly hostile environment.

Increased governmental presence was felt at the shrine as well, which in many ways answered the long-standing petitions of Aoki and sons. The shrine was exempted from paying property taxes, received funds for ritual and administrative operating expenses, and underwent a building expansion. Prior to 1634, the government had merely “encouraged” but not enforced public participation in shrine events. Now, it issued a decree requiring all residents of the city to register at the shrine as parishioners (ujiko) and be counted. Those who did not, by simple logic of association, were suspected Christians and therefore subversives subject to arrest, imprisonment, torture and execution if they failed to renounce their faith. Additionally, three wealthy businessmen and community leaders were chosen and handsomely paid to supervise shrine rituals and pressure public participation, a policy which continued until the end of the Tokugawa or Edo period.

The state also appropriated for official shrine management a local fall festival known as kunchi. Beginning with the celebration of 1634, the deities of Suwa Jinja were put into portable shrines (mikoshi) and carried through the streets of the city to a harbor-side location where, in a “normal” Japanese city, the population would come readily to seek closer access to the powers of these Kami. While priests today interpret this event as a benevolent act (subjecting the Kami to the profane world) on the part of their predecessors, many citizens of the time must have seen it quite differently—as another heavy-handed provocation by the Tokugawa administration that required, like the decree to register at the shrine, public compliance. Although the size of the Nagasaki crowds are not reported, we do learn that the portable shrines were carried by farmers, that city merchants made special floats and participated in a parade, and that courtesans from the entertainment district danced in front of the Kami. As we will see later in this book, the phenomena of the Okunchi festival, manifesting a continuing dynamic of secular and sacred concerns, prospers to this day as one of the most dynamic matsuri in all of Japan.

By moving the people’s festival to the sanctified grounds of Suwa Shrine, the government sought not only to link this event to traditional religious sources (the Shinto predilection for autumn or harvest celebrations of gratitude to the Kami) but also to give it a more fitting stage to impress the Dutch and Chinese, whose shipping trade was a needed source of hard currency. The local residents were still permitted their odd assortment of dances and merrymaking, but to show everyone (locals and foreigners alike) the importance of the shrine, it was decreed that from 1638 onward that the main event of the annual festival would be that most subtle and glorious achievement of Japanese

culture and sensibility, Noh drama. Comparatively speaking, no other shrine in the nation, (save for the Tōshōgū at Nikko which was built as the tomb for Ieyasu, the founder of the Tokugawa dynasty) received such direct supervision and funds from the government as did Suwa Shrine during the years 1634 to 1685.

Faced with intervention of this magnitude and persistence, the citizens of Nagasaki had little choice but to accept the new shrine and the practices associated with it. As time passed and the memory of the Christian era grew less immediate, the shrine became a place where baby dedications, coming-of-age ceremonies, exorcisms, purifications, and other traditional shrine functions once so integrated with society were again in full swing. Apart from a few catastrophic floods, typhoons, epidemics, famines, and one particularly disastrous fire that destroyed most of the Noh masks, kimonos, and props in 1856, the actual history of the shrine was fairly peaceful throughout the entire Tokugawa period. Chief priests came and went, civil administrators met with varying degrees of success in keeping foreigners and locals separated (or committed seppuku if they did not, as happened to the magistrate when the British ship “Phaeton” sailed into the poorly-guarded harbor in 1808 and threatened a bombardment if provisions weren’t supplied) or were promoted to positions that let them escape the wilds of this frontier post.

The opening of the country during the Meiji era (1868) brought an economic and cultural boom to Nagasaki,¹³ but it was not until the summer of 1945 when world history again took notice of city. The militarists responsible for the long succession of events that turned Japan from a feudal society into an imperialistic monolith with half of Asia under its control had used, as one of their tools, the symbols and mythology of Shinto to try and convince the Japanese people they were destined for greatness by the Kami. They had many precedents from the close association of the state with Shinto to draw upon, one of the most obvious being Hideyoshi’s adoption of Shinto ideology to counter Spanish and Portuguese missionary activities, or the religious legitimization of his temporary conquest of Korea. Once again from the 1890’s onward, Shinto was used to provide a ritual and mythological structure whereby the “mystic idea of an entire people supernaturally bound together by the common heritage of a national soul defined a unique Japanese political order and social morality superior to the West.” Japan was said to be destined to become the “protector” of Asian nations and drive out the imperialistic West by means of a “sacred” war. It took only a few seconds, first at Hiroshima and then at Nagasaki, to finally destroy this illusion, though its demise also cost the lives of over 140,000 and 70,000 people respectively.

In Nagasaki, people found their own interpretations for the horrific bombing. When talking to survivors of August 9, 1945, one frequently hears a fatalistic acceptance of this dreadful outcome. After all, people will sadly say, Japan started the war and thus could expect to be severely punished for its actions, the same way entire clans in Japan have been wiped out for having failed to achieve their objectives. Shortly after the bombing however, another more positive explanation was in vogue. Because of the city’s mountainous geography, with its northern part separated from its central and southern neighborhoods by Mt. Konpira, and with Suwa Shrine being in the central part of the city on the mountain’s back flank, the shrine received virtually no major damage from the bomb. On the other hand, the northern part’s famous Urakami Cathedral and surrounding Catholic neighborhoods (flourishing since the middle Meiji period’s policy allowed religious freedom) were at the very center of the devastation. To people desperate for understanding, the fact that the Americans, known to be a Christian nation, had dropped this terrible weapon on the largest cathedral

in all of Asia and left the city's main shrine untouched was a significant omen. According to a first-hand account, a street-preacher named Honda had walked far and wide, exhorting the dazed public to remember that it was the protection of the Kami of the shrine which had saved two-thirds of the city from ruin. The message must have been well-taken because it was only one year after the bombing and end of the war that the shrine's major festival, the Okunchi matsuri, was permitted by the Occupation and received city-wide support.

Since the beginning of the Meiji period (1868), the government had imposed a separation of Buddhism from Shinto so that the latter tradition could be more easily manipulated into a nationalistic ideology of service to the state's agendas. As a result, the rituals and orientations of Buddhism, focused on salvation and the cessation of suffering, dominated concerns people had regarding their ancestors, death, and mortuary propriety. Thus, in the weeks and months after the war's abrupt end, people went to the city's surviving temples to pray for the souls of family and friends killed in the war and atomic bombing. While Shinto institutions in many parts of the country were shunned because of their complicity in the doomed war effort, Suwa Shrine seemed to have weathered this disaffection better than most shrines, perhaps because of ideologues like Honda.

For the first time in its short but eventful history, the shrine emerged from under the watchful eye of military rulers. It began an appeal to citizens in need of strength, luck, health, new opportunities, a spouse, a first pregnancy, protection from sickness and natural disasters, and the perseverance necessary to rebuild shattered lives. We can imagine the comfort a visit to the shrine must have provided at that time—to come from a shanty-town structure or damaged dwelling (90% of the city's buildings received some damage from the bomb) into a green enclave of large trees, and there be able to have a drink of pure spring water before and after asking for blessings. A visitor could then clearly see how the shrine had been spared destruction, with its hundred year old gates and three sanctuaries still stately and elegant in their function of housing the Kami. All of these impressions must have been like ointment for the scorched souls of the people. As the city rebuilt, the priests from Suwa Shrine were a visible presence out in the neighborhoods, consecrating land and purifying existing structures of the death and suffering that had so recently filled them. People saw again how the shrine could be an elemental pivot for so many stages of their lives, and how everything from the food they ate to the buildings they lived within, from natural forces impossible to understand to the kitchen fire merrily heating water for tea—all had some aspect of Shinto tradition as a higher, broader, or subtler point of reference.

The post-war years, while impressive in their achievements of industrialization and reconstruction, have taken their toll on practices, beliefs, and values that used to more closely bind an individual to their local shrine. But again, because Nagasaki is so far removed from the centers of economic activity in Tokyo and Osaka, this trend has not been as harsh as it might have been on the viability of Suwa Shrine as a center for communal activity. We will later see in more detail how certain individuals have had a profound effect on the economic and even psychological health of the shrine since the 1980's, restoring its early stature as the center and nurturer of practices thought conducive to social cohesion. As long as Japanese culture and society continues to recognize occasions that call for some expression of gratitude to the spirits of the land, to the ancestors, or to the historical figures who helped shape the nation, it is likely the 350 year history of Suwa Shrine will provide a rich repertoire from which a variety of actors can attempt to shape, in the words of one of the priests, "the foundations for future generations to build their lives upon."

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