

## Article

# Do Kentucky Kami Drink Bourbon? Exploring Parallel Glocalization in Global Shinto Offerings

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**Abstract:** Scholars of Japanese religion have recently drawn attention to the global repositioning, “greening”, and international popularization of Shinto. However, research on Shinto ritual practice and material religion continues to focus predominantly on cases located within the borders of the Japanese state. This article explores the globalization of Shinto through transnational practitioners’ strategic glocalization of everyday ritual practices outside of Japan. Drawing upon digital ethnographic fieldwork conducted in online Shinto communities, I examine three case studies centering on traditional ritual offerings made at the domestic altar (*kamidana*): rice, sake, and sakaki branches. I investigate how transnational Shinto communities hold in tension a multiplicity of particularistic understandings of Shinto locality and authenticity when it comes to domestic ritual practice. While relativistic approaches to glocalization locate the sacred and authentic in an archetypical or idealized form of Japanese tradition rooted in its environment, creolization and transformation valorize the particularities of one’s personal surroundings and circumstances. Examining these strategies alongside recent and historical cases in Shinto ritual at shrines *within* Japan, I propose that attending to processes of “parallel glocalization” helps to illuminate the quasi-fictive notion of the religious “homeland” and close the perceived gap in authenticity between ritual practices at home and abroad.



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## 1. Introduction

In the age of social media and intensified globalization that is the twenty-first century, the Japanese religious tradition known as Shinto has never been more accessible to foreigners. People from around the world may now encounter Shinto shrines, priests, and rituals in a variety of ways, thanks to global flows of people (e.g., international tourism), technology (e.g., livestreams), goods (e.g., sacred items such as protective talismans), ideas (e.g., Shinto as a “green religion”), and media (e.g., anime and manga).<sup>1</sup> Some come away from these encounters profoundly inspired by contemporary Shinto’s emphasis on living a good life in this world, ritual practice, and appreciation for nature. The continued activity of diasporic shrines such as those in Brazil and Hawai’i, as well as the recent establishment of Shinto shrines in the United States, Canada, Europe, and Taiwan, make it possible for someone to become part of an active shrine community without ever setting foot in Japan. However, it is more often the case that a person interested in adopting Shinto practice lives hundreds, if not thousands, of miles away from the nearest shrine. Finding themselves outside of Shinto’s “native” territory and without direct access to traditional Shinto spaces and materials, global Shinto practitioners must make creative use of the resources available to them in order to properly manage their veneration of the Shinto deities called kami. Since the early 2000s, global Shinto practitioners have used digital technologies to network and to form online Shinto communities in which they can share their interests, experiences, information, and problems (Ugoretz 2021a, 2021b).

This study is part of my ongoing ethnographic research into the globalization of Shinto and the growth of online Shinto communities as facilitated by digital technology and media. Here, I draw upon four years of participant observation and interviews within several online Shinto communities, as well as a survey of fifty members' domestic ritual practices conducted in 2019. The group of Shinto practitioners discussed in this study were chosen as members of online Shinto communities whose questions, considerations, and practices are reflective of trends within the globalization of Shinto. This paper primarily considers Facebook groups, including communities established by individual shrines in the United States, connected with particular shrine traditions or kami, and those related to certain regions or general Shinto interests. Here, I do not refer to these groups by name out of respect for their privacy. The demographics of members within these communities are diverse in terms of ethnicity, citizenship, gender, sexual orientation, and abilities. However, it is worth noting that discussions in these groups tend to be dominated by anglophone posts, and the majority of active members as of this writing are non-Japanese and live in the Global North.

Because Shinto is popularly framed as the “indigenous” religion of Japan, “belong[ing]” to the locality of Japan “more purely than others” (Beyer 2007, p. 103), the question of the fundamental nature or location of the sacred in Shinto remains a perennial concern for global practitioners. Steven, a new member of an online Shinto community based on Facebook, posted a reflection along these lines.<sup>2</sup>

*I feel that Shinto is the right path for me, but I believe my religious practice should relate directly to my life and environment. It doesn't make sense for me to follow a foreign religion's agricultural calendar or venerate deities that are not endemic to the landscape around me. So what does this mean for me and my potential Shinto practice? Are the kami here with me? Or do they only come from Japan? ... In other words, can Shinto be indigenous here in the Great Plains, too?*

Steven's question resonates with that of globalization scholar Arjun Appadurai (1996, p. 52): “What is the nature of locality as a lived experience in a globalized, deterritorialized world?” Put another way, what is the nature of locality as a part of Shinto ritual practice in a globalized, deterritorialized Shinto tradition? Theorists have argued that globalization as a process gradually emerges from individuals' and communities' everyday tactics of reterritorialization or glocalization, the localization and particularization of the global (Robertson 1995; Appadurai 1996; Beyer 2007; Dessì and Sedda 2020). This paper explores how Shinto practitioners like Steven participate in the globalization and localization of Shinto through their everyday ritual practices. In particular, I analyze global Shinto practitioners' strategies for adapting traditional offerings for the kami made at the domestic Shinto altar or *kamidana*. I investigate how transnational Shinto communities hold in tension a multiplicity of particularistic understandings of Shinto locality and authenticity when it comes to domestic ritual practice. While relativistic approaches to glocalization locate the sacred and authentic in an archetypical or idealized form of Japanese tradition rooted in its environment, creolization and transformation valorize the particularities of one's personal surroundings and circumstances. Examining these strategies alongside recent and historical cases in Shinto ritual at shrines *within* Japan, I propose that attending to processes of “parallel glocalization” helps to illuminate the quasi-fictive notion of the native religious “homeland” and close the perceived gap in authenticity between the ritual practice at home and abroad.

## 2. Glocalization Strategies within Global Shinto Communities

Deleuze and Guattari ([1987] 2005) note that globalization necessarily demands the deterritorialization and reterritorialization of a given concept, practice, or object. This process produces a multiplicity of localities, heres and theres; the dialectic between them is what renders legible the “global”. As Peter Beyer writes, “global religion ... is globalized only in and as particular variations. It is both global and local at the same time; any variation can be global only as a series of localized forms” (Beyer 2009, p. 14). The end

result is the simultaneous particularization of universalism and the universalization of particularism (Robertson 1992). In other words, as the former process detaches Shinto tradition from the particular context of Japan so that it may be mobilized by communities and individuals across the globe, the latter process not only encourages, but also valorizes constructions of local(ized) Shinto identities. As I will demonstrate below, this dialectic is unfolding in much the same way both in Shinto communities inside Japan and beyond its borders through the process of “parallel glocalization”.

Returning to Steven’s post to the online Shinto community, the question of whether Shinto ritual practice may be considered indigenous to the Midwestern United States cuts to the very heart of the problematics of the globalization, or rather glocalization, of religious traditions. The term “glocalization” (a combination of “global localization”) was first popularized as business jargon in the 1980s to refer to the micromarketing strategy of tailoring global products to particular and local consumer markets (Robertson 1995). Roland Robertson famously called for theorists of globalization to attend to the interpenetrating and co-constitutive relationship between the “global” and the “local”, which exhibits simultaneous trends toward universalization and particularization, through the concept of glocalization.

It is remarkable how Steven’s attention to the suitability of Shinto to his immediate environment closely follows the meaning of the Japanese term from which “glocalization” is said to derive, *dochakuka* 土着化. The root word *dochaku* (often translated as “of the land” or, literally, “wearing the soil”) originally referred to an “agricultural principle of adapting farming techniques to local conditions” (Tulloch 1991, p. 134). Today, *dochaku* signifies the “native” or “indigenous”, and *dochakuka* broadly refers to a process of domestication or indigenization. In the context of religion, Japanese scholars have used *dochakuka* to discuss the indigenization of traditions originating outside of the Japanese archipelago. As early as the sixth century, kami cults were offered as a “native” foil for “foreign” traditions, most notably Buddhism. From the late eighteenth century on, nativist scholars and their nationalist successors have (re)constructed Shinto as “an ‘indigenous religion’ . . . inextricably linked with a single nation, Japan” in contrast with so-called “world religions” such as Christianity (Inoue et al. 2003, p. 2). In other words, Shinto in these historical contexts was conceptualized as already uniquely “of the land” and therefore not requiring indigenization. This characterization belies the global nature of Shinto’s history (Thal 2006; Payne 2021). However, considering the historical and contemporary positioning of Shinto as the indigenous religion of Japan, Steven’s predicament and the recent spread of Shinto practice overseas prompts anew critical examination of the tradition’s potential for glocalization.

Can and should Shinto undergo a process of *dochakuka*, of glocalization? Robertson (1995) argues that the main issue is not of *whether* the universal and the particular will be combined, but rather *how*. Giulianotti and Robertson (2007) sketch a four-fold typology of the forms glocalization may take:

- (1) Relativization: here, social actors seek to preserve their prior cultural institutions, practices, and meanings within a new environment, thereby reflecting a commitment to differentiation from the host culture.
- (2) Accommodation: here, social actors absorb pragmatically the practices, institutions and meanings associated with other societies, in order to maintain key elements of the prior local culture.
- (3) Hybridization: here, social actors synthesize local and other cultural phenomena to produce distinctive, hybrid cultural practices, institutions, and meanings.
- (4) Transformation: here, social actors come to favor the practices, institutions, or meanings associated with other cultures. Transformation may procure fresh cultural forms or, more extremely, the abandonment of the local culture in favor of alternative and/or hegemonic cultural forms. (Giulianotti and Robertson 2007, p. 135)

The answers Steven received from the online Shinto community fall into three general categories for approaching Shinto localization. The first group favored relativization and

argued that while Shinto is universal in that anyone can adopt its practices, it is inextricable from its historical Japanese context and must be practiced within a Japanese paradigm to be considered authentic. As the head priest of the Tsubaki Grand Shrine of America, Rev. Lawrence Koichi Barrish, paraphrasing his predecessor Rev. Yukitaka Yamamoto (1987), is fond of saying: “The sun shines on all people equally, and Amaterasu Ōmikami smiles on us all”. According to this perspective, there is no need to look outside of historical Shinto tradition for kami. There is already a kami and an orthopraxy for everything, and it is unnecessary or even disrespectful to ignore these customs. Some community members suggest that while Shinto does not prescribe what people can and can’t do, straying from Japanese tradition to follow one’s personal inclinations results in a practice that is not Shinto, but rather a form of eclectic spirituality or neo-Paganism.

The second group favored accommodation or hybridization, which I will collectively refer to as creolization (Rocha 2006).<sup>3</sup> They explained that there are already historical frameworks available for venerating local kami outside of Japan from overseas shrines (Suga 2010; Nakajima 2010; Shimizu 2019). According to this perspective, there is no conflict in recognizing kami local to one’s own region, including deities from other traditions, such as the legendary Korean founder Dangun, the Hawaiian *akua* Pele, or the Norse *æsir* Odin, in addition to Japanese kami who have already migrated to the West, including Amaterasu Ōmikami and Inari Ōkami. Additionally, diasporic shrines such as Hilo Daijingu in Hawai’i have historically incorporated local features, such as lava rocks, palms, and pine trees into the shrine’s design (Shimizu 2019).

The third group favored transformation and replied that there must be local kami for Steven to venerate because Shinto is fundamentally a nature religion, and nature is everywhere. According to this perspective, kami can be found in one’s backyard or a nearby park. Just as there may be a kami associated with the famed Isuzu River beside the Grand Shrines of Ise, there ought to be a kami associated with the Pilchuck River on whose banks the Tsubaki Grand Shrine of America sits. After all, kami veneration began as a heterogeneous body of hyper-local practices tailored to a given place and community. Thus, the most faithful approach to practicing Shinto outside of Japan is to pay one’s respects to the local kami in accordance with local characteristics and customs.

The question of where and how kami exist outside of Japan is at once ontological and pragmatic. As Appadurai notes, “locality is ephemeral unless hard and regular work is undertaken to produce and maintain its materiality”, and ritual practice is one such concrete method contributing to the “the spatiotemporal production of locality” (Appadurai 1996, pp. 180–81). In the following sections, I examine how global Shinto practitioners’ everyday negotiation of the materiality of ritual practice, centering on the home altar or *kamidana*, produces multiple Shinto localities. In particular, I explore three case studies that explore the globalization of offerings of rice, sake, and sakaki.

At the same time, I interrogate how relativization strategies assume a static body of “prior cultural institutions, practices and meanings” as a standard against which to compare religious change due to globalization (Giulianotti and Robertson 2007, p. 135). Relativization strategies thus reference and (re)produce a quasi-fictional ‘homeland’ or ‘original’ tradition that is somehow impervious to globalization by virtue of its ‘indigeneity.’ I do so by attending to ‘parallel globalization’, which I define as a process of simultaneous globalization that is independent in terms of location yet coincident in terms of outcome.<sup>4</sup> I demonstrate that parallel globalization foregrounds how the interaction of universalization and particularization in the religious ‘homeland’ and ‘abroad’—in this case, Japan and the West—may converge, collapsing the meaningful distinction between relativization, creolization, and transformation.

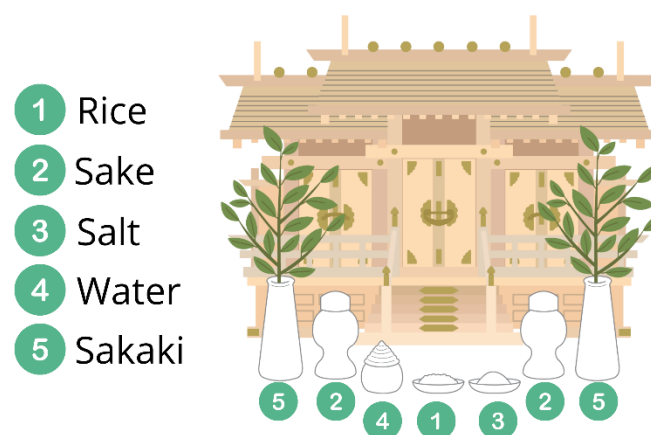
### 3. Domesticating Global Shinto Ritual Practice

For someone living in Japan today, it is a simple matter to visit one of the many Shinto shrines in their neighborhood to pay respects to the kami or participate in formal ritual events and festivals. In Japanese and diasporic homes, you may also find a domestic

altar called a *kamidana* (lit. “kami shelf”), although surveys suggest that the majority of households do not have *kamidana*, and those numbers continue to decline (Hardacre 2016; Abe and Imamura 2019). Due to their geographic distance from Shinto shrines, the “spiritual center” for many global Shinto practitioners’ ritual practice is the *kamidana* (Iwamura 2003, p. 275). A *kamidana* enshrines the kami in the home through consecrated objects (*shinsatsu*) and provide a sacred space in which to interact with them through offerings (*shinsen*) and prayer. *Kamidana*, as individual household altars dedicated to kami (which may include ancestors), date back to the mid-Edo period (1603–1868) and the proselytization activities of the Grand Shrines of Ise (Hardacre 2016). While the simplest *kamidana* may include a paper talisman linked to a particular shrine and its deities (*ofuda*) and a simple stand, a typical *kamidana* today consists of a small shrine replica, which houses the *ofuda*, and ritual implements such as offering dishes. Ideally, *kamidana* are to be kept in a clean, bright, and quiet space and elevated on a shelf above eye-level out of respect for the kami’s sacred nature.

Global Shinto practitioners may buy the altar’s components from online vendors in a set or slowly collect them as their means allow, except for the *shinsatsu*, which must be obtained from a shrine. They may construct and assemble their *kamidana* through the labor of their own hands and often personalize them with artwork and articles of personal significance and connected to Japanese culture. This can be seen as an ongoing, intimate process of making Shinto “at home” overseas (Gould 2019). A *kamidana* may share space in the home with any number of other altars—such as its Buddhist corollary, the *butsudan*—but is conventionally given its own space and ritual attention.

Regular offerings for the kami traditionally include rice, water, and salt, as well as rice wine (sake) and evergreen branches (sakaki) (see Figure 1). Fresh fruits and vegetables and local or seasonal delicacies are also popular additions, particularly on special occasions. These offerings are given in gratitude for the kamis’ blessings, one aspect of which is the production of the elements necessary for life: food, water, and ritual purification. Once the ritual is completed, the offerings are removed from the *kamidana* and consumed by the participants. This practice, called *osagari*, serves as a kind of communion which deepens one’s relationship with the kami and distributes their blessings and protection.



**Figure 1.** Diagram of traditional offerings listed in order of placement on the *kamidana*. Source: author.

As the ritual offerings are staples in Japan, it is easy to acquire them locally and incorporate them into one’s regular meals. However, this is not always the case for Shinto practitioners living outside of Japan. Their local staples may differ, and certain elements may be hard to come by for a variety of reasons. Necessity being the mother of invention, global Shinto practitioners thus tactically “make do”, to borrow the language of Michael de Certeau (1984, p. 18), with the means and materials available to them while negotiating notions of authenticity and tradition. Focusing on customary offerings of rice, sake, and sakaki branches, I present below three case studies illustrating some problems that Shinto



practitioners face relating to their domestic ritual practice and the glocalization strategies they adopt to resolve them. While these moments of glocalization play out in highly individual and everyday circumstances, they accrete over time to suggest the shape and trajectory of an emergent global Shinto tradition.

### 3.1. Do British Kami Eat Oats?

Rice has a venerable history in Japanese cuisine and Shinto ritual tradition. The earliest archaeological evidence available suggests that in ancient times, people in the archipelago worshipped kami for their role in controlling the weather, water, and crops (Mori 2003). When wet rice agriculture traveled from the Asian continent, kami worship was systematized to better follow the rice-centric agricultural calendar and to promote cooperation on a larger scale as well as hierarchy, culminating in the identification of rice agriculture with the ancient imperial system. While there is disagreement among historians as to whether rice has always been quantitatively “the staple food” of Japan, Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney (1993) demonstrates that the grain has played a dominant role as a metaphor of self and a symbol of collective Japanese identity. Moreover, “the symbolism of rice is bifurcated: on the one hand, ‘rice as *our* food’ and, on the other hand, ‘rice paddies as *our* land’, each reinforcing the other” (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993, p. 4, emphasis in original). Thus, rice links space and time, as well as the real or imagined land and history of Japan.

Beyond the practical, rice takes on symbolic importance in Japanese cosmologies, representing the soul and the divine. Rice was in a category of its own, in opposition to non-rice grains (*zakkoku*). Yanagita (1982) argued that only rice was believed to have a soul, thus requiring ritual performance. For example, rituals are conducted to purify a field, pray for a good planting and harvest, and offer first fruits to the kami in gratitude for the harvest. Through such rituals, which are now understood to be part of Shinto, rice participates in a cycle of (re)generative exchange and facilitates commensality between deities and humans. The majority of these rituals began as folk traditions; however, the ancient imperial court adopted them into the official calendar. The emperor took on further importance as the apical ritual performer on behalf of his subjects, both at the time of his enthronement and on an annual basis. His ancestral deities enshrined at Ise, particularly the solar deity Amaterasu Ōmikami, also acquired new precedence.

Today, rice continues to occupy a preeminent position in Shinto rituals as the first offering made to the kami at shrines and *kamidana* and the last to be removed. Yet, it is far from the only food offering made in Shinto tradition. Dizzying lists of dishes ranging from meat and fish to nuts and herbs, to be prepared in all sorts of ways, are codified in texts such as the tenth-century *Procedures of the Engi Era*, or *Engishiki* (Grapard 2021). Some shrines share powerful ties to certain non-rice foods. Suwa Jinja, for example, is well-known for its long tradition of ritual hunting and offerings of boar meat, venison, and pheasant (Grumbach 2005).

For most global Shinto practitioners, acquiring rice for offerings is a relatively simple matter. Rice is a staple in many cuisines, and most groceries and markets sell it; yet, even the inclusion of this global grain in one’s daily ritual practice is up for interpretation. Shinto practitioners who take a relativizing approach to glocalizing Shinto ritual tend to prefer to use rice imported from Japan, or “Japanese style” rice grown outside of Japan, most often Calrose or other California rice varieties.<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that each of the Shinto shrines active in the online Shinto communities explicitly associates itself with rice production in some way. Rev. Izumi Hasegawa, the head priestess of the Los Angeles-based Shinto Shrine of Shusse Inari in America, has cultivated a close relationship with Koda Farms. Located in central California’s San Joaquin Valley, Koda Farms is a Japanese-American family business that takes pride in the cultivation of “certified organic, heirloom, Japanese style” rice, particularly their proprietary Kokuho Rose cultivar (Koda Farms 2022). This collaboration is perhaps unsurprising, as the shrine’s principal kami, Inari Ōkami or Uga-no-mitama-no-kami, is predominantly associated with rice and grains. Rev. Hasegawa visits Koda Farms every spring and autumn to conduct rituals to purify the fields, bless the

farm and the workers, and give thanks for the harvest. Shrine members are often invited to visit Koda Farms for the spring and autumn festivals, either in person or virtually via livestream. Participants may also receive a package of “blessed rice” and a lucky gohei wand decorated with Koda Farms rice ears in exchange for a donation to the shrine. Rev. Barrish of the Tsubaki Grand Shrine of America, located in Washington state, sources organic rice ears from Lundberg Family Farms in California for special ritual occasions. The shrine’s website information emphasizes that the enshrined kami are involved in the rice-growing process. Rev. Kuniko Kanawa of the Kamunabi Ban’yū Ko-Shintō Shrine even grows her own rice in a small garden on the shrine grounds in Maryland.

Disruptions to the global supply chain precipitated by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 highlight our dependence upon the international flow of material goods. Due to shortages, shipping issues, tariffs, and market inflation, staples such as rice became more expensive and difficult to find. In a post to an online Shinto community, Lisa explained that Japanese rice had become too difficult to source in the UK. “Desperate times call for desperate measures”, she wrote. “So I’ve started offering oats at my *kamidana*”. While Lisa’s adaptation of ritual practice in response to the pandemic is characteristic of creolization tactics, some of her observations suggest a potential shift toward transformation. Lisa observed that her new practice of offering oats instead of rice “feels more natural” for two reasons. First, oats are a part of her regular diet, so it is easier to incorporate the offerings into her meals after removing them from the altar. She can consume the oats as *osagari* on a daily basis and avoid wasting food. What to do with rice offerings after removing them from the *kamidana* is a common topic of discussion within online Shinto communities. Some practitioners are not accustomed to eating rice every day and wonder if they should adopt a more Japanese diet so that the grains will not go to waste and to avoid insulting the kami. Other practitioners have noted that the quantity of rice offered each day is so small that they wait to consume the rice until they have saved enough grains over the course of the week to cook a more substantial meal. Second, Lisa noted that oats are grown locally and are more representative of the English diet in the same way that rice is of the Japanese diet. Many Shinto practitioners claim that the symbolic practice of offering a local grain essential for life with gratitude (*kansha*) and sincerity (*makoto*) is most important and acceptable to the kami. In this interpretation, substituting rice with a grain native to one’s own locality is not simply a temporary or expedient measure, but a practice that may be seen as more faithful to the spirit of Shinto tradition than the uncritical adoption of offering rice.

### 3.2. Do Kentucky Kami Drink Bourbon?

Offerings of rice at the *kamidana* are followed by sake. A versatile alcoholic brew derived from fermented rice, sake is essentially an offering made for the entertainment and enjoyment of the kami. Several prominent myths feature this libation. For example, in the *Izumo no Fudoki*, it is said that during the “Month When the Gods are Present” (*Kamiarizuki*), when all the kami gather at the Grand Shrine of Izumo, they enjoy drinking sake together. At New Year’s celebrations, parishioners offer bottles of sake to their local shrine, and sake brewers donate whole casks, which are stacked at the entrance to the shrine. Sake is a part of regular offerings at the shrine, and it is also offered on special occasions including weddings, groundbreakings, and festivals. When a person participates in a formal ritual offering at a shrine, the priest will often invite them to have a sip of the sake offered (in this case, called *omiki*) as their *naorai*, the shrine practice after which *osagari* in the home is patterned.

American diplomat and Japanese studies scholar Edwin O. Reischauer once remarked that “saké is part of the Japanese soul” (Kleiman 1989). However, while the Japanese consumption of sake and the number of domestic breweries have declined over the last few decades, global interest has boomed (Yarrow 2010). Not only is Japanese-made sake an export commodity, but companies and independent brewers have established sake breweries around the world. For global Shinto practitioners who prefer a relativization approach to glocalizing Shinto ritual, it is now more possible than ever to procure sake for

offerings. The necessary quality and provenance of the sake offered, however, is a matter for debate. Ron does not drink and felt uncomfortable purchasing a bottle of sake knowing that he would not drink it. Wanting to avoid waste, he asked online Shinto community members if a low- to non-alcoholic rice wine meant for cooking would make an acceptable offering. As expected, the responses were mixed. Some practitioners argued that the fundamental purpose of the sake offering was for the kami's enjoyment. As such, only sake that would be enjoyable to drink should be offered. Others suggested that the important thing was to respect Shinto ritual tradition by sincerely offering some form of sake, even if it is of the cooking variety. A third camp emphasized that the other offerings, especially rice, were more important, and that sake should be considered optional. Many practitioners only offer sake on special occasions such as festival days. The wife of a Shinto priest in Hawai'i commented that it would be better not to offer sake than to offer inferior cooking wine. Ron eventually decided to buy a bottle from Gekkeikan, a popular international sake brewer and distributor. As an Inari devotee, he notes that Gekkeikan is a particularly auspicious brand, thanks to its historical ties to Fushimi in Kyoto (and thus, the Grand Shrine of Fushimi Inari) and its now local production location in Folsom, California.

Another outcome of the global sake boom is the possibility for shrines outside of Japan to form traditional relationships with local breweries. In recognition of the historical role of sake in Shinto ritual, Rev. Barrish has cultivated such a relationship with SakéOne, an American-owned brewery in Oregon. SakéOne's facilities include a *kamidana* with an *ofuda* from the Tsubaki Grand Shrine of America, and Rev. Barrish visits annually to bless the brewery's storehouse (Auld 2010). His visits are akin to a lively festival and serve as an occasion to strengthen the association between sake and Japanese culture, featuring sake tastings and taiko and kendo performances. SakéOne also produces a special junmai ginjo genshu sake in a fundraising collaboration with Rev. Barrish, with 20% of the profits donated to the shrine (Hawk 2020).

Although sake has generally become more available and accessible overseas, it is not always a viable option for global Shinto practitioners. In Matthew's case, his local liquor store in Kentucky doesn't carry sake, citing lack of demand and high import cost. Taking a creolization approach to globalizing the tradition offering of sake, Matthew decided to offer a bottle of Old Grand-Dad bourbon at his *kamidana*. He explained that bourbon is a quality spirit unique to his locality, much like sake is in Japan. He hoped that it would be an acceptable offering to the kami and joked, "I think they'll enjoy it, it's pretty strong stuff". Meanwhile, the San Marino Shrine, nestled in the mountains of the Italian peninsula, makes its own "shrine wine" from grapes grown in an adjacent vineyard, which it also labels as *omiki* (Saarinen 2021).

It is worth noting that, historically speaking, other types of alcohol have been offered at shrines in Japan. For example, *shōchū*, which may be brewed using rice, barley, sweet potatoes, and a variety of other ingredients, is featured in some rituals (Toida 2011). There is also historical evidence of local brews being offered in lieu of sake, such as *cachaça*, derived from sugar cane in Brazil (Kebbe 2021). Kami in Japan also appear to enjoy alcoholic drinks of foreign origin. Barrels of French wine conspicuously stand opposite to casks of sake along the path to Meiji Jingū in Tokyo. Since 2006, France has sent nearly 200 bottles of wine from Burgundy to Meiji Jingū in a gesture of friendship and in recognition of Emperor Meiji, who is enshrined there as a kami, and his reputed fondness for wine (Okimura 2015). The wine is ritually consecrated, offered to the deified emperor on the anniversary of his death, and shared with foreign guests on his birthday. Although the offering of wine or other "foreign" drinks is far from the norm, Meiji Jingū is not the only shrine to welcome such libations. Casks of world-famous Ichiro's Malt whiskey are dedicated to the kami at the Chichibu Shrine, which also plays host to the Chichibu Whiskey Festival (Zaji 2014). Located in a town famous for its brewing industry, the Chichibu Shrine also offers wine, made from locally grown grapes from the Usada Winery in Saitama and aged in the basement under the shrine's main hall, to the kami (Ōura 2021). Asama Jinja in Yamanashi Prefecture, known as Japan's wine country for over one hundred years (Gastin 2015; Asama



Jinja 2018), designates wine as its *omiki*, instead of sake, and wine dominates visitors' libation offerings. Asama Jinja and Tsuno Jinja in Miyazaki Prefecture, the highest-ranking shrines in their respective regions, have served wine as *naorai* (Fuefuki Shunkan Net 2011; Miyazaki Nichinichi Shimbun 2019). In response to parishioners' questions, Sugihara Jinja in Toyama suggests that any alcoholic beverage will make for an acceptable offering, as long as the offerer considers it of suitable quality for the kami's consumption (Sugihara Jinja n.d.), echoing global Shinto communities' common wisdom that what matters most are the quality of the intent for the offering and that of the offering itself.

For some global Shinto practitioners, the question remains: is an alcoholic beverage—whether it be sake, bourbon, or wine—a necessary offering to the kami at one's *kamidana*? In other words, do the kami enjoy non-alcoholic drinks? Dave, a native to Seattle, Washington, floated online the idea of offering coffee at his *kamidana*. Seattle holds an international reputation as a center for coffee roasting and distribution, boasting a rich coffeehouse culture, as well as being the birthplace of the ubiquitous Starbucks coffee chain. In Dave's estimation, the most important thing about the traditional offering of sake is to offer, in sincerity and gratitude, an enjoyable beverage that has close ties with the local environment. He understands the laborious process of roasting, grinding, and brewing high-quality coffee beans himself to be a worthy, if not better, alternative to offering imported sake, mass-produced in a computerized factory. Nyri also occasionally offers coffee at her *kamidana*, which enshrines her tutelary deity (*ujigami*), Hachiman Ōkami. Growing up in the Armenian diaspora, she was taught from a young age the importance of coffee and its careful preparation for family, friends, and honored guests. Nyri also drinks coffee to help manage her ADHD. Her practice of offering coffee at her *kamidana* emerges not from a whim or simple personal preference, but out of her consideration of historical precedents for offering a variety of food and drink to the kami at Shinto shrines, the deep cultural significance of coffee in her Armenian heritage, and the rationalization that a stimulant would likely be appreciated by a kami associated with battle. Zoe also offers caffeinated beverages she personally enjoys to Inari Ōkami at her *kamidana*, namely soda and sometimes coffee or tea. Each of these transformative approaches to glocalizing Shinto ritual valorize the practitioner's intent, the particularity of the local, and personal gnosis. Tea is sometimes offered as *shinsen* in Japan, but it remains to be seen whether non-alcoholic brews may catch on as *omiki*.

### 3.3. Do Colorado Kami Prefer Real or Artificial?

Besides offerings of water and salt, which are very rarely debated due to their accessibility, the last prescribed ritual offering at the *kamidana* is that of sakaki branches. Sakaki (*Cleyera japonica*) is a species of flowering broad-leaf evergreen in the tea family (*Theaceae*), native to Japan. The etymology of sakaki is ambiguous; it may refer to the branch's vitality symbolized by its evergreen leaves (*sakaeru-ki*, lit. "always thriving tree") or its use as a boundary marker for sacred spaces (*sakai-ki*, lit. "border tree") (Inoue n.d.). Regardless, the sakaki is considered to be a sacred tree and features prominently in various levels of Shinto ritual. In the foundational myth of the "Opening of the Heavenly Rock Cave" (*Ama no Iwato Biraki*) recorded in the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*, the myriad kami convince the solar kami Amaterasu to come out of hiding and restore light and warmth to the world with the help of a sakaki tree decorated with sacred offerings. This myth provides an archetype that Shinto ritual follows today. Branches of sakaki decorate entrances to shrines, serve as a temporary conduit (*yorishiro*) in which the kami may dwell during rituals, and feature as props in ritual dances. Sakaki branches decorated with lightning-shaped paper strips called *shide* are also formally offered to the kami as *tamagushi*. Finally, sakaki branches sit in slender vases on either side of a *kamidana* as offerings and are replaced a few times each month on festival days.

While sakaki naturally grows in warm areas outside of Japan (in East and Southeast Asia and northern India), it is not typically found in the West (eFloras n.d.). Global Shinto practitioners who adopt an attitude of relativization toward glocalizing Shinto practice

emphasize the singular importance of offering sakaki. This group is divided in half between those who offer real or artificial sakaki at their *kamidana*. The use of plastic sakaki branches is a common practice of convenience in Japan, and they can be easily bought online from vendors on popular sites like Amazon. According to Hiroyuki Watanabe (2022), a scholar of Japanese forestry and sacred forests (*chinju no mori*), some shrines in Japan even use artificial sakaki as decorations, though not as *tamagushi* offerings. Citing environmental concerns, many practitioners prefer using the artificial sakaki because they want to avoid harming a living tree through the routine clipping of branches for offerings.

However, others will go to great lengths to acquire live sakaki to offer at their *kamidana*. For example, members share links to plant nurseries in the United States and Europe which will ship sakaki saplings to be planted in one's yard. Interestingly, this camp also cites Shinto's connection to nature as the impetus for their practice. For these practitioners, the feeling of 'freshness' and vitality that live *sakaki* plants impart to their *kamidana* is essential. Several switched from offering plastic branches to real ones after they sensed that the artificial *sakaki* "didn't feel right", and others view their use of artificial sakaki as a temporary measure until they can source live branches.

According to renowned Shinto scholar Inoue Nobutaka (n.d.), in ancient times the term *sakaki* referred to evergreen trees in general. Even as sakaki became increasingly associated with species in the tea family or camellia genus, in practice ritual specialists also made (and continue to make) offerings of other evergreen species. It is worth noting that sakaki does not grow naturally over the whole of the Japanese archipelago. Thus, while sakaki is, by and large, the standard for *tamagushi* offerings, and some shrines go so far as to transplant sakaki on the grounds, the plants used in shrine rituals differ according to the history and tradition of the shrine in question and the flora of its locality. In a survey of sacred trees at Japanese shrines, Sasou (2012) reports that at least thirty-six different species of trees are used for *tamagushi*. Watanabe (2022) notes that, today, there are several famous shrines that fit this description. For example, Iwashimizu Hachimangū uses magnolia (*ogatamaki*), Yoshimizu Jinja uses lily-of-the-valley (*asebi*), and Suwa Taisha uses holly (*soyogo*). He laments that shrines feel the need to use artificial sakaki or real sakaki branches imported from China (which tend to be less costly than those grown in Japan) and recommends that they simply use a similar evergreen plant native to the shrine's locale.

Rev. Barrish reports that the Tsubaki Grand Shrine of America regularly uses camellia (*Camellia japonica*) instead of sakaki in rituals for two similar reasons. First, the camellia is a broadleaf evergreen native to Washington state and a close relative of *Cleyera japonica*. Second, the camellia, *tsubaki* in Japanese, is a sacred plant with a deep historical connection to the Tsubaki Grand Shrine as its namesake. Like Watanabe, he argues that "live plants are preferable to plastic sakaki" and recommends that Shinto practitioners substitute live branches from a local broadleaf evergreen species. For example, Barrish notes that parishioners of his shrine living in Colorado offer juniper at their *kamidana*. Other practitioners have substituted holly, laurel, magnolia, dogwood, and even succulents (which are technically green in every season). Rev. Barrish thus effectively authorizes a creolization approach to glocalizing traditional ritual offerings of sakaki at one's *kamidana* by appealing to his shrine lineage's historical practices and affirming the "Shinto environmentalist paradigm" (Rots 2017).

Understanding the originally broad nature of the sakaki category and accepting the significance of offering live plants, some global Shinto practitioners have adopted a more transformative approach to filling the vases on their *kamidana*. Living in a region of England known for its many rivers, Ben makes offerings of reeds. He explains that while his practice is rather unorthodox, the reed is an important plant in his area, and it is used for many purposes. Since he associates his *kamidana* with local kami connected to water and rain, reeds seem like a fitting offering. In Ben's estimation, the aspects most important for the ritual offering of plants is that the plant is living and an essential part of life in his locality, much like rice, water, and salt. Erin lives in Ireland and offers holly branches at her *kamidana*

in the winter and oak branches in the summer. Given the sacred status of these two native trees in Celtic tradition, she finds them to be especially auspicious offerings to local kami.

#### 4. Discussion

Returning to and reframing Steven's prescient question, how is it possible for Shinto ritual to be indigenized in locations outside of Japan? In this paper, I have shown that global Shinto practitioners, connected through online Shinto communities, negotiate answers to the problematics of glocalization in everyday life through ritual practice at their *kamidana*. We have seen that global Shinto practitioners may favor any and all three categories of glocalization strategies: relativization, creolization, and transformation. As [Giulianotti and Robertson \(2007\)](#) suggest, multiple approaches to glocalization may coexist within a single community. Taking this observation one step further, I would argue that a single person within a community may adopt a variety of glocalization practices, depending on their personal knowledge, circumstances, and goals, which are liable to shift over time and in response to new contingencies and developing points of community consensus.

Appadurai observes that "the work of the imagination . . . through which local subjectivity is produced and nurtured is a bewildering palimpsest of highly local and highly translocal considerations" ([Appadurai 1996](#), p. 198). What sort of global imagination of Shinto, then, emerges from the glocalization strategies employed by Shinto practitioners living outside of Japan? Overall, the negotiation of offerings reflects a growing popular understanding of Shinto as a green "religion of the forest" ([Dessi 2016](#); [Rots 2017](#)). In each case, online Shinto communities affirm the importance of the connection between Shinto ritual and the sacralized landscape. Global Shinto practitioners' collective negotiation of glocalization processes on the whole confirms that kami are present in one's locality and that locality matters to them; thus, locality must matter to those who venerate them. Conversely, because the kami value sincerity, that which matters personally to Shinto practitioners also matters to the kami.

The problem for online Shinto communities, then, becomes which particular land or locality should take precedence: the "Japanese" local or the personal local. On the one hand, those who valorize the "Japanese" local claim that authentic Shinto practice must follow tradition or orthopraxy in Japan, or else it strays into spiritual eclecticism or cultural appropriation. This perspective often promotes the phenomenon that Ugo [Dessi \(2013\)](#) has identified as "cultural chauvinism". That is, Shinto, conceptions of "Japanese" nature and Japanese culture may more broadly be accepted as superior to local manifestations. As a result, Shinto shrines and practitioners outside of Japan undertake projects to import these Japanese elements and effectively reproduce the "sacred land" (*shinkoku*) of Japan by buying or growing Japanese rice, patronizing sake breweries, and planting sakaki in their yards.

On the other hand, the online Shinto communities' increasing valorization of personal locality shifts the association of authority and authenticity toward the individual. While an emphasis on privatization and personal gnosis is admittedly characteristic of New Age and Neopagan spiritualities, I would like to highlight the fact that global Shinto practitioners explicitly reference historical and conceptual precedents in kami worship. Online Shinto communities are keenly aware that while Shinto tradition as we know it today developed and underwent systematization and standardization over the centuries, it originated as hyper-local kami cults. Leaders and stakeholders within online Shinto communities are also more cognizant of the internal diversity of Shinto ritual in Japan, thanks to travel, time living in Japan, or personal research. While Japanese religious institutions may tend to promote community identity and collectivism over personal identity and individualism ([Dessi 2013](#)), scholars have shown how individuals in Japan cultivate private relationships and structures of meaning and feeling with kami based upon a constellation of personal experiences, affinities, wishes, and goals ([Reader 1991](#); [Smyers 1998](#); [Reader and Tanabe 1998](#)). Global Shinto practitioners affirm their highly personal relationship with kami and their intuitive approach to adapting ritual practice through the language of Shinto "virtues".

The consensus among online Shinto communities is: if you cannot follow Shinto tradition as it is practiced in Japan to the letter, do your best to interact with the kami with sincerity and gratitude, and they will graciously accept both your circumstances and offerings.

However, attending to “parallel glocalization” in Japan and abroad blurs the distinction between relativization, creolization, and transformation. I have demonstrated that there is an extraordinary degree of internal variation pertaining to historical ritual offerings within Japan. Moreover, Shinto’s supposed “indigeneity” to the land of Japan has never rendered it immune from globalization. On the contrary, Shinto incorporates a broad range of religious influences from around the world, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, and folk traditions. In response to global concerns, contemporary Japanese religions increasingly construct themselves as “green” traditions, whose practices offer insights into environmental sustainability (Dessi 2016; Rots 2017). Even the land of Japan itself continues to change, being deterritorialized and reterritorialized, as evidenced by the domestication of grapes and domestic production of wine and whiskey, as well as by the translocal transplantation of sakaki. Appadurai explains that the “homeland” is “partly invented, existing only in the imagination of deterritorialized groups” (Appadurai 1996, p. 49). Thus, the global imagination of Shinto, influenced by discourses around Shinto’s indigeneity, flattens conceptualizations of Japanese nature and Shinto’s diverse, glocalized ritual practices into a static, idealized understanding of Japan as Shinto’s “homeland”. This quasi-fictitious homeland and its traditions in turn produce anxieties in global practitioners relating to Shinto’s continued glocalization outside of Japan.

In this paper, I have illustrated how contemporary Shinto is far from the timeless, indigenous, and insular island religion it is often assumed or made out to be. Shinto ritual practice is spreading around the world, and shrines and practitioners are forming digital networks and online communities. The pertinent question is not whether Shinto can or should undergo globalization outside of Japan, but how it is currently being glocalized both within and without. I have suggested that attending to processes of parallel glocalization can aid the study of the globalization of religion by highlighting the construction of the religious “homeland” status and collapsing distinctions between relativization, creolization, and translation strategies taken for granted in Giulianiotti and Robertson’s analysis of glocalization. Future research is encouraged help to explicate how ongoing processes of parallel glocalization influence notions of authenticity within global religious traditions.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Here I reference the five “dimensions of global cultural flows” proposed by (Appadurai 1996): ethnoscap, mediascap, technoscap, finanscap, and ideoscap. For more on the global flows of Japanese religions, see (Dessi 2013; Dessi 2016), and of Shinto in particular, see (Rots 2015; Rots 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Names and identifying information of digital Shinto community members have been changed to protect their privacy, unless the informants preferred and consented to be identified. Moreover, original data is “transfigur[ed] . . . into composite accounts and representational interactions” where appropriate (Markham 2012, p. 334). For more on fabrication as ethical practice in digital ethnography, see (Markham 2012; de Seta 2020). However, the real names of key public figures such as Shinto priests, Shinto shrines, and related companies are given.



- 3 Following Cristina Rocha's lead, I use "creolization" to refer to a "process of interaction and change" through which religious traditions may "become indigenized . . . [and] create a home where [it] is not at home" through individuals' creativity, agency, and innovation (Rocha 2006, pp. 18–19). I also find it a useful term to collectively refer to approaches that may fall into the two categories of "accommodation" and "hybridization" offered by Giulianotti and Robertson (2007), as the distinction between the two is not always clear in practice.
- 4 (Chen 2008) uses the term "parallel glocalization" to resist the assumption that the globalization of New Age practices necessarily means "Americanization" and to discuss the simultaneous glocalization of New Age movements from Taiwan. While Chen's study shows that glocalization does not occur "in series"—not so dissimilar from Christina Rocha's (2006) illumination of the multidirectional or rhizomatic nature of globalization from non-Western centers—her usage of "parallel" does not attend to parallel outcomes of glocalization processes.
- 5 Global Shinto practitioners' use of California-grown japonica rice as an approximation of Japanese rice is interesting, given the controversy over the importation of California rice in Japan (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993). Beginning in the 1940s, the Japanese government strictly controlled the production, supply, and distribution of foodstuffs, particularly rice (Lama 2017). In the 1960s, with the passage of the Agricultural Basic Law of 1961, the domestic rice industry was heavily subsidized to increase production and support farmers. The importation of rice was effectively banned until the 1990s, after a terrible domestic rice production crisis and pressure from the United States and other countries for Japan to open its economy to more agricultural imports. Even after the import ban was lifted, popular opinion claimed that California rice is inferior to domestic rice in quality and taste. Thus, despite the fact that California rice is technically identical to domestic short-grain japonica rice, it is held as symbolically different because it is "grown on foreign soil" (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993, p. 109). I have observed that global Shinto practitioners of Japanese ancestry share similar sentiments, while non-Japanese practitioners consider California rice to be a perfectly acceptable offering due to its family resemblance to rice grown in Japan, though further research is required to substantiate this trend.

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