

Neighborhood Shinto

Tokyo's Ana-Hachiman Shrine

By Paul B. Watt



Honden or Main Shrine, Ana-Hachiman. Photo by Paul B. Watt.

One of the remarkable traits of the Japanese today is, in a way similar to many Europeans, they tend to identify themselves as non-religious. This does not mean, of course, that they don't have strongly held values that guide their lives and have been transmitted through tradition, families, and schools. It does mean, however, that a majority of the Japanese population has only weak ties to religious institutions. Funerals and memorial services for the dead seem to be the chief reasons for visits to Buddhist temples or for visits by Buddhist priests to the home, since for centuries Buddhism has provided these services. Shinto, Japan's oldest religious tradition with a history as long as Japan itself, has always been deeply tied to, among other things, the celebration of nature and its creative powers; hence weddings have traditionally been associated with shrines, and they still often take place there. But in recent decades, hotels and specialized wedding halls seem to be the more popular choices.

When one observes the life of Shinto shrines, it is surprising how much activity goes on, even in the supposedly secular cities. Most Buddhist temples are quiet places, except for the historically famous tourist attractions and a few centers devoted to the serious training of priests or nuns. Some exhibit attractive architecture or gardens, but many are, more than anything else, institutions for the care of the dead, and their grounds are covered with grave markers. Yet, Shinto shrines are often very different, welcoming daily visitors as well as hosting important seasonal festivals and events. Ana-Hachiman-Gū, or the Ana-Hachiman Shrine, located in the western part of Tokyo near Waseda University in the Shinjuku Ward, is one such institution.

HISTORY

The shrine's origins date back to the eleventh century CE, when it was founded by Minamoto Yoshiie (1039–1106), a member of the powerful Minamoto family that was soon to produce the shoguns or ruling generals of the Kamakura period (1185–1333). Yoshiie was appointed by the imperial court in Kyoto as a general guarding over the region of present-day Tokyo and the area to the north of it commonly called Tōhoku (the Northeast) today. He established the shrine as the local clan shrine and revered the family Shinto protector *kami* or deity of Hachiman. Hachiman had a long history in Japan, reaching back to at least the seventh century CE, and he was especially revered by military

families, including the prominent Minamoto. Over time, other kami, including the Emperors Ōjin and Chūai, and the Empress Jingō, usually placed in the second through fourth centuries CE, also came to be revered at the shrine.

The Tokugawa shoguns, beginning with Tokugawa Ieyasu (who is also revered as a kami at the shrine) took control of the country in 1600 and established the city of Edo (present-day Tokyo) as the seat of their military government or *bakufu*. The shrine guide notes that in 1641, when a “hut for the shrine guard” was built, a mysterious “sacred opening” was discovered and the shrine became known as Ana-Hachiman, the shrine of Hachiman with the opening (*ana*). This rather oblique language refers to the fact that in this year a Buddhist temple, Hōjōji, was built next to the shrine, and at the time of construction an image of the Buddha Amida, the so-called Buddha of the Western Paradise, was discovered. Hōjōji remained affiliated with the shrine until the 1870s. Also during the early Tokugawa period, the area around the shrine was designated by the bakufu as a bow-and-arrow training ground for the shogun’s samurai. Furthermore, the third shogun, Tokugawa Iemitsu, designated residents living in the surrounding area of Ushigome as shrine parishioners, or *ujiko*, who then provided a source of financial and other support to the shrine. By the late 1640s, the shrine had been greatly enlarged and received the patronage of the Tokugawa shoguns as well many samurai families in their service. The shrine continued to flourish in the eighteenth century, but it was heavily damaged by fire in 1854. It was rebuilt in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and members of the imperial family would occasionally visit the shrine. However, the shrine was virtually totally destroyed by the bombings of Tokyo carried out by the Allied Forces during World War II. Although some minor reconstruction took place shortly after the war, it has been only in the last two decades, over the period known in Japanese as Heisei, that the main shrine hall or *honden* and certain other buildings have been restored.

SHRINE LIFE

The religious activities of a shrine, broadly speaking, can be placed in three categories: informal visits to the shrine by individuals or small groups; more formal services in which Shinto priests play a prominent role but which are still designed for specific individuals or groups; and finally, large festivals in which great numbers of people participate.

If one were to observe the comings and goings of individual visitors to the shrine, of which there might be a few dozen on an ordinary day when no special events are planned, it would not be unusual to find some who were there simply for a morning or afternoon stroll. The grounds of the Ana-Hachiman Shrine, marked off by the traditional



Main Shrine. Photo by Paul B. Watt.

entrance ways or *torii*, are usually accessible, with several large trees—trees viewed as sacred—near the shrine itself and around the perimeter. Visitors might come with friends, or perhaps with a child or grandchild. The grounds welcome all comers, and they need not have a religious purpose to visit. In crowded Tokyo, shrine grounds can simply provide a quiet place to think or talk.

Other visitors clearly come for religious reasons. Following the usual ritual, they stop at the ablution pavilion or *temizuya*, a trough of flowing water that is usually placed near the entrance of a shrine.

Visitors purify themselves there by washing their hands with water and then rinsing their mouths. Purification, the removal of any impediments that could stand between the individual and the kami, is a central value in Shinto, with references to it found in Japan’s earliest written records and still earlier Chinese records that contain brief observations about the Japanese. The visitor then usually proceeds to the outside of the Main Shrine building, before which they would stand and throw a coin into the offering box. They would then bow in the direction of the main hall immediately before them where the kami are enshrined, clap their hands together twice in a deliberate fashion (though the number of claps can vary depending on the shrine), offer their prayer, bow and withdraw. The visitor is not normally admitted into the Main Shrine building where the kami themselves are enshrined. That may occur, however, when special services are requested by worshippers, services such as more elaborate purification rituals, weddings, and prayers of thanks or supplication. One service that the shrine offers on a daily basis that involves entrance to the shrine itself is a special prayer to quiet crying, irritable babies. The ritual is called *Mushi fūji gokitō*, which refers to “prayers that rid babies of the worm (that causes irritation).” This is a ritual that has a long history in East Asia and is performed at both Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples. At



Path to the Main Shrine with Ablution Pavilion on the right. Photo by Paul B. Watt.

The most famous event on the Ana-Hachiman calendar is the Winter Solstice Festival, or *Tōjisai*, which begins in late December and runs for several days into the New Year.

Ana-Hachiman, the tradition of performing the ritual began in the Tokugawa period, and the shrine brochure notes with great pride that both the shogun families and the imperial family brought children to the shrine for this ritual.

Like most shrines, Ana-Hachiman has several major events that are usually closely linked to the movement of the seasons. There are regular services held at the shrine on the first, fifteenth, and twenty-eighth of each month, and services held in February to mark the beginning of spring or *setsubun* and the beginning of summer on May 15. The February and May dates reflect the dates of the old lunar calendar. However, the official brochure distributed by the shrine lists as its first major event the “Annual or Regular Great Festival.” Held every other year on September 15, it involves a grand parade of portable shrines, or *mikoshi*, owned by the shrine through the surrounding neighborhoods. Each of the *mikoshi* is understood to be a vehicle for one or another of the kami of the shrine. In a very visible way, the sacred power of the shrine is disseminated throughout the area, and prayers for a peaceful year are said.

This event is followed each year on National Sports Day, which occurs in October, by one of the shrine's best known regional events,

a demonstration of traditional archery on horseback known as *yabusame*. Reflecting the historical ties of the shrine to the samurai class, the event features men (and occasionally, these days, women) dressed in traditional warrior attire and riding full speed on horseback on a narrow path that passes in front of three small targets. The rider must unsheath an arrow for each target, string it, and fire, while traveling at breakneck speeds. While most observers of the event simply enjoy the spectacle and the skill of the riders, in the past, *yabusame* was intended as an offering to the kami Hachiman.

The most famous event on the Ana-Hachiman calendar is the Winter Solstice Festival, or *Tōjisai*, which begins in late December and runs for several days into the New Year. For days, thousands of visitors flock to the shrine, some walking the twenty minutes it takes from the local train station, others taking advantage of the extra bus service offered. The main purpose for the visit is to obtain an amulet or charm (*omamori*) called, in literal translation, “the

amulet of the return of the one sun” (*ichiyō raifuku omamori*), which signifies the return of spring, and more generally, good fortune. The literature of the shrine states that it is an amulet first received by a courtier at a Buddhist temple near Kyoto and that later Emperor Shōmu received it in 723 CE. Beginning in the Tokugawa period, the amulet was then distributed at the Winter Solstice Festival at Ana-Hachiman. The amulet as it is distributed today is a small, cylindrical piece of paper, slightly pointed on one side at the top, with the characters “the return of the one sun” printed on its face. The promise is that this amulet will bring to its bearer “immeasurable blessings and virtues.”

When one purchases the amulet, one also receives a sheet of paper that provides further explanation of its powers as well as detailed instructions for its display. In addition to “immeasurable blessings and virtues,” the sheet stresses that it is an amulet that will bring good fortune regarding money. It points out that this amulet is a special amulet transmitted from Tokugawa times and distributed only at Ana-Hachiman. For it to have its proper effect, the amulet must be placed on a pillar or wall on the eastern side of the home or office at a point as high as possible. The time of placement is also important—twelve midnight on one of three dates: the winter solstice, the last day of the year, or the day of the beginning of spring. Once properly positioned, we are told, the amulet must not be moved for one year, though the sheet provides instructions for extraordinary situations. This amulet can be purchased in a wallet size form as well, and numerous other charms are also on sale.

If the purchase of the amulet and a visit to the shrine to start the New Year off in the right frame of mind is the main purpose for a visit to Ana-Hachiman at the time of the Winter Solstice Festival, then surely having a good time is another. One section of the shrine is given over to a long row of stalls or booths. At one, there are children's toys, at another *yakisoba* or fried noodles. Another booth will sell *takoyaki*, fried octopus balls, and another, small flowering plants. Still others display figurines of the “inviting cat” (*maneki-neko*, shown sitting on its

hind legs with one front paw raised in an inviting wave) with the power to draw people into one's shop, or papier-mache figurines of Daruma—that is, Bodhidharma, the founder of Zen Buddhism in China, who is considered a representation of both perseverance and good luck. In the afternoon and early evening, the line of stalls is often crowded with people who are shopping and eating. After a visit to the shrine, families and friends often spill out into the surrounding neighborhood for further dining and socializing.

ANA-HACHIMAN AND JAPANESE RELIGION

This brief account of the history and religious life of Ana-Hachiman Shrine tells us much about the nature of Shinto and of Japanese religion in general. The centrality of concerns about purity in Shinto have spread in various ways throughout Japanese culture. Early in Shinto's history, purity achieved through the ritual use of water or through purifying rituals performed by Shinto priests, such as ritual expulsion or *harai*, was aimed chiefly at removing contact the individual had incurred with agents considered polluting, contact with blood, for example, or with the dead. As these examples suggest, these were contacts that brought to human awareness the limits of existence or interfered in some way with the harmonious life with the kami that early Japanese yearned for. In later centuries, as Shinto came into dialogue with Buddhism and Confucianism, both of which entered the country in the sixth century CE, Shinto conceptions of purity came to take on a more ethical dimension; purity came to be associated with purity of heart, sincerity, and honesty. Although purity through the use of water was associated with Shinto from earliest times, the Buddhist equivalent of ablution pavilions became part of Japanese temple structures as well. And beyond the realm of religion narrowly defined, many observers have taken note of the great attention given to cleanliness generally in Japanese culture—the love of bathing in public baths, hot springs, or at home, being perhaps the best example.

Nature is often at a premium in Tokyo, and Ana-Hachiman does not have the space for extensive gardens or groves of trees, although visitors to certain other shrines in Tokyo can easily encounter them. Yet even at Ana-Hachiman, the large trees that stand near the shrine remind Japanese visitors of Shinto's close ties to nature. Indeed, historically the largest category of kami was nature kami. The definition of kami is broad; a phrase that is often used to describe kami is "anything out of the ordinary and awe-inspiring." Therefore, in this conception, extraordinary human beings—great poets, for example, or valiant warriors—can and have been considered kami, but it has been awe-inspiring mountains, beautiful forests and rivers, the vast blue ocean, and long-lived or massive trees that have most often struck the Japanese as sacred. On one early Sunday morning visit to the shrine, I observed from a distance a woman leaning against and hugging one of the large trees at the front of the shrine for more than fifteen minutes. I was unable to make out the words that she was saying as she repeated these motions. One can only imagine the reasons that brought her to that tree and its life-giving force.

Amulets are a feature of virtually all Shinto and Buddhist institutions, as they are of many religious institutions around the world. Given



New Year's visitors in line for amulets. Photo by Paul B. Watt.

their close ties to nature and nature's creative forces, shrines often sell amulets that provide assurances of finding a suitable mate or having an easy and safe childbirth, but the full range of protective charms can usually be found, from success on entrance exams to safety while driving. It is important to appreciate the important roles that amulets play for both the religious institutions that sell them and for the visitor that purchases them. From the viewpoint of the shrine or temple, amulets

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Stalls at Ana-Hachiman at New Years. Photo by Paul B. Watt.

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provide significant income and they strengthen the ties that bind together the institution and the visitor. From the viewpoint of the purchaser, the amulet may provide a link to tradition (buying an amulet that relatives and friends have bought for years, for example, or that is associated with a famous institution); it may provide a way of expressing one's love and concern for others (should one give it as a gift to a relative or friend); and it may provide the purchaser with a sense of renewed commitment, security, and ease.

In the case of Ana-Hachiman and many other Shinto shrines, the connection between religion and the nation is also clear. Emperors and empresses, as well as shoguns, have been associated with the shrine both as kami that are revered there and as patrons. There was a time during the 1930s and 40s when Shinto was used by the Japanese government to martial the efforts of the nation in a tragic empire building policy that stretched across much of East and South Asia before that effort collapsed in 1945. The Shinto sponsored by the government during that period, which drew on an early mythology and that was used to legitimate a view of the Japanese as a divine race, is often referred to as State Shinto. State Shinto was disestablished in 1946 with the issuance of Japan's post-war constitution, a constitution that also guaranteed freedom of religion. When one encounters pride in the national tradition today at shrines like Ana-Hachiman, one should not associate that pride with the fanaticism of the immediate pre-war and war years; rather it is better to recall the ways that religious institutions in the West as well often have understood one of their roles to be protector and guide of the state.

Finally, it is worth noting the way in which the history of Ana-Hachiman illustrates the Japanese tradition of the blending of religions, especially Shinto and Buddhism. Throughout most of their history, the Japanese understood themselves as followers of both religions, or as the classical phrase puts it, followers of both "the kami and the Buddhas." The current literature of the shrine does not emphasize this aspect of its past; yet one only has to walk next door to visit the Shingon or Esoteric Buddhist temple of Hōjōji to be reminded of this fact of Japanese religious history. From the early 1600s down until the beginning of the Meiji Period (1868–1912), Ana-Hachiman and Hōjōji were naturally linked. The temple's name comes from a Buddhist ceremony that involves the "release of life" (*hōjō*) in the form of fish, birds, and other animals, and during the sixteenth through mid-nineteenth centuries, there was a pond on the grounds of Ana-Hachiman known as "the pond for the release of life." The close relationship between the temple and the shrine came to an end in 1868, when the Meiji

government decreed the separation of Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples across the country. The Meiji government then attempted to use Shinto as an ideology uniting the people in Japan's nineteenth century effort at industrialization and modernization. However that effort soon failed, so strong was the custom of thinking of the two traditions as mutually supportive. Today, if one characteristic of Japanese religiosity is that many Japanese feel only a weak connection to any particular religious institution, then another, perhaps related characteristic would be that, for the vast majority of Japanese, the long-standing attitude of religious open-mindedness and tolerance lives on. ■

Editor's note: Readers interested in a complementary essay on Japanese Buddhism should go to the Archives on the EAA Web site tool bar (<http://www.asian-studies.org/EAA/Archives-06-10.htm>) and click on the cover for this issue. There is a link to Guven Witteveen's online essay, "A Look at One Japanese Temple," in the table of contents.

FOR FURTHER READING ON SHINTO

- Kasulis, Thomas P. 2004. *Shinto: The Way Home*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press. A look at Shinto spirituality from both philosophical and historical perspectives.
- Nelson, John K. 1996. *A Year in the Life of a Shinto Shrine*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press. A study of Suwa Shrine, a major shrine in Nagasaki.
- _____. 2000. *Enduring Identities: The Guise of Shinto in Contemporary Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press. A study of the historic Kamigamo Shrine in Kyoto.
- Ono, Sokyo. 1984. *Shinto: The Kami Way*. Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle. Provides a sense of the spiritual dimensions of Shinto by a modern interpreter.
- Reader, Ian. 1998. *Simple Guides: Shinto*. London: Kuperard. A short, useful introduction to the basics.
- _____. and George J. Tanabe Jr. 1998. *Practically Religious: Worldly Benefits and the Common Religion of Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press. Includes sections on Shinto, though much of the volume deals with Buddhism.

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