

From Kinship to Heterogeneous Networks: Navigating Ritual Life and Crisis at a Shinto Shrine in Japan

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Abstract: This paper elucidates how uncertainties and crises have affected the social and ritual life of a Shinto shrine in Japan. While many shrines have declined due to urbanisation and the weakening of traditional local communities, the HKN shrine, situated in Ibaraki prefecture's rural periphery, remains prosperous and continues to attract worshippers and tourists. To address the crisis of a weakening local community, the shrine has replaced its traditional social foundations by creating a substitute network based on kinship and relatedness (Carsten 1995). Nevertheless, when this network became unstable during the COVID-19 pandemic, the shrine again tackled the crisis and established a heterogeneous network through associations with non-human actors. Drawing on ethnographic research, the study examines how ritual organisers maintain the shrine's operations and community cohesion through both human and non-human actors, ranging from sacred objects to ritual spaces, within the framework of actor-network theory (ANT) (Latour 2005). By applying ANT, this paper shows that the shrine's resilience emerged not only from human strategies but also through the cooperation of non-human actors such as sacred objects, technologies and spatial arrangements, which participated in sustaining ritual life during a crisis.

Keywords: Shinto shrine, local community, social network, COVID-19 pandemic, ANT, non-humans, heterogeneous network

INTRODUCTION

“Without a shrine, a place is ‘unfit for human habitation’, because proper relations with the Kami have not been established” (Hardacre 2017: 1). Shinto has *yaoyorozu no kami*, which means eight million or countless *kami*; the *kami* (deities or spirits) reside in everything, such as animals, stones, trees, mountains, seas and so on. Shinto shrines are ubiquitous in Japan, where humans can dwell or be near them. Not all shrines necessarily have large buildings and mysterious things around them. Some places only have a tiny *kamidana* (a small altar to enshrine a Shinto *kami*) with a small *torii* (a Shinto shrine archway) nearby.

In the Meiji period, to propagate Shinto as a State ideology, all Shinto shrines were pulled together under the control of the State. The state took the land and assets of shrines and temples to gain control over them (Ross 1983; Ono 1972). Establishing the Ise shrine as its center, a ranking system was engendered. Shrines were categorized into three ranks: *kansha* (official shrines), *minsha* (unofficial shrines), and *mukakusha* (unranked shrines). The official shrines were divided into *kanpeisha* (imperial), *kokuheisha* (national), and *bekkaku-sha* (special shrines). The central government administered official shrines, whereas prefectural and local governments administered unofficial shrines (Hardacre 2017; Ono 1972).

While the government attempted to support shrines financially, it was not feasible to support all of them. It primarily supported the highly-ranked shrines, leaving the responsibility of maintaining small village shrines to local villagers. It was not the priests but the parishioners who were responsible for looking after their *ujigami* (local tutelary deity). Shrines depended on local parishioners for financial and voluntary oblations. They managed to secure their income through parishioners attending the yearly rites and coming for individual prayers.

Bestor (1989) notes that shrines were a core of its community activities. Since they were the place where community gatherings and festivals were held, they were therefore strongly connected to local communities, and people in the communities, in turn, supported their activities, forming associations of their local *ujiko* (parishioners) by neighbourhood or hamlet. These associations supported shrines and temples financially and labour-wise (Shimazono 1988). The representatives of the associations (*ujiko soudai*) were involved in the administration of shrines (Robertson 1991).

However, urbanisation and modernisation weakened the connections between shrines and their communities. Many people migrated to urban areas, and others lost interest in community activities. Losing local parishioners and followers, numerous shrines fell out of favour (Morioka & Hanashima 1968; Ishii 1998). In contrast, while other rural shrines were demolished due to urbanisation and modernisation, a small village shrine in a depopulated, poor farming area called the HKN shrine¹ was expanded and attracted not only local

people but also worshippers from a wide range of the Kanto² region. It transformed from a small village shrine to a famous shrine.

The administrators of the HKN shrine were aware of the declining support from the local community and foresaw how the social changes could affect the shrine's future. Therefore, the former *guuji* (head priest) sought to attract worshippers from more distant areas for financial support to ensure its survival. Moreover, they crossed communal boundaries for labour-wise support and tried to use personal ties to gather staff to work during events and festivals. Succeeding the former *guuji*, the current *guuji* introduced a business-corporation-like structure to the shrine, employing *kannushi* (Shinto priests), *miko* (Shrine maidens),³ and other workers instead of relying on temporary helpers from *ujiko*. These strategies proved successful. The HKN shrine transformed from the inside out and expanded. Fifty years ago, it was mostly open for just one day: its annual autumn festival. Now, it operates daily and attracts worshippers and tourists throughout the year.

This transformation was possible because a social network was created based on personal ties and marketing to sustain the shrine. However, this network was partially disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the shrine had to face uncertainties again. This paper examines how the ritual organisers of the shrine (defined here as the head priest's family, who serve the shrine from generation to generation) responded to uncertainties brought about by social changes and what strategies they employed to address them. Further, it explores how the ritual organisation evolved to manage modern problems in the contemporary world. Prior to the pandemic, the focus was primarily on human participants in the social network of the shrine. However, when this network became partially disconnected because of COVID-19, the ritual organisers adapted a heterogeneous network of human and non-human actors to overcome the crisis.

While earlier research on shrines has focused on social organisation and community relationships, this alone cannot explain how the HKN shrine managed to sustain ritual life when human relations were weakened. Therefore, to analyse the shrine not only as a social institution but also as an assemblage of relationships between humans, objects and spiritual entities, I employ Actor-Network Theory (ANT), which was developed by Bruno Latour, Michel Callon and John Law in the early 1980s, within the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS). ANT proposes the idea of a generalized symmetry, which means that humans and non-humans should be treated equally in analytical frameworks (Bennett 2010, cited in Kim 2018: 43). Whereas traditional social sciences often consider only humans as active agents, ANT argues that agency is distributed; non-humans such as objects, architecture, texts, animals, or sacred spaces also exert influence and participate in the construction of social worlds (Latour 1999, 2005; Law 1992). When these actors form associations, they create a heterogeneous network, and their agencies diffuse in that network

and become inseparable, which creates a hybrid actor (Callon & Latour 1981, cited in Kim 2018: 36).

Through this lens, the HKN shrine is viewed as a living network shaped by interactions among both human and non-human participants. While the pandemic is not the central focus of this study, it serves as a moment of crisis that illuminates the resilience and adaptability of the shrine's network.

To elucidate how ritual organisers of the HKN shrine manage rituals in uncertain times, I will first provide an ethnographic overview of the shrine and its local community; second, I will discuss how the pandemic affected it and disconnected its human network; I will then examine how, with the help of non-human actors, the shrine could connect to a heterogeneous network to sustain itself.

METHODOLOGY

This research examines the HKN shrine from an anthropological perspective. I conducted fieldwork at the shrine from 2018 to 2022, working there as a part-time *miko*. Participant observation was the primary method of my fieldwork. Besides, informal, semi-structured and formal interviews were conducted with the shrine's staff and individuals on its *keidai* (precincts), including *rotenshou* (stall vendors), local people and worshippers. Contrary to previous research that has focused primarily on institutional structures or theological interpretations, this study applies insiders' perspectives based on long-term intensive fieldwork. It highlights the lived, relational aspects of shrine life, including both human and non-human actors, as seen through the daily routines and crisis responses of those who maintain the shrine's rituals and community.

Since I will explore the relationships between human and non-human actors, besides ethnographic methods I will use ANT as an analytical tool. I emphasise that ANT is useful in this context because it allows us to examine how agency is shared among human and non-human actors, and how a network reorganises itself in times of crisis.

THE BACKGROUND OF THE SHRINE

The HKN shrine was an unofficial village shrine, built in 809 AD in a town situated on the periphery of the Ibaraki prefecture. It is known as a shrine where any wish in one word comes true. According to the shrine's priests, there is a legend that a mysterious light appeared near the current shrine, and a bamboo shoot appeared from the snow, which split into three shoots. Villagers were surprised to see it and decided to purify it. When they attempted to purify it with hot water, *kami* HKN⁴ appeared and instructed the villagers to revere the bamboo, enshrine it, and worship him eternally. In return, he promised to

protect them from disease and misfortune. Therefore, many people visit the shrine to pray for recovery from illness or critical medical conditions.

The shrine was situated in a poor farming area. As Yokoshima (1978: I–II) notes,

From the olden times, it is said that there are two good things in this town: the HKN kami and karakuri tsunabi (puppet fireworks). There were about two hundred small farmhouses scattered around the village, and it was a poor village that could only produce tea as its specialty, and with this, it could barely maintain its face. It indeed felt inferior to the surrounding villages. Undoubtedly, such a remote cold village became widely known throughout the Kanto region, certainly because of HKN kami and the fireworks festival, which is conducted on its annual autumn festival. Nevertheless, the town was not established as a monzen machi (temple town),⁵ which gathers worshippers like Narita and Kasama⁶. Only once a year, at the time of the fireworks festival, worshippers come to the shrine from dawn to the end of the karakuri tsunabi performance. The total number of worshippers is close to 100,000 people. After the festival, they disappear as if a fire has been extinguished. Of course, there are usual visits of worshippers, but the numbers are incomparable (translated by the author from Japanese to English).

Since a large population venerates the shrine, its annual autumn festival used to attract extremely large crowds. Its *karakuri tsunabi* (puppet fireworks) was exceptionally famous. As per the shrine's staff, *karakuri tsunabi* was so popular that thousands of people would come to see it, and the shrine could secure its annual income from that one day.

As mentioned earlier, the shrine was located in a poor farming area, and the previous *guuji* (head priest), the father of the current *guuji*, worked in the city office and did not open the shrine daily. The shrine would only open for its annual autumn festival, the New Year festival, and occasionally for personal prayers from local parishioners. Even during the Meiji period, it was difficult for unofficial shrine priests to survive solely through this profession. They had to do other work to earn their livelihood and work as a *kannushi* as a side job. Some usually return to their shrines to perform their duties only for festivals (Ross 1983). Still, at present, many people get qualifications for *kannushi* through intensive courses and pursue different occupations simultaneously. They have their regular jobs, and only in the New Year do they perform *gokitou* (purification prayers) in their respective shrines.

Since the HKN shrine was mainly active for one day, there was no full-time *kannushi*. The previous *guuji*'s eldest son, the current *guuji*, also had a different occupation. He ran a printing company. When he succeeded in the shrine, he

eventually quit the business and dedicated himself entirely to the shrine. He had an aptitude for management, and with his farsightedness, he soon realized that relying solely on the one-day festival would not be enough to sustain the shrine. Thus, he implemented several management changes to make this shrine function as it does today.

For example, instead of depending on the one-day festival, the shrine started to open every day without any holidays. Permanent *kannushi*, part-time *miko*, and cleaning staff were recruited. Efforts were made to clean the shrine's compound and advertise it on FM radio. Posters and signboards were put up throughout the town and train stations in the city. The current *guuji* fixed the time and price for *gokitou* (purification prayers) and *ofuda* (wooden amulets) (Koga 2018). As per the current *guuji*, when he first started working at the shrine, he had to perform all the tasks alone. Therefore, he decided to streamline processes so that everything could be carried out smoothly. Currently, *kannushi* perform all kinds of twenty-three *gokitou*⁷ and even go for *gai-sai* (purification ceremonies conducted outside the shrine).

To make the shrine a livelier place, he allowed *rotenshou* to set up their shops on the shrine grounds during festivals and throughout the year. The *rotenshou* who set up shop at the shrine are members of *Mitsukaido rotenshou kumiai* (Mitsukaidou Stall Vendors Association). Many of them are residents of Joso City and the surrounding areas. They mainly operate their stalls during main festivals such as the annual autumn festival and the New Year. However, in the shrine precinct, a flower shop opens every day, and an *obanyaki*⁸ stall opens every weekend.

The above-mentioned management changes made the shrine open daily, yet the question emerged: How did it deal with the challenge of depopulation?

Dealing with Crisis and Uncertainty: Transformation of the Shrine

Over the past fifty years, several things have changed at the shrine. This shrine expanded at a time when scholars of Shinto studies were predicting that many rural shrines would be gradually demolished (Ishii 2010). It has evolved alongside the changing times, from a small shrine that was occasionally active to a major, daily active site. It now hosts a variety of events and historically significant festivals⁹. It is approximately 7.5 km from the nearest station (Mitsukaido station), and there is no bus service to the shrine. Visitors must arrive by private vehicle or taxi; therefore, it is slightly inconvenient in terms of public transportation, yet it welcomes a wide range of worshippers.

The shrine was in a depopulated area; therefore, it struggled with the shortage of staff and supporters. Nevertheless, not only this shrine but also other Shinto shrines struggled with fewer people. Due to urbanisation, many people from rural areas have migrated to cities, weakening the shrine's connection with its local community. Many *kou* (followers' associations) have disbanded. Even in cities, shrines have been trying to strengthen their relationship with

newcomers as they become more involved with them (Robertson 1991; Hardacre 2017).

As Yokoshima (1978) mentioned, it was a poor farming area, and villagers could not support the shrine financially. Therefore, the previous *guuji* used to travel to Chiba, Saitama and Tokyo by bicycle or boat to promote the shrine. His efforts were successful, and several people formed a *kou* (followers' association), which venerated the HKN shrine. People have had faith in this shrine for generations, and one of its *kou* comes from Hokkaido. Uda et al. (2014: 145) note that after the Second World War, many *kou* were formed in various places, and *kou*'s shrine visits increased. At the HKN shrine, especially around the second half of the 1960s, more than five hundred buses used to come for its annual autumn festival on the 13th of September. In the mid-1970s, *kou* visits were at their peak at the shrine.

However, *kou*'s visits could not contribute to the town's development, though they did play a significant role in expanding the shrine. Table 1 contains the record sheet of the construction and renovation of the shrine's facilities from 1970 to 1992, which was provided by the shrine. The same document is also cited in Uda et al. 2014: 147; Koga 2018: 33.

Table 1. List of construction and renovation of shrine's facilities (1970–1992)

Year	Facilities Construction and Renovation
1970	Main hall expansion and renovation (roof copper plate re-roofing)
1973	New construction of the assembly hall (steel frame, two-story)
1975	New construction of the east <i>ofuda</i> reception New construction of <i>chouzu</i> (a place to purify hands and before paying a visit to <i>kami</i>)
1977	New construction of the photography room
1978	New construction of a wedding hall (wooden and steel frame, two-story) New construction of the shrine inside the wedding ceremony hall
1979	Corridor extension and renovation (partial)
1980	Corridor renovation (steel frame construction) Parking lot pavement construction New construction of the west <i>ofuda</i> reception
1981	The shrine's main hall's new outer wall (steel frame) New construction of the first <i>Shinmei</i> -type Big <i>torii</i>
1982	New construction of precinct guard hut (two-story)
1983	New construction of subordinate shrine (thirteen shrines) (reinforcing iron rod) New construction of subordinate shrine (thirteen shrines) (wooden) Restoration of paving stone on <i>sandou</i> (road approaching the shrine)
1984	New construction of a public toilet for worshippers.

Year	Facilities Construction and Renovation
1985	New construction of festival equipment storehouse (34.71074m) Renovation of <i>haiden</i> (hall of worship) beach edge New construction of the outer hall of worship New construction of the bamboo spirit hall <i>Heiden</i> (hall of offerings) paving stone construction (replacement)
1987	New construction of office (wooden copper roof)
1989	Construction of the private retaining wall
1990	New construction of a place to keep old <i>ofuda</i> and amulets Office entrance new construction
1991	Shrine front gate parking lot construction
1992	New construction of antechamber (steel frame, two-story)

Source: Created from the repair record sheet provided by the shrine office.

As the *kou* expanded, the shrine also expanded and renovated its facilities. The HKN shrine remained small until 1970 (Figure 1), but with the expansion of *kou*, the shrine itself grew and underwent renovations (Figure 2).



Figure 1. Shrine’s old picture.

Source: This picture is taken from an old book of the HKN shrine.



Figure 2. Current picture of the shrine.

Source: taken by the author.

Along with the expansion of its building and area, people were required to manage them. To place people in the required areas and spaces, the shrine needed to pay them. Further, to pay them, it should have enough funds to do so. *Kou* solved the shrine's financial issues, while local people and relatives supported the shrine through their labour during events. However, when people's occupations changed from agriculture to salaried labour, the local community could not help, and *kou* started to dissolve. However, when I worked at the shrine for the first time, I witnessed that the shrine's staff was so close and friendly, like a community (I will briefly describe the shrine's relation with the community in the next section). Nevertheless, I was later bewildered to discover that this shrine does not have a strong relationship with its local community. How did organisers manage to gather such close-knit staff? How did they navigate the social changes and successfully organise the shrine rituals and events? To explore these questions, I will first describe the shrine's relations with the local community and then explain how an interpersonal network substituted for the previous one.

THE LOCAL COMMUNITY OF THE SHRINE

In December 2018, I worked at the Shrine's New Year festival for the first time. It was very lively inside and outside. The staff were very friendly with each other, chatting and laughing together. When I was selling *goshuin* (notebooks for collecting shrines or temples' stamps) with Mr. Yamamoto, he told me he had known the *guuji* for over thirty years. After he retired from the City Hall, the *guuji* asked him to work at the shrine during the New Year festival and *akireit-aisai* (annual autumn festival)¹⁰. Since then, he and his wife have worked at the shrine during both festivals for seven years. Many people were approached in this way to work during festivals; they already knew each other in some way. Because of that, the atmosphere among the staff was very friendly, with people making jokes and laughing during breaks. Some older men were speaking in the Ibaraki dialect and laughing loudly. When I commented on the closeness of the people at the shrine, Mr. Yamamoto told me, "Here, everyone knows everyone. We are like a family. It is fun to work here."

I saw this friendly atmosphere extending outside the shrine. The precincts were full of *rotenshou*. Among the more than one hundred fifty stalls, approximately ten were those that also set up their stalls during the monthly *tsukinamisai*¹¹. *Manjuu*'s stall is always positioned just in front of the shrine. The shrine's staff at the amulet's reception and the staff of the *manjuu* stall often exchanged friendly words during their free time.

My observation of the New Year festival and Mr. Yamamoto's words evoked a sense of community as a group of people who share a common identity and have something in common (Rouner 1991). However, curiously, when I told a *kannushi* that I wanted to research the shrine's community, he looked surprised and said, "What! But this shrine has no community. *Guuji-san*¹² used to run a company and runs this shrine in the same way. The local community is not much involved with the shrine's management. *Ujiko soudai* (representatives of the local parishioners) neither give money to the shrine nor say anything about its matters. *Guuji-san* made this shrine self-sufficient. *Negi-san*¹³ always says that this shrine has a weak community." Contrary to my expectations, it was clear that Mr. Kobayashi and the shrine staff had regarded "community" as a local community consisting of the *ujiko* who live near the shrine.

While a local community is generally imagined as a spatially proximate, homogeneous group, it would be common in Japanese to use the term '*en*'¹⁴ when discussing community, such as *ketsuen* (blood-related) and *chien* (geographically-related). However, curiously enough, while a community suggests a bounded region consisting of people living in mutual interaction, *en* as a network of persons is, in principle, open-ended. For the HKN shrine, people who live in the same town, called Oozaki¹⁵ were part of its local community.

In previous literature, scholars have emphasised that shrines rely on their communities for support, especially in rural areas. Both financial and labour

contributions from *ujiko* have historically been crucial for maintaining a shrine. In some shrines, different forms of support from the local community remain. Local people come to clean shrines and participate in their festivals. In the New Year festival, they set up stalls in their shrine's precincts, and the *ujiko seinenkai* (youth group of the parishioners) prepares *omochi* (rice cakes) and throws them at the crowd. However, such things do not happen in the HKN shrine. Just a few volunteers come to help. If the traditional community is no longer participating, who are the people who support the shrine's activities? Further, why do they appear so close-knit, even though they do not belong to the "community" in the traditional sense? To explore this, let us examine the staff members who perform the work at the shrine.

The Staff Members of the Shrine

During my fieldwork, twenty-three people worked regularly at the shrine; however, only six were permanent employees, five *kannushi* and Mr. Kumano, who was the person in charge of repairing and groundwork. Among the five *kannushi*, three were kin: the *guuji*, the *negi*, and the *gon negi*⁶. Others were Mr. Yamada and Mr. Kobayashi. Mr. Yamada came from a shrine family, and his father was an acquaintance of the *guuji*. Mr. Kobayashi was the only *kannushi* at the shrine who was not from a shrine family; he studied Shinto at the university and decided to become a *kannushi*.

At the shrine, there was still no permanent *miko*. *Miko* were paid daily with some exceptions, such as Mrs. Toshiba and Mrs. Murakami. *Miko* often brought their friends to work with them. For example, Mrs. Murakami brought her friend Mrs. Miyazaki, who lived in Joso City, but not in Oozaki town. Ms. Sakamoto also brought one of her school friends, Ms. Furuuchi, who lived in Tsukuba. Ms. Sakamoto was a high school student when she joined the shrine. She was from another city but said she had a long relationship with this shrine. Her mother longed for a daughter and conceived her soon after she prayed at the shrine. Therefore, since childhood, Ms. Sakamoto had visited the shrine regularly with her family to thank the HKN *kami*. One year, she applied to be a *miko* during the New Year festival, then continued working as a part-time *miko* afterwards. Among the young *miko*, only Ms. Murata lived in a neighbouring city and joined the shrine without being introduced by anyone. In addition to them, Ms. Michiko, the *gon-negi*'s wife, also worked and was listed alongside the *miko* in the shift chart.

There were two regular *goshuin* (*Goshuin* is a stamp that worshippers or visitors collect at a shrine or temple) writers, Mr. and Mrs. Hirota, a couple in their early eighties, who lived in a nearby city. After Mrs. Hirota retired from work, she was asked to help during the New Year festival and *akireitaisai*. Nevertheless, because *goshuin* became exceedingly popular, the couple was requested to work regularly on weekends, holidays and special events. For four or five years, they have taken turns working on weekends: Mrs. Hirota on Saturdays and

Mr. Hirota on Sundays. Mrs. Yamamoto also wrote *goshuin* for special events. She was the wife of Mr. Yamamoto, and the couple lived in Oozaki.

Three older women worked as cleaners. Mrs. Yoshida, Mrs. Honda, and Mrs. Uchida were all in their late sixties. Mrs. Yoshida was the *guuji*'s cousin, and before marriage, she lived just next to the shrine premises as a member of a *bunke* (branch family) of the *guuji* family. Then, she moved to a nearby city. After retiring from a company job, she began working at the shrine. Mrs. Honda was Mrs. Yoshida's cousin (mother's sister's daughter) and was introduced by her. They both worked twice a week. Mrs. Uchida was not related to the *guuji* family. She was recruited through the Silver Center¹⁷. She cleaned the garden and the surroundings of the shrine and also worked twice a week. Besides them, Mr. and Mrs. Nakayama also helped clean the shrine's grounds.

I have described the staff members of the shrine to this point. It is evident from the above that most of them were related to the *guuji* family or acquaintances of those who had worked at the shrine before. Merely two were from Oozaki, where the parishioners live, and the rest came from outside. In any case, most of them had a long-term relationship with the shrine. In this sense, they had some interpersonal connections and, as Ms. Sakamoto's story impressively suggests, felt connected to the shrine. I categorised them into three groups based on their relationships with the shrine.

Categorisation of Regular Staff

I categorise the staff members working in 2019 into three categories. (1) kin and relatives, (2) local community, and (3) acquaintances & others. Among the regular staff, 26% are kin and relatives, 9% are from the local community, and 65% are acquaintances & others (Figure 3).

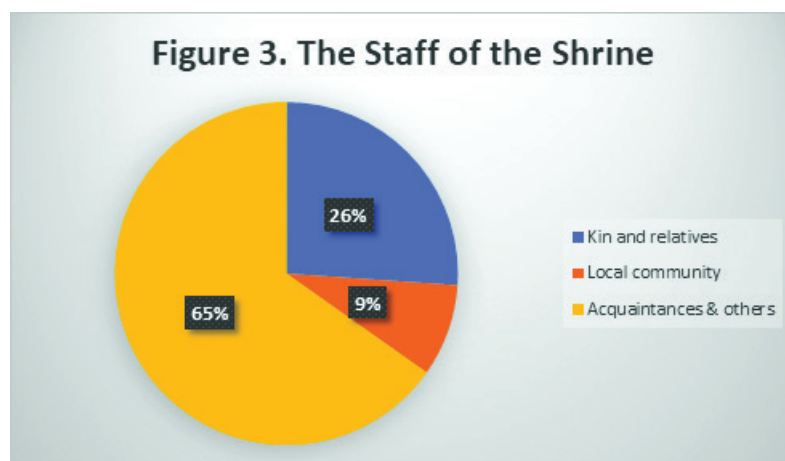


Figure 3. The staff of the shrine.

Source: created by the author.

(1) Kin and Relatives

As I wrote above, three of five *kannushi* are blood-related (the *guuji*, the *negi*, and the *gon negi*). *Gon negi*-san's wife Ms. Michiko, also works at the shrine. Mrs. Yoshida is the *guuji*'s cousin, and Mrs. Honda is her cousin. In the shrine, 26% (6 of 23) of the regular staff members are relatives. In addition, the *guuji*'s second son, his wife, their two daughters, and people from the branch of the *guuji* family come to help in the festivals. Further, people related to the *guuji*'s wife, such as her brother and his son, also come to help. In the past, the *guuji*'s younger sister and her husband came to help, but now they do not come any more due to their age.

(2) Local Community

As I explained, the HKN shrine is in Oozaki town of Josō City, so the people who live in Oozaki are the shrine's parishioners and are considered its local community. According to this definition, most of the staff members, including the relatives of the *guuji* are not from the local community. Among the staff members, only Mrs. Yamamoto and Mr. Yamamoto can be counted as part of the community. Only 9% (2 of 23) of the regular staff members are from the local community.

(3) Acquaintances & Others

Those who started working at the shrine through someone's introduction, such as people from the *guuji*'s previous company and friends of *kannushi* and *miko*, and people who come for work by seeing an advertisement or through the Silver Center, come into this category.

This categorisation indicates that while just a few regular staff members are from Oozaki community, two-thirds of the staff members do not have *ketsuen* or *chien* with the shrine. Obviously, this seems to support the statement "no community". However, as I explained in Figure 3, 15 of 23 members had known another staff member before they joined the shrine. In other words, most of the regular staff members have a relation (or *en*) with each other. They do not have just economic interests but feel they are helping their friends and the shrine since they were recruited through personal ties.

Recruitment Through Personal Ties

Kondo (1990) mentions that family-based companies in Shitamachi recruit staff through personal ties. A similar pattern can be observed at the shrine. As previously noted, many of the current staff members of the HKN shrine were recruited through personal ties. Even for the New Year Festival, the shrine's most crowded event, most of the temporary staff members were recruited in the same way. For instance, in 2019, other than two student *kannushi* from Kokugakuin University, the remaining *kannushi* who worked temporarily were acquaintances of the *guuji* or another permanent *kannushi*. One of them even brought his wife

to work as a *miko*. Only a few of the *miko* came after seeing the advertisement. Most of them were introduced by someone already working at the shrine.

While working with them, I asked the regular *miko* how they were recruited and how long they had been working there. Two of them were sisters, and their father was a friend of the *negi*. They had been working there for three years and had also brought one of their distant cousins to work with them. Another *miko*, Ms. Haruka, was a granddaughter of the *guuji*, and had brought two friends of hers to work as *miko*. Another one, who looked older than the others, said she was a *shakaijin* (a person who finished school and is working). She was a friend of the *negi* and had been invited to help. Some other *miko* also came through similar connections.

I also asked *hojuunin* (people who restore the empty boxes of amulets) the same questions. These workers assisted in the *ofudaba* and helped set up and clean up the festival. Some were classmates of Mr. Kobayashi, while others were friends of the *negi*. Three people supervised the work in both the west and the east *ofudaba*. One of them was Mr. Hasegawa, who was from Oozaki; Mr. Kikuchi was the *guuji*'s wife's brother's son; and Mr. Nohara belonged to one of *guuji*'s *bunke* (branch families). These supervisors also tried to find more people to work as *hojuunin*. *Goshuin* writers were also recruited through personal connections. One of the four *goshuin* writers was from Oozaki, and she brought an acquaintance of hers to write *goshuin* with her. Additionally, Mrs. Yoshida and Mrs. Honda also called some friends to serve tea and lunch.

In this way, we can see that people who worked during the New Year festival came through personal ties. The same happens in events such as *akireitaisai* and *nagosai*¹⁸. This suggests that a temporary, heterogeneous group, consisting of kin, relatives, friends and friends' friends, seemed to substitute for the local community in supporting the shrine. Management changes resolved the shrine's financial crisis, while local community substitution through personal ties addressed the labour shortage.

The shrine could sustain itself in the modern world through long-term perseverance and continuous effects. However, the COVID-19 pandemic disturbed its social network and again threw its future into uncertainty. The following section will discuss how the pandemic created uncertainties and how, this time, a heterogeneous network of human and non-human actors helped sustain the shrine.

DISCONNECTION OF INTERPERSONAL NETWORK DUE TO THE PANDEMIC

As described above, the *guuji* family had long relied on their interpersonal network to sustain the shrine during events. On the first three days of the New Year, from the 1st to the 3rd of January, the shrine would typically be crowded with over 150,000 worshippers. To manage such a large crowd, the shrine administration needs additional staff. However, due to the pandemic, the shrine faced

the challenge of gathering staff. Kin and the local community members could not come to help. They had to arrange staff through personal connections and advertisements. If we categorise the staff who worked during the New Year festival in 2019, 2020 and 2021 (as shown in Figure 4), we can see that in 2019, fifty-seven people worked during the New Year. Of these, forty-five people's names were listed on the shift roster. In addition to them, four or five women were there to prepare tea and lunch. Besides, *ujiko soudai* from each block also came to help on the 1st of January; therefore, I included them too. Among those forty-five people, there were three permanent and four part-time *kannushi*, six regular and fifteen short-term *miko*, and three regular and two short-term *goshuin* writers. Five people worked at the reception, seven were *hojuunin*, and three carried *dempyou* (application forms of *gokitou*) from reception to the *ofuda* assembling area. When broken down by category, kin and relatives made up 17%, the local community made up 17%, and acquaintances & others accounted for 66%.

In 2020, there were approximately sixty people. Twenty-four *miko* (seven regular *miko* and seventeen non-regular *miko*); eight *kannushi* (among them four were permanent *kannushi*); four *goshuin* writers (one short-term and three regulars). Other than them, five worked at the reception, and three carried application forms of *gokitou*. In 2020, kin and relatives made up 14%, the local community made up 19%, and acquaintances & others accounted for 67%.

In 2021, the older staff members were not called to avoid the risk of infection because of the pandemic. Only forty-six people worked, with thirty being *miko*. The breakdown was: kin and relatives 11%, local community 9%, acquaintances & others 80% (Figure 4).

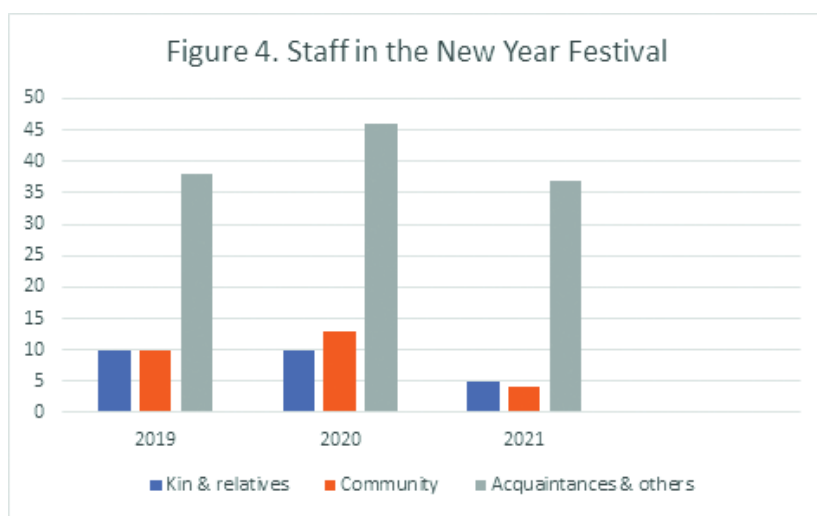


Figure 4. Number of staff members per category in the New Year festivals of 2019, 2020, and 2021.

Source: created by the author based on documents provided by the shrine.

As shown in Figure 4, more than ‘kin and relatives’ and ‘local community’, staff members in the ‘acquaintances & others’ category came to work at the shrine. They were arranged through personal ties (approximately 90%) and have been known by at least one of the staff members who has already worked at the shrine. A few people saw an advertisement and applied for work. Looking at staff numbers from 2019 to 2021, we will notice that the number of staff members has decreased due to the pandemic. Further, in 2019, 66%, in 2020, 67%, and in 2021, 80% of those who worked were ‘acquaintances & others’. The older staff members were advised not to work; therefore, young amateur staff were in charge.

Not only the staff but also the *kou* group prayers decreased (Figure 5).

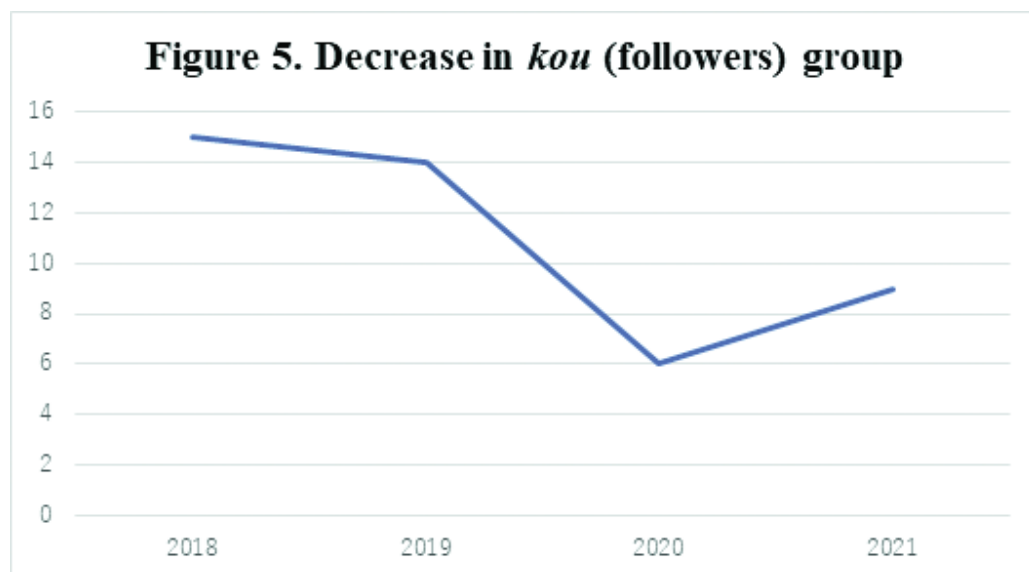


Figure 5. *Kou* groups from 2018 to 2021.

Source: based on data provided by the shrine.

Figure 5 shows that the number of *kou* groups also decreased. The pandemic not only disrupted the network inside but also outside. There were fewer *roten-shou* in the shrine precincts because they could not work during the COVID period. Many had to quit their jobs and had to seek alternative employment. Due to the fear of infection, elderly worshippers avoided going to shrines and temples to buy *omamori* and *ofuda*. When the pandemic disrupted the human network of the shrine, the organisers sought the cooperation of non-humans.

COOPERATION OF NON-HUMANS

To deal with the pandemic, the shrine tried to function with minimal human contact. In order to sustain ritual continuity and organisational stability, the shrine did not rely solely on human actors. Instead, it redistributed agency to non-human actors: objects, technologies and spatial arrangements. This shift from a primarily human network to a heterogeneous network of human and non-human reflects what Latour (2005) calls the reassembling of the social.

First, to reduce direct contact, some ritual practices were delegated to material and technological mediators. The shrine began to send amulets and *ofuda* by post and allowed worshippers to book *gokitou*'s appointments online. The amulets were displayed in cases outside the amulet reception area to avoid crowding near the reception. Electronic tablets were introduced so that *miko* could receive requests without directly speaking to worshippers. In this way, digital devices and postal services reduced face-to-face interactions, and they became active participants in keeping the shrine connected to worshippers. ANT argues that agency is distributed across both humans and non-humans, and here we can see clearly that objects and technologies acted on behalf of humans to sustain shrine operations during the crisis.

Furthermore, non-human actors shaped the behaviour and movement of worshippers, replacing human instruction. As shown in Figure 6, signboards and chains led the worshippers in a specific direction in the shrine precincts and controlled the flow of movement. Notices such as '*kannkeisha igai tachiirikinchi* (No entry except for authorised personnel)' prevented visitors from entering restricted areas.



Figure 6. Signboards and chains were leading the worshippers in the specified direction.

Source: taken by the author.

Inside the *haiden* (hall of worship), attendees sat in the assigned seat number, which they received when they applied for *gokitou*. Those slips made them sit in the assigned chair (Figure 7), without human supervision. These material objects ensured order and replaced the need for human guidance.

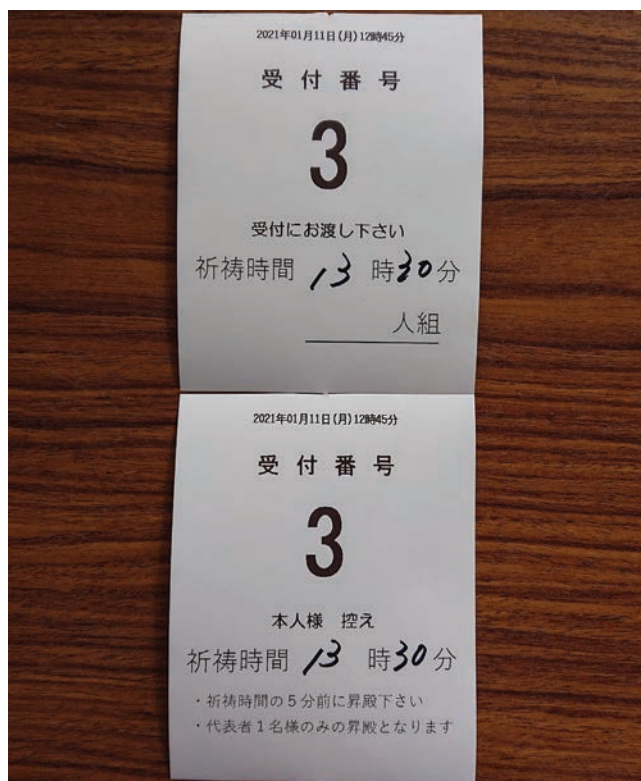


Figure 7. Paper slips¹⁹.

Source: taken by the author.

The *kami*, a supernatural non-human being, acts in this network. According to the shrine's legends, he appeared before the villagers and asked them to enshrine him. In return, he will protect them from disease and misfortune. Even today, worshippers believe that the *kami* protects them from illness and misfortune. During my fieldwork, I have encountered several worshippers who visited the shrine to thank the *kami* after their wishes came true. During the pandemic, many prayed for protection, bought *omamori*, or requested *gokitou* because they believed the *kami* acted for them. In this sense, the *kami* continues to participate in shaping the lives of the shrine's human actors.

Furthermore, many visitors purchased *omamori* not only for protection but also for emotional reassurance. They act as mediators between the worshippers and the *kami*. *Omamori* make humans and non-humans act. With *omamori* people's cars also act properly, avoid accidents, and do not break easily. Sometimes, these *omamori* make humans act.



Figure 8. *Gakugyouseijyu omamori.*

Source: taken by the author.

A fellow Japanese researcher once told me that they do not buy *omamari* because of superstition. However, when they see *gakugyou jyoujyu omamori* (amulet for academic success) (Figure 8), it reminds them to study, and they study. It makes them act.

As this anecdote highlights, non-human actors can “make” humans act. They are not passive objects but active participants in daily life and religious practice. Thus, during the pandemic, when human interaction became limited, non-human actors emerged from the background and took on visible roles. Objects, devices, signs and sacred beings participated in maintaining the shrine’s ritual practices. This association between human and non-human actors shows that the shrine did not function as a purely social organisation but as a heterogeneous network, as ANT suggests.

CONCLUSION

The HKN shrine has shown a remarkable degree of adaptability throughout its history. When its relationship with the local community weakened due to depopulation and urbanisation, the shrine organisers (the head priest’s

family) turned to interpersonal networks built on *en* (social ties) and created a substitute human network. When financial pressures mounted, they introduced managerial strategies to ensure self-sufficiency. They reached beyond their geographic area through marketing and broadened their base of worshippers. However, when the COVID-19 pandemic limited human interaction, even this interpersonal network became unstable. Elderly workers were no longer invited. Group worship and physical interaction were limited. Yet, the shrine found ways to continue its activities, this time by forming a heterogeneous network of human and non-human actors.

By applying Actor-Network Theory, this paper has demonstrated that the survival of the shrine was not maintained by humans alone. Instead, agency was shared among humans and non-humans. Signboards and chains guided worshippers in place of the staff. Tapes on the grounds were making them follow social distancing. Tablets and postal services reduced face-to-face communication. *Omamori* continued to connect worshippers to the shrine and the *kami*. The *kami* himself continued to act for worshippers, as they believed he would protect them during the crisis. In short, ritual continuity was achieved through a heterogeneous network.

The case of the HKN shrine shows that religious practice is not only maintained by the community or tradition. It is sustained by relationships between humans, objects, technologies and spiritual beings. ANT helps us to understand that the social life of the shrine is not constructed by humans alone but by a heterogeneous network in which both human and non-human agencies are diffused. Rather than collapsing in crisis, the shrine reorganised itself by forming new alliances and redistributing agency among available actors.

Ultimately, this case demonstrates that the future of rural shrines may not depend solely on the revival of local communities but on their ability to form flexible networks which include both human and non-human participants. In this sense, the HKN shrine shows that tradition is not static but continues through adaptation, negotiation and cooperation through a constantly shifting network.

NOTES

- 1 From 2019 to 2022, I conducted my fieldwork at this shrine. To protect its identity, I refer to it as the HKN shrine. Further, to protect the identities of my interlocutors, I have used pseudonyms for all of them.
- 2 The northern region of Japan.
- 3 Shrine maidens, young girls or women, assist the priest at shrines. In some shrines, *miko* perform *kagura* dance in rituals.
- 4 To protect the identity of the shrine, I refer to the enshrined deity as the HKN *kami*.
- 5 A *monzen machi* (temple town) is a town that flourishes around a temple. Since tourists and worshippers come to famous temples, many inns, restaurants and souvenir shops are built around them.
- 6 Narita Temple and Kasama Shrine are prominent pilgrimage destinations in northern Japan.
- 7 There are twenty-three types of *gokitou*, such as for traffic safety, household safety, bad luck removal, favourable directions, passing examinations, health and so on, related to daily life. The

price ranges from 3000 yen to 30000 yen. The content of the *gokitou* does not change based on the price.

- 8 A popular Japanese sweet resembles a pancake stuffed with red bean paste or custard.
- 9 The shrine hosts various events and festivals rooted in both the Shinto ritual calendar and its own traditions. Major events include:
 - (1) *Tsukinamisai*, held on the 13th of each month, is a morning prayer for the imperial family, country, parishioners and the region.
 - (2) *Gantansai* (New Year Festival), from December 31st to January 3rd, receives around 3,000 annual prayer applications (*gokitou*) and 150,000 worshippers.
 - (3) *Shunkisai* (Spring Festival), held on April 13th, featuring plant stalls and Japanese drum (*taiko*) performances dedicated to the *kami*.
 - (4) *Nagosai* (Summer Grand Purification), on June 30th, a mid-year cleansing of sins.
 - (5) *Kodomo Omikoshi* (Children's Portable Shrine), held on the fourth Sunday of July since 1993, involves children parading with an *omikoshi* to strengthen community ties.
 - (6) *Akireitaisai* (Annual Autumn Festival), on September 13th, is the shrine's most important festival, featuring offerings such as *karakuri tsunabi*, *shishimai*, and *karakasa mandou* performed by the preservation association (*Hozonkai*).
 - (7) *Kikkasai* (Chrysanthemum Flower Festival), from late October to late November, features floral displays arranged by the shrine's Chrysanthemum Association.
 - (8) *Kottoichi* (Antique Market), held on the third Sunday of each month, is the largest in Ibaraki Prefecture, featuring over ninety stalls in the shrine grounds.All major shrine festivals, including *niiname-no-sai* (December 13th), are aligned with the 13th of the month, commemorating the *kami*'s appearance on the 13th of the lunar November (Uda et al. 2014: 147; Koga 2018: 29).
- 10 *Gantansai* (New Year Festival) and *akireitaisai* (Annual Autumn Festival) are the most significant festivals of the shrine. Both attract large crowds and require additional staffing.
- 11 *Tsukinamisai* has been held on the 13th of every month from 9 am to 9:30 am. This festival is to pray for the prosperity and well-being of the imperial family, country, parishioners and the region.
- 12 *-san* is an honorific suffix in Japanese, similar to "Mr." or "Ms." in English. It can be used for both males and females.
- 13 *Negi* is a position one rank below *guuji* (head priest). At the HKN shrine, the head priest's eldest son serves as a *negi*. The staff address him as *negi-san*.
- 14 *En* is originally a Buddhist term referring to indirect causal relationships or fateful bonds that cannot be altered by personal will. *Shaen* (company-related *en*) was coined at a time when life-time employment was the norm in Japan. Ueno (2008) introduced the term *jyoen* (women's community), suggesting that women can choose their *en* (*erabu en*).
- 15 To protect the shrine's identity, I have also used a pseudonym for the town.
- 16 *Gon-negi* is a position one rank below *negi*. At the HKN shrine, the head priest's third son serves as a *gon-negi*. The staff address him as *gon-negi san*.
- 17 A municipality-run facility that introduces older people to work opportunities.
- 18 *Nagosai*, held on the 30th of June, is also known as *Nagosai no oharae*, *Nagoshi*, and *Minazuki no harae*. It is an important Shinto purification ritual. In ancient times, it was held in June and December at the imperial palace. It later became popular among the general public and is now practiced at shrines across Japan.
- 19 At the *gokitou* reception, this kind of paper slip was given to those worshippers who were supposed to enter the *haiden*.

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