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Fall 2012

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Recommended Citation

Imson, Hannah; Kahng, Amy; and Lekson, Victoria, "Torii and Water: A Gateway to Shinto" (2012).
Pepperdine University, *Featured Research*. Paper 74.
<https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/sturesearch/74>

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Torii and Water: A Gateway to Shinto

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Abstract

Water symbolizes purity in the Shinto religion and thus holds utmost importance as a method of religious purification. Additionally, scholars and worshippers recognize the role of *torii* as gateways to the *kami*, or deities of nature. However, there has not been a documented survey of the relationship between torii and their placement in water, a relationship we feel is significant in understanding Shintoism. We intend to bridge this gap in scholarship by displaying the prevalence of torii placed in or right next to water. We will explore torii from various parts of the world as well as different time periods in history. By looking at various torii that are located in water, such as the Itsukushima, Meoto Iwa, Oarai Ibaraki, Shirahige Jinja, and Astuta shrines, we hope to display a significant link between the placement of torii and water as the torii is leading to the highest purity in the spiritual world.

Introduction

A central tenet in Shinto religion is the worship of kami. Torii, the religious gateways of Shintoism, allow the worshipper to enter a space where everything that is natural is holy. Together, cleansing with the water and walking through the torii are believed to purify and prepare the worshipper to be in the presence of kami. We chose to investigate the relationship between these two aspects of Japanese Shintoism because we are intrigued by the interplay of religion and nature, especially water. Torii found in or right next to water, such as the Torii Gate of the Atsuta Shrine, do not contain a way for the worshipper to cleanse and purify him/herself; instead, placement in or next to water symbolizes purity as it leads to the most pure of all kami (water) and thus purification of the worshipper is not necessary. In contrast, torii not found in or next to water, such as the Torii at the Meiji Shrine, have basins called *temizuyas* for the worshipper to symbolically purify him/herself by rinsing hands and mouth. These torii are also gates to the terrestrial world, while the torii in and next to water lead to a pure sacred space represented in the body of water. We seek to demonstrate that placement of torii in water is incredibly important in the pure exchange between devotee and kami.

Methods

Our exhibition bridges the gap between the significance of torii and water by providing a relationship between two of the most significant aspects in the Shinto religion that have not previously been discussed together. Our sources were picked from those that directly discuss the purity of water in Shinto religion, and woodblock paintings and images that illustrate the placement of torii in or beside water. We also chose various torii from different parts of the world that had been placed in or beside water in order to illustrate the recurring theme of the relationship between the two. The various torii that we are presenting are best studied together as a group because they all illustrate the common theme of torii placement in or beside water. However, we do not feel that this is a huge discrepancy, as both torii point to the body of water as the sacred space.

We examined torii of different importance in order to demonstrate the recurring trend of the importance placement in water plays. For example, the Miyajima torii of the Itsukushima shrine is one of the most well-known torii in Japan, and we have comparatively placed it next to the torii at Meoto Iwa, a less accessible torii, in order to exemplify this recurring relationship that occurs even in different levels of "sacredness."

By displaying several artworks of various torii from different time frames and of varying accessibility, we hope to reveal interplay in Shinto worship between the placement of torii and water, thus explaining why there is a significant number of torii placed in bodies of water.

Pictures



Torii Gate at Itsukushima, 16th Century. Wood, concrete, copper. Itsukushima Shrine in Miyajima, Japan.



Katsushika Hokusai, *Bay of Noboto in Shimosa Province*, 1830. Woodblock print, 14 x 9 in. Fuji Arts, Ann Arbor, MI.



Meoto Iwa, 1910. Stone, cord, wood, concrete, 3.6 x 9 meters. Futami Okitama Jinja, off the shore of Futami, Mie, Japan.



1. Itagawa Hiroshige, *Torii Gate of Atsuta Shrine at Miya Station*, 1830. Woodblock print. Kyoto, Japan.



Kaneko Keizo, *Torii at Mt. Fuji*. Print color photograph, 10 x 18 inches, Lake Fuji, Japan.

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Exhibition List

1. *Torii Gate at Itsukushima*, 16th Century. Wood, concrete, copper. Itsukushima Shrine in Miyajima, Japan.
2. Itagawa Hiroshige, *Torii Gate of Atsuta Shrine at Miya Station*, 1830. Woodblock print. Kyoto, Japan.
3. Kaneko Keizo, *Torii at Mt. Fuji*, 1980. Print color photograph, 10 x 18 inches. Lake Fuji, Japan.
4. Hokusai, *Bay of Noboto in Shimosa Province*, 1830. Woodblock print, 14 x 9 in. Fuji Arts, Ann Arbor, MI.
5. *Meoto Iwa*, 1910. Stone, cord, wood, concrete, 3.6 x 9 meters. Futami Okitama Jinja, off the shore of Futami, Mie, Japan.
6. *Torii Gate at Brooklyn Botanic Garden*, 1915. Wood, bronze. Japanese Hill-and-Pond Garden, Brooklyn Botanic Garden, New York.
7. *Torii Gate at Oarai Ibaraki*, 1000 CE. Stone, cement. Oarai Ibaraki Shrine, off the shore of Oarai Ibaraki.
8. *Torii Gate by Miyagawa River*. Wood, metal, cement. by the Miyagawa River, Takayama, Japan.
9. Utagawa Toyoharu, *Itsukushima Shrine*, 1760. Woodblock Print, 25.4 x 37 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
10. *Torii Gate by Campbell River*, 1993. Wood, metal, cement. By the Campbell River at Sequoia Park British Columbia, Canada.
11. *Torii Gate at Shirahige Jinja Shrine*, 1937. Wood, bronze, cement, 7.8 x 12 meters. Shirahige Jinja Shrine, Lake Biwa.
12. Paul Binnie, *Miyajima no Torii*, 2003. Woodblock print, 42 x 29 cm. Ukiyoe-Gallery.
13. *Torii Gate at Watazumi Shrine*, 1950. Wood, cement. Watazumi Shrine, Tsushima Island.
14. Utagawa Hiroshige, *No. 5 Bizen Province*, 1853-1856. Woodblock Print. Fuji Arts, Ann Arbor MI.
15. Kasawe Hasui, *Snow at Miyajima*, 1929. Woodblock Print, 9x14 in. Fuji Arts, Ann Arbor MI.
16. Utagawa Hiroshige, *Jinbutsu Tokaido & Takaido Harimaze-zue*, 1760. Woodblock print, Bank of Tokyo-Mitsubishi, Akatsuka, Japan.

Conclusion and Discussions

The common placement of torii in water does prove to have a special significance in comparison to torii not placed in or near water. At Shinto shrines that have torii not placed in or around water, worshippers must cleanse themselves in a basin after walking through the torii; however, at shrines with torii in or around water, this purification step is unnecessary. Because water, especially salt water, is considered the most pure entity in the Shinto faith, torii and shrines placed in or near water are considered the most pure of all shrines, and thus there is no need for the devotee to cleanse him/herself before worshipping the kami.

By referencing prints and photographs from different time periods and locations, we have demonstrated that the purity of torii in water is extremely important in the Shinto religion. Torii in or near water have been the focus of artists for centuries, as seen in our exhibitions.

Our research could be furthered by actually observing the rituals firsthand at on-land torii versus rituals at in or near water torii. Watching how devotees interact with the different kami could teach us about the purposeful designs of torii and also deepen our argument that torii placed in or next to water are more pure than those located not near water.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank W. M. Keck Foundation Project Director and Associate Provost for Research Lee Kats, Seaver College Dean Rick Marrs, and Seaver Associate Dean and Blanche E. Seaver Chair in English Literature Constance Fulmer, and Dr. Chiem.