Sample Bigel Proposal “A”

Shinto Religion in New York

Abstract
Shinto is the Native religion of Japan and the primary focus of this study. I propose to study Shinto in the setting of New York City and how Japanese Americans relate to it. Shinto is as old as Japan itself and offers a fascinating and colorful cosmology along with lore, rituals and customs that have become part of the Japanese social structure. Through observation, participant observation, and interviews, I plan to understand the fate of Shinto in New York. This study will help uncover trends in migrant population religiosity and influence in an area, as well as showing how the minority groups assimilate into and affect American society.

Problem Statement
Shinto is the name of the native religion of Japan. It is a religion of animism, ancestor and nature worship. Shinto is such an abstract concept that it has been difficult to define for religious professionals and laymen alike. I am interested at looking at how a religion that was so closely tied to a geographical area can survive outside of Japan. More importantly, I am interested in discovering what Shinto means to the people who follow it or at least adhere to the traditions.

In the case of Shinto in America, I want to explore the following questions: Do people hold on to their religious identity when they have moved to this country? Do these religious beliefs and practices merely become nonreligious cultural traditions or do they become relics that only remain as fond memories in the history of a family or people? For the Japanese Americans of New York, where do they fit, in all of this? What has happened at this crossroad of cultures? I will examine Shintoism in America, specifically New York City and the surrounding metropolitan areas of New Jersey.

Theoretical Background
The term Shinto comes from ancient Japan to distinguish the native kami cults and folk beliefs from the influx of outside influence. Including Buddhist and Confusion thought around 700CE. These incoming religions and philosophies took root and took on aspects of Shinto, the local culture and beliefs, and became “japan-ified.” At that point in time Shinto was essentially the local culture and belief system. There are several different types of Shinto but all are ultimately the same in their school of thought. The first and most common is shrine Shinto. This is the type that is practiced in shrines, and was most connected to the government along with the second type; Imperial Shinto could only be practiced by the emperor, since his connection with the universe meant he could interact directly with the creative forces (Musubi). This is still practiced by the Imperial family. The rest of the population can only pray through kami, what is commonly known as the deities of Shinto. Shinto is a polytheistic religion with many deities. The third and fourth are Sect and Folk Shinto. Sect Shinto is a series of kami cults dedicated to specific deities. These tend to ignore other deities and have started to take on somewhat
monotheistic trends. Folk Shinto Sect and Folk Shinto existed and were prevalent before foreign influences, such as Buddhism and Confucianism.

There have been two main areas that the literature has been covering. They are the areas of Shrine Shinto and non-Shrine Shinto. The majority of the literature on shrine Shinto outside of Japan has dealt with the issues of Japanese colonialism. While the literature on non-Shrine Shinto has been addressing domestic issues of identification and belief and customs. In the areas of non-Shrine Shinto the areas of study have been in Brazil and Bolivia.

Research is done in South America due to a large Japanese migration in the early 20th century. In the early 1900’s there were migrations from Japan to Hawaii, US and Brazil. The migrants to Brazil did not build shrines like in Hawaii and west coast of America due to fear of Christian retaliation. However, the Japanese brought their religious traditions with them. The studies done in Bolivia dealt with how even though some Japanese converted to Catholicism, they still held on to Shinto rituals and customs.

Ninety percent of Japanese are Shinto/Buddhist. There has been a blending of these two religions due to their nature and histories in Japan and the similarities between them. The combination and similarities of these two can be seen in early Chinese theologians who came to Japan and saw the Kami as local embodiments of universal Buddhas and Bodavistas. There was much Chinese influence on Shinto in the late 700’s-early 1100’s. Shinto priests adopted Chinese thoughts and these influence Shinto practices. Examples of these are the adoption of the yin yang concepts, Confucian ideals and some Taoist beliefs. All of these religious elements existed independently but had a great impact on Shinto.

What are the theological thoughts behind Shinto shrines abroad, in terms of larger Jingas(神社), as well as smaller shrine altars for the home? Do Kami exist outside of Japan? How do laymen view them? How well does Shinto function outside of Japan? Put into an alien culture how does it adapt? In what ways have the rituals and customs of Shinto in Japan changed what is being expressed in a foreign country. How do the people involved in all of this understand their own religiosity? I propose to explore these questions in the context of contemporary Shinto practice in America. I will be using America as a case study but the findings may be relevant to other parts of the world. Once we understand how Shinto functions outside of the native country we can understand how Shinto contributes to the host culture and how Shinto has adapted to other cultural settings.

**Research Plan / Methods**

I will conduct research using primarily participant observations and unstructured and semi structured interviews in each of four locations. I will begin by entering each study site and casually observing social behavior. This will lead to participant observation and first contacts with research subjects/participants. Next, I will begin to establish rapport with research subjects and conduct interviews at each location. The first study site is the Japan Society in NYC, a critical location for this research given the role it plays for Japanese Americans and the expression of their cultural heritage in the United States. The Japan Society is a crucial location to make contacts and meet potential research subjects. The second study site is the International Shinto Federation in NYC, which celebrates holidays and holds Shinto rituals. It also hosts lectures concerning
Shinto theology and talks on the topic of Shinto in contemporary Issues. This site allows direct access to Shinto theologians and a valuable location to conduct participant observation. The third site is the New York Buddhist Church. In Japan, Shinto and Buddhism are so closely tied that this location is an important potential location to find research subjects as well as observe. The last site is a Japanese super market and an adjoining strip mall of Japanese stores in Edgewater, New Jersey. In the surrounding area outside of New York City, Edgewater has the largest Japanese population.

**Intellectual Merit and Significance**

Upon completion of this project, I expect to have a thorough understanding of how Japanese Americans and their descendants view Shinto and relate to it. I expect to have a grasp of their religious identity and the values that come with it. This will help me to better understand what happens to religions when populations migrate. It will uncover how cultural diffusion affects the religion of their parents.

The understanding of Shinto is a key-determining factor for understanding how Japanese society functions. Shinto is the foundation of the Japanese social structure and so in studying it in other societies, we can see how assimilation can take place. Getting an understanding of how Shinto adapts to the new setting is a good gauge for how Japanese adapt to American society in general. The Japanese population in the NY area is an interesting and unique one. They are a small percentage compared to the impact that their culture is having on the area and country. Japanese culture has had and continues to have great effects on American culture. From popular TV shows, to electronics, food, and cars, Japan has influenced American society tremendously. Understanding the way that the Japanese become part of the US culture can provide a rich example of how minority groups in general assimilate into American society.

This project is intended as a prelude to my anticipated research in Japan. I plan to use the data and experiences gained through this project in future studies relating to Japanese social structure and cultural phenomenon.
**Budget:**

**Transportation**
- Train $720.00
- Subway $400

**Overnight Room/Board** – $200 There will be times when I will be unable to return home due to the scheduling with participants, this is to allow for a greater access to participants that would otherwise be unavailable.

**Food** - $100

**Supplies** - $50 (such as notebooks and supplies for notes.)

**Event Fees** - $200 The Japan society and ISF hold events that would be great locations for P.O.

**Membership Dues** - ISF-$25 Japan Society- $60 The Japan Society and ISF have membership dues that allow access to greater amounts of information and opportunities to meet research subjects.

**Research Subjects** - $600 (tokens of appreciation to participants who agree to interviews, as well as money to invite them to a meal as to build rapport with them.)

**Books/Supplies** - $100 (software- to aid in coding of notes, Recorder- to record interviews for analysis.

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Total= $2460.00