Discovering Japanese Fusion of Religions on the Pilgrimage Island of Shikoku

STEVE McCARTY

Chapter 26 in A Passion for Japan: A Collection of Personal Narratives


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Steve McCarty was born in Boston and specialized in Japan at the University of Hawaii for an MA degree in Asian religions. He has been a full Professor for 22 years of his 40 years in Japan. He currently lectures for Osaka Jogakuin University and the government foreign aid agency JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency). Since 1998 he has also served as President of the World Association for Online Education. His publications on Japan, Asian studies, bilingualism, language teaching with technology, and online education are available at his Website: https://japanned.hcommons.org
The mountain slope just outside Takamatsu, the capital of Kagawa Prefecture on the island of Shikoku, was developed with houses in recent years, but did not yet have a sewer system, just channels under the street for liquids to flow downhill. Like everyone else, we belonged to the neighborhood association (jichikai) that handled collective practical matters as well as children’s sporting events that our sons participated in. One day the community leader gathered together the couples, including my Japanese wife and myself, who lived at the top of the hill. Whereas most Japanese would prefer to live closer to the train station, I loved the view of mountains, rice fields, and bamboo forests. The leader, a man of about 60, got straight to the point and told us that the subterranean channel for wastewater was blocked by condoms. There was a nervous hush among us, as anyone could be implicated. People started to look around the circle until all eyes focused on me and then my wife. To my relief and exoneration, she was eight months pregnant.

WHY JAPAN? FORMATIVE YEARS FROM BOSTON TO HONOLULU

How had it come to this? At one point even being the head of the neighborhood association (my wife as the actual power) on the most traditional and religious of Japan’s four main islands? It was by going west, halfway across the world from my birthplace of Boston. There had been fascinating glimpses of faraway Japan such as the Akira Kurosawa movie Rashōmon and exhibitions at Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts. At Northeastern University I went from majoring in physics to philosophy and then out the door to Eastern religions. Circuitously, I wound up in Honolulu, where Asian influence is strong. Working as an intern in the state House of Representatives, my bosses were Chinese Hawaiian and Filipino, while the governor was Japanese American. Transferring to the University of Hawaii and majoring in Asian religions in graduate school, there was a choice of country and language to specialize in. I had associated closely with Japanese Americans, Okinawans (who identified themselves as distinct from Japanese), and Japanese who were visiting or studying in Hawaii. It was knowing those people, more than what I studied, that convinced me to specialize in Japan, study Japanese hard, and then move to Japan. At a conference in 1979, I mentioned to Harvard Japanologist Edwin O. Reischauer that I was going to study Japanese. His eyes lit up, saying “Japan is an upcoming country.” What an understatement that turned out to be!

The effort of studying Japanese for three hours a day instilled a work ethic that would serve me well in Japan. I studied kanji characters from the beginning, discovering that sentences with kanji were easier to read than sentences of only hiragana or katakana phonetic syllables, because there are no spaces between words in Japanese writing. Japanese students on campus were happy to do language exchange or just talk. Their campus organization had been renamed the Japanese and American Student Association to accommodate participants like myself—a welcome inclusiveness!
Glimpse of a Promising Research Area: Japanese Fusion of Religions

During graduate school I would often visit the East-West Center, with its fragrant plumeria trees in front and Japanese garden in back. Although this was a US State Department think tank for diplomacy, I could just walk into events there. On one occasion, an East-West Center grantee delivered a fascinating lecture on Japanese sacred space. He stated that his findings were very privileged, but to advance his career he wanted to impress the assembled University of Hawaii Department of Religion professors. I had studied Buddhism from my youth in Boston, but Japan’s indigenous religion Shinto was mostly new territory.

The speaker presented a tour de force on syncretism (the amalgamation of different religions) at a site where Buddhist and Shinto divinities were identified long ago and arrayed such that a mountain became a mandala—a geographic configuration of symbols—that pilgrims could enter. It took me over 40 years, but I was able to pinpoint that site on the main island of Honshu and another such site on Kyushu, placing in context my identification of a third site on Shikoku where there is clear evidence of the co-existence and interaction of Buddhism, Shinto, and other major and folk religions of Asia. (Details below.)

MOVING TO JAPAN

On a campus bulletin board, I found a teacher-wanted advertisement for an English conversation school in Hiroshima, so that is where I lived in my first sojourn in Japan, returning to Hawaii when my contract ended. Japan was not the electronics district of neon lights that I had imagined, but actually setting foot in the country was a long-lasting thrill accompanied by a feeling of entering a profoundly different world. My second stay in Japan came about in 1981 when I answered an advertisement for a conversation school in a greener environment: Takamatsu in Kagawa Prefecture, on the island of Shikoku. Later I would do research there for my MA thesis, and graduate from the University of Hawaii long-distance while working. Returning to Honolulu, I found that I sorely missed the wonderful people I had met in Japan, and so, working one more session in the state legislature, I saved enough for a one-way ticket to Japan for good. With my Japanese skills and credibility as a researcher, I was able to get back to Takamatsu, with the abbot of a Buddhist sect as my sponsor.

Playing Baseball for Language Fluency and Acculturation

Everywhere I lived in Western Japan, I was wanted on at least one baseball team. The level of play was higher than in Hawaii, but some teams needed a slugger. The leagues were either windmill pitching from very close in softball, or baseball rules with an elusive hard-rubber ball.

Japanese mostly play the same sports as Americans, but they do so more religiously. There is also a strong social dimension. Intercultural communication research shows that Japanese
are both collectivistic and individualistic, but I found that they love to lose themselves in a group experience such as a team sport, a festival dance, or shared laughter. As a team member I was welcomed into my teammates’ nightlife, slept over in their homes, and connected to the social networks among players. I found that, being able to speak Japanese pretty well and being acculturated to a certain extent, it was possible to become an insider in Japanese groups.

Sports like tennis and baseball also serve as a halfway house for learning Japanese, because many English terms are used, even by the majority of Japanese who regard themselves as monolingual. One can also pick up actual spoken local dialects that are not found in Japanese language textbooks, with the action of play providing “scaffolding” for understanding new vocabulary through usage in context. Some of the slang picked up from rough baseball players, however, is not to be used in polite company—a lesson I learned from the red faces of female college staff!

Teaching English

Teaching English in Japan, generally speaking, is a difficult art to master. Those with EFL training are often flummoxed by the language barrier, the institutional culture where they teach, and the reticence of students to speak out in English. Japanese teachers of English know the culture of the students but are often limited in communicative pedagogy by their training in grammar and reading, unless they have lived abroad. I studied the language and culture before coming to Japan, but teaching English was a skill I had to learn on my own. At conversation schools for several years, I could teach using textbooks and learn from my blunders while the stakes were still low.

A breakthrough came when I was able to leave the sponsorship of the abbot and work at a reputable conversation school in Matsuyama, in Ehime Prefecture west of Kagawa. The “hometown of haiku,” a top baseball region, making up a quarter of the Pilgrimage of Shikoku, and receptive to English education and internationalization—all these made Matsuyama an ideal place for me around 1984. My Japanese and English haiku were getting published, and I was often in the newspapers and on radio and TV for various activities in local society.

Learning by doing, I founded the Matsuyama Chapter of the Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT), with a bilingual, community-service philosophy. Actually, I found that Matsuyama already had a network that was ready-made for international collaboration. There were more English-speaking educators in Matsuyama than was usual for Japan, because of a wonderful professor, Shigeo Imamura, whose biography straddled the US and Japan. Professor Imamura had educated the Matsuyama cohort in teaching oral English for some years by conducting in-service training for secondary school teachers. I revived that summer seminar on a volunteer basis with other foreign teachers, and it was officially recognized as in-service training by the prefectural secondary school teachers’ organization. I’m happy to say that the JALT Matsuyama Chapter has been one of the most successful in
JALT history in proportion to its population base, with a balance of Japanese and foreign teachers of languages conducting chapter activities to this day.

With a bit of social capital from Matsuyama, my Japanese at an advanced level, and the minimum qualification of an MA promised, I was able to join the faculty of a college, moving to Kagawa Prefecture for the third time to take a tenure-track position at Kagawa Junior College. There was explicitly “no special treatment” for being a foreigner, which meant a heavy workload at the entry level and a subsistence salary that would grow only slowly under the traditional lifetime employment system. Since 1985 I have taught 74 consecutive college semesters, with occasional specialized graduate school classes.

Becoming a tenured faculty member provided a platform for me to branch out beyond teaching and administrative duties. I was grateful to JALT for the professional development opportunities it provided, so I endeavored to continue contributing to the English teaching profession in Japan as Kagawa Chapter President and Bilingualism National SIG (Special Interest Group) President, and later as a member of JALT’s national Executive Committee.

Shikoku is rich in history and culture, but a bit isolated from urban Japan, so I also became active in providing information about Shikoku to people around the world. As soon as Kagawa Junior College got connected to the Internet, in 1995, I became involved in the nascent e-learning field based in North America, presenting at and serving as program chair for the Teaching in the Community Colleges Online Conference and founding the World Association for Online Education.

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIFE

Kagawa Junior College sent me to Hawaii in 1987 to establish a sister school relationship, and there I happened to meet an attractive and poised young woman from Nagoya who was on her college graduation trip. After returning to Japan, I corresponded with her (in Japanese, as she had no particular background in English), and we ended up getting married.

Her parents and other relatives were friendly, making me feel like a full member of the family. My father-in-law had a solid blue-collar job. On the verge of retirement, I heard him speaking freely to his boss at a company vacation lodge, whereupon the boss said sternly to my father-in-law that he did not know that he had opinions. I thought: Imagine maintaining a poker face for over 40 years with the same company while being outspoken in private life.

My father-in-law and I often discussed religions, and he confirmed the often-noted plural religious affiliations of Japanese people. It is unheard of in most cultures for individuals to belong to more than one religion, so I continue to find this feature of Japan fascinating as well as interesting to research. When I introduce Japan to visiting officials for the government foreign aid agency JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency), I pantomime how my father-in-law does prayer rituals before a Buddhist altar, then steps over to the Shinto altar and claps his hands to wake up the gods.
We have two sons, and we were worried at first that they might be bullied for being different, but there were only a few catcalls around second grade in their whole idyllic childhood. They played with neighborhood kids in nature and around the Shikoku Pilgrimage temples. We were early computer users, having a Macintosh at home with a graphic user interface. Once I saw our three-year-old showing neighborhood kids of four and five how to play compact disc games in Japanese and English.

When they were teenagers and getting interested in electronics, we moved to Osaka for my next professorship. The Kansai region opened up all sorts of opportunities for their education, and my wife was able to work at department stores in Osaka. Our older son studied systems engineering at Ritsumeikan University and has carved out a successful professional career in Tokyo, utilizing his IT and linguistic skills. Our younger son was also poised for an engineering career when he decided to go back to college to study music. This worried us a bit, but like our older son he has moved from one full-time job to a better one, and is now a sound director in the entertainment industry. Through him we now have a three-quarters Japanese granddaughter.

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND BILINGUALISM

Every day in Japan involves intercultural communication and bilingualism on all sorts of levels. These are adjacent disciplines, parting at the point where intercultural communication provides guidance without much language study to sojourners in foreign cultures. However, becoming bilingual makes possible a high level of intercultural communication, and expands the possibility of becoming bicultural to some extent. Many foreign professionals in Japan stick closely to their native culture rather than “going native”; this pattern tends to be well-received in Japanese society, although in Japanese companies or families the pressures to assimilate are stronger. Speaking unaccented Japanese can trigger expectations of Japanese behavior or attitudes, which might be a bridge too far. “Additive bilingualism” is the process of learning a second language while one’s first language is maintained and reinforced, and a similar process can expand one’s cultural identity.

At first, I was interested in bilingualism for my own language development, but later I conducted a survey of Japanese and non-Japanese that showed the cognitive and ethical benefits of becoming bilingual. When our sons were born, I tried to raise them to be bilingual, and at Osaka Jogakuin University, where I now teach, content-based EFL, a modest form of bilingual education, is practiced. For many years I have been teaching intercultural communication and bilingualism classes, and bilingualism has become one of my main areas of research.
THE PILGRIMAGE ISLAND OF SHIKOKU

Let me now briefly introduce the island of Shikoku and the Shikoku Pilgrimage. Japan’s Seto Inland Sea (瀬戸内海, Seto Naikai), which separates Shikoku from Japan’s main island of Honshu, was formed around 7,000 years ago when the sea level rose due to ice melting following the most recent ice age, causing sea water to pour into a basin between the Chūgoku mountains (on Honshu) and Shikoku mountains. Shikoku is the site of the famous Shikoku Pilgrimage (四国遍路, Shikoku Henro), a 1,200-kilometer clockwise circumambulation of 88 Buddhist temples and other sacred sites where the Buddhist priest Kūkai (774–835) is believed to have practiced asceticism during the 9th century. Kūkai, posthumously known as Kōbō Daishi, studied in China in the capital of the T’ang dynasty, and upon returning to Japan was influential in the promotion of esoteric Buddhism, establishing the Shingon sect monastery of Kōya-san in today’s Wakayama Prefecture, south of Osaka. The Pilgrimage of Shikoku today offers an opportunity for pilgrims to connect with their religious heritage, to join with others in a shared purpose, and to reflect on their lives.

Kūkai was from what is now Kagawa Prefecture, where I fortuitously lived during most of my graduate research. My MA thesis was on Kūkai, and I later collaborated with local schoolteachers on an English guidebook to Kagawa, and with Akiko Takemoto on an English-Japanese guidebook to Shikoku, both of which included information on the Pilgrimage of Shikoku.

BUDDHISM AND SHINTO

Before turning to Buddhist-Shinto syncretism, let me present a brief overview of the two religions separately. Buddhism spread from ancient Hinduism throughout Asia as a philosophical, psychological, ethical, and educational system. Its vast canon of sūtras, commentaries, guides for meditation and rituals, and standards of virtuous conduct have been translated from Pali or Sanskrit into the major Asian languages, with some additions even being created in the latter.

While the Theravāda Buddhism of southern Asia hued to the teachings of the historical Buddha, the Mahāyāna Buddhism of northern Asian developed in India from the first century BC onwards, becoming metaphysical and sometimes explicit that its Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and other emanations were symbolic of inner transformations. Exquisite sculptures and paintings were provided by an artisanal class, the influence of which can be seen in the refined aesthetics of Japanese arts even today.

Shinto, which resembles the animistic pantheism of African indigenous religions, could hardly be more different from Buddhism. This has produced a sort of “division of labor” in the roles the two play in Japanese people’s lives: roughly, Shinto for purity and joy and Buddhism for morality and mortality. Shinto shrines and rituals are part of a Japanese upbringing, and most Japanese belong to one Buddhist sect or another; thus, Japanese can be regarded as culturally belonging to both religions.
Unlike in Buddhist temples, there is not much to see or read in a Shinto shrine. The sacred space is marked by torii gates. There are buildings where rituals are performed and physical objects in or near the shrine called go-shintai (御神体, sacred body of the kami)—man-made objects such as mirrors, swords, or sculptures as well as natural objects like rocks, mountains, or trees—in which kami (spirits or gods) reside.

I first knew of Shinto as a teaching assistant in a World Religions class, and in recent years have come to understand it more deeply through participation in events and sacred rites. In November 2021, a Japanese friend who heads a cultural research institute in Kyoto invited me and my wife to join a procession at Kamigamo Shrine reenacting a thousand-year-old Heian Period ritual. We were able to enter the inner shrine for a ceremony reporting to the Shinto gods that a royal cherry tree had been transplanted to the shrine from Kyoto Imperial Palace.

In ways like these, Shinto connects people with an invisible world of kami, ancestors, and a web of relationships or destiny, where humans and spirits are believed to interact and exchange influences.

Major Sites of Buddhist-Shinto Syncretism

Buddhist-Shinto syncretism refers to the mixing together of Buddhism, which was introduced to Japan from China in the sixth century, and Japan’s native Shinto religion.⁶ The Japanese term for Buddhist-Shinto syncretism is shinbutsu-shūgō (神仏習合, “syncretism of kami and buddhas”). It is also called shinbutsu-konkō (神仏混淆, “jumbling up” or “contamination of kami and buddhas”).⁷ After Buddhism arrived in Japan, Japanese tried to reconcile the new beliefs of Buddhism with the older beliefs of Shinto, assuming both were true. These efforts were aided by the honji suijaku (本地垂迹) theory, widely accepted up until the Meiji period, according to which Indian Buddhist deities chose to appear in Japan as native kami in order to more easily convert and save the Japanese.⁸ As a consequence, Buddhist temples (o-tera) were attached to Shinto shrines (jinja), and vice versa.

Following the Meiji Restoration in 1868, Japan’s new government approved a series of laws that forcibly separated the two religions, downgrading Buddhism as a foreign import and elevating Shinto as Japan’s national religion. This may have unmoored Japanese from the ethical side of their heritage—Buddhism teaches nonviolence, love, wisdom, goodness, calmness and self-control, whereas Shinto does not have specific teachings that followers are supposed to practice—facilitating the misuse of Shinto and the Imperial institution as a pretext for the ill-fated Japanese imperialism of the first half of the 20th century. Following the Second World War, collegial linkages and interactions between Buddhism and Shinto resumed, with temple grounds today often containing Shinto shrines, and the grounds of shrines sometimes containing temples.
It is historically established that the first major site of Buddhist-Shinto syncretism was not on Honshu but rather on Kyushu at the Usa Hachimangū shrine, in today’s Oita Prefecture. In 779, a temple called Miroku-ji was built next to Usa Hachimangū, making it what is believed to be the first shrine-temple, or jingūji (神宮寺) in Japan. In the East-West Center lecture on syncretism that I attended in Hawaii long ago, the speaker referred to an example of Buddhist-Shinto syncretism that I later identified as the Hiyoshi Taisha shrine, which lies near the foot of Mt. Hiei on the opposite side from Kyoto. Along with Enryaku-ji, the Buddhist temple complex erected on Mt. Hiei in 778 by Saichō, the founder of the Tendai school of Buddhism, Hiyoshi Taisha served as a guardian of the capital from its spiritually vulnerable northeast quadrant. As Enryaku-ji grew more powerful, Hiyoshi Taisha, in accordance with shinbutsu-shūgō, was subsumed into Enryaku-ji.

Recently, after an arduous climb to the top of Mt. Hiei and some searching along its forested trails, I was able locate remnants of the original shrine buildings, a huge boulder spanned by a sacred rope, and a sign in Japanese that read jingūji. Usa Hachimangū and Hiyoshi Taisha provide the context for my discovery on the island of Shikoku of a third major site of Buddhist-Shinto syncretism.

A SYNTHESIS OF ASIAN RELIGIONS IN A MANDALA OF MOUNTAINS

All my adult life I have been fascinated by symbolism, including religious myths and symbols. In Japan this interest led me on a years-long quest, including pre-modern Japanese texts, interviews with priests, and site visits, to uncover the significance of a site of Buddhist-Shinto syncretism on Shikoku that was a pilgrimage destination in its own right on old maps, with no explicit connection to the 88 temples of the Pilgrimage of Shikoku.

The site in question centers on the major pilgrimage destination Kompira-san (also known as Kotohira-gū), a large Shinto shrine complex on Zōzu-san (象頭山), which translates as Elephant’s Head Mountain, overlooking the town of Kotohira. Historically, Kompira-san was both a Shinto shrine and a Buddhist temple, dedicated to the syncretic deity Kompira Daigongen, a guardian god of sailors and seafaring, but it was officially declared a Shinto shrine when Buddhism and Shinto were separated at the beginning of the Meiji period. Next to Kotohira is the city of Zentsūji, whose Zentsūji Temple was established in 807 by Kūkai, the founder of Shingon Buddhism and upon whose whose path the Pilgrimage of Shikoku is based.
I was intrigued by the question of what ancient people saw in their minds when they viewed or visited the sacred sites of Elephant’s Head Mountain.

Elephant’s Head Mountain in Sanuki Province (modern-day Kagawa Prefecture), woodblock print by Utagawa Hiroshige (1797–1858).

Multiple Asian religions are represented in the Elephant’s Head Mountain Range. In addition to the presence of Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples, mountain worship itself is an element of Shinto, as mountains are among the go-shintai where kami reside. The word Kompira comes from the Sanskrit word Kumbhira, the name of a Hindu crocodile god of the Ganges who became a Buddhist guardian deity. In esoteric lore, Kumbhira and the entirety of Elephant’s Head Mountain, where the Buddha had imparted vital teachings, flew from India to this site in Japan. The head priest of Hashikuradera, the inner sanctuary of Kompira-san, rewarded my research interest by showing me two scrolls. One showed Kompira Daigongen riding Elephant’s Head Mountain depicted as a white elephant, a mythological creature associated with both the Buddha and the Hindu god Indra. The other was an old map showing Kompira Daigongen swirling down from the sky to meet Kūkai.
The deeper I looked into the temples, shrines, and lore of the Elephant’s Head Mountain Range, the more interrelationships I uncovered among Shinto, Buddhism, and other Asian religions. Fugen Bosatsu, who originated in India as the Bodhisattva of Universal Goodness, Virtue, and Worthiness, and who is often depicted riding a white elephant, appears with Monju Bosatsu, who rides a lion, flanking the historical Buddha in a triad that is common in Buddhist iconography. Although Buddhism was officially banished from the Kompira-san shrine, I noticed a carving remained of Fugen preaching atop his elephant mount, with a winged lion above. Above Zentsūji are the Five Peaks, which are associated with pre-Han dynasty Daoism as well as the Five Wisdom Buddhas in the five-story pagoda of Zentsūji Temple. I could give more examples, but to jump to the conclusion of my research: the Elephant’s Head Mountain Range could be viewed as a gigantic mandala, a geometric configuration of symbols that establishes a sacred space and focuses the attention of pilgrims.

Tracking down evidence of the fusion of religions in Japan has been one of my “passions for Japan,” along with developing deep relationships with thoughtful Japanese who have welcomed my interest in their culture. For me the acculturation process of living in Japan has been far more than simply adjusting to differences from my home country. It has been more like a willing personality change, a fusion—a syncretism, if you will—of values and ways of thinking that I had with me when I first landed in Japan and values and ways of thinking that I came to adopt while living here. This has given me to some extent what I consider to be a bicultural identity, one that has enriched my life.
Notes


6. Syncretism is defined as “the attempted reconciliation or union of different or opposing principles, practices, or parties, as in philosophy or religion.” *Dictionary.com*.


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