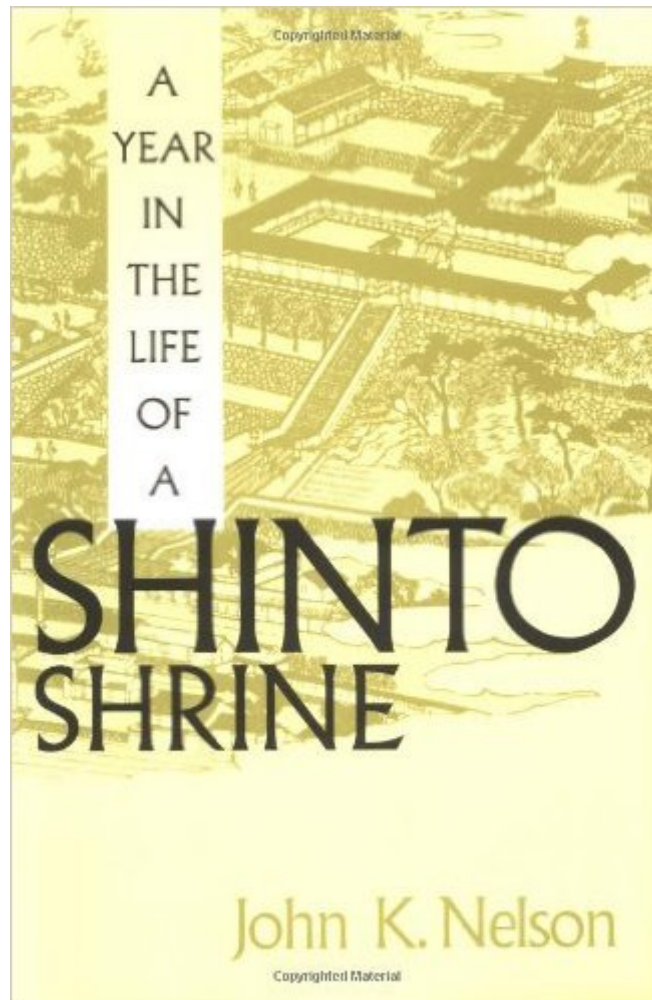


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# A Year In The Life Of A Shinto Shrine



## Synopsis

What we today call Shinto has been at the heart of Japanese culture for almost as long as there has been a political entity distinguishing itself as Japan. *A Year in the Life of a Shinto Shrine* describes the ritual cycle at Suwa Shrine, Nagasaki's major Shinto shrine. Conversations with priests, other shrine personnel, and people attending shrine functions supplement John K. Nelson's observations of over fifty shrine rituals and festivals. He elicits their views on the meaning and personal relevance of the religious events and the place of Shinto and Suwa Shrine in Japanese society, culture, and politics. Nelson focuses on the very human side of an ancient institution and provides a detailed look at beliefs and practices that, although grounded in natural cycles, are nonetheless meaningful in late-twentieth-century Japanese society. Nelson explains the history of Suwa Shrine, basic Shinto concepts, and the Shinto worldview, including a discussion of the Kami, supernatural forces that pervade the universe. He explores the meaning of ritual in Japanese culture and society and examines the symbols, gestures, dances, and meanings of a typical shrine ceremony. He then describes the cycle of activities at the shrine during a calendar year: the seasonal rituals and festivals and the petitionary, propitiary, and rite-of-passage ceremonies performed for individuals and specific groups. Among them are the Dolls' Day festival, in which young women participate in a procession and worship service wearing Heian period costumes; the autumn Okunchi festival, which attracts participants from all over Japan and even brings emigrants home for a visit; the ritual invoking the blessing of the Kami for young children; and the ritual sanctifying the earth before a building is constructed. The author also describes the many roles women play in Shinto and includes an interview with a female priest. Shinto has always been attentive to the protection of communities from unpredictable human and divine forces and has imbued its ritual practices with techniques and strategies to aid human life. By observing the Nagasaki shrine's traditions and rituals, the people who make it work, and their interactions with the community at large, the author shows that cosmologies from the past are still very much a part of the cultural codes utilized by the nation and its people to meet the challenges of today.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The author uses a major Shinto Shrine, Nagasaki's Suwa Shrine, as the focus of the book. It starts out with chapters about Kami, the history of the shrine and a overview of rituals and ceremonies then the book is cut up into Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter. It has lots of details, including, in the back, a map of the shrine, glossary of terms, list of festivals and rituals of the Suwa Shrine and works cited. The details are about this ONE Shrine, so if you wanted a book on all kami and shrines in Japan THIS is not it. Yet it does give a nice first person account of events in a Shinto Shrine, dealing with beliefs, practices and how the shrine interacts with the city's community, businesses and families. Kind of like seeing the forest by examining one of the trees. A must for people interested in Shintoism or Japan.

For any serious student of Shinto or highly interested, independent researcher, this book is a wonderful choice. Dr. Nelson's vivid imagery and comprehensive descriptions give the reader a chance to connect emotionally with the events as they transpire across time. In my case, I felt almost as though I was present. There are few English-language volumes on Shinto which so clearly and eloquently deliver up to the reader what, until recent years, has been arcane knowledge unavailable to the West.

"A Year in the Life of a Shinto Shrine" is the best book on Shinto that I have ever read, and that is really saying something as I have read a lot of books on Shinto. It is the first book I have seen that puts things in layman's terms while not dumbing down a fairly complicated system of beliefs and cultural practices. Instead of attempting to interpret the mysteries and cosmology of the inscrutable religion, author John Nelson puts you in the shoes of Shinto practitioners, from the highest ranking priest to the novices, to the casual visitors who drop by. He takes you behind the scenes, showing you what the day-to-day life is of a Shinto priest, what they believe and what they do. The shrine he introduces, Suwa Shrine in Nagasaki, is a fairly major one, with a full calendar of events and

rituals. On top of all this Nelson frames Shinto in its cultural context. It is not simply a religion, something to be believed in and practiced, but it is a sort of societal glue for Japan, something that connects the present to the past and provides a contextual framework that all Japanese people can recognize. It is difficult to understand this element of Shinto, because the very concept of religion is different. One of the most fascinating sections of this book is the chapter called "I shouldn't be telling you this but..." where he allows several Shinto priests to express their private opinions under the protection of anonymity. It is exactly this kind of human touch that has been missing from all previous books. Shinto is a religion of human beings, and without this necessary voice it loses all context.

I recently finished reading this book in preparation for a trip I'm taking to Japan in the fall, I will be studying at University for year. I had read a couple of other books about Shinto and found them useful but what I really wanted to read was a book on Shinto practice so when I visit a Shinto Shrine I will have a more complex understanding of what is going on. In a way, this book goes beyond just understanding a Shinto practice it also covers details on things like how to finance a Shrine and how to sit so your legs fall asleep less often etc. I should clarify that this book isn't a travel guide but a well written ethnography, one that primarily focuses on one medium-large Shinto Shrine. In general the book doesn't get too detailed or too hard to read. The author spends some time with theory's and interpretations but mostly focuses on observation. Some of my favorite parts of the book are the interviews with the Guji, he had an interesting life story and some good comparative religion thoughts. Some of the younger priests also have some interesting input, some times complaints. The chapter about a woman Shinto Priest was another highlight. I believe this book would be great for undergraduates, I'm an undergrad in Religious Studies and Philosophy, or for anyone interested in Shinto practice.

It has been years, but I still remember Doc Nelson quite well, as one of the best professors I have ever had. He was capable of educating you without feeling like you were being schooled, if you know what I mean. In his book, it is much the same as in his classes. He provides such powerful imagery to invoke the spirit of the Suwa Shrine that it feels like you are there. And given that I lived in Nagasaki and have been there on several occasions, it feels to me that I have returned. You can experience through his first-person narrative the depth of ritual and see as well how it permeates into the life of the average Japanese person, who may not even realize it.

I would recommend "A Year in the Life of a Shinto Shrine", by John K. Nelson, to anyone with an interest in Shinto and Japanese Culture. The book provides a detailed look at Shinto rituals at Suwa Jinja in Nagasaki, Japan. My favorite chapters were about the purification of a plot of land for a construction company, the great purification ceremony, and ringing in the New Year. The chapters about women at the shrine and how younger Japanese relate to the shrine were also really interesting from a cultural perspective. "A Year in the Life" contains a wealth of knowledge of interest to the scholar. The book is however, easy to read - as if you were listening to a friend telling a story. A glossary of Japanese terms, end notes, maps of the shrine, and pictures broaden the reader's context and add depth to the narrative. I really appreciated how the book was arranged in five sections. The first section gives the reader an introduction to the history of the shrine, the kami that the shrine is dedicated to, and the people who make the shrine work. The following four sections, one per season, tell the story of the major rituals at the shrine over the course of year. Each chapter usually begins with a description of the shrine on the day of the ceremony, which allows the reader to understand how they might have felt had they arrived at the shrine for the ritual. This reminded me of my own experiences visiting a shrine in Japan. The description also set the mood for the author's descriptions of the rituals that follow.

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