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“SACRED HIGH CITY, SACRED LOW CITY:

A Tale of Religious Sites in Two Tokyo Neighborhoods”

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PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Rationale

This project examines sacred sites in two distinct Tokyo neighborhoods: Akasaka representing the traditional “high city” or Yamanote (literally “in the hills”) section that is currently an upscale, blue-suit business area populated by hi-rise hotels and hi-tech corporations; and Inarichō near Asakusa representing the traditional “low city” or Shitamachi (literally “lower town”) that is a working class area. The relation between the two parts of the city (see map on next page) that has its origins from the early modern period (Tokugawa or Edo era, 1600-1868), as discussed by Edward Seidensticker in *Low City, High City: Tokyo from Edo to the Earthquake* (Tuttle 1983), still greatly affects the quality of urban life and the role of religiosity today.

Two Neighborhoods

In the midst of a decidedly modern urban area, Akasaka is known for featuring several prominent shrines that seem like a throwback to a different era. The image below shows juxtaposed with a modern office building a traditional shrine dedicated to the worship of Inari (rice fertility god often symbolized by a shape-shifting fox). In a couple of cases, the sites are readily apparent to



the pedestrian, including Toyokawa Inari (also known as the Zen temple Myōgonji), which has a display of red lanterns lit up at night, and Hie Sannō Jinja, which is a sprawling complex that spreads near and is considered to protect the Diet Building. But in other cases, there are sites hidden from view down an alley or behind another kind of structure, such as Akasaka Inari Jinja. This shrine, where many weddings are performed with a hotel next door, is located in the back of the home of Gen. Nogi, a famous early twentieth century war hero

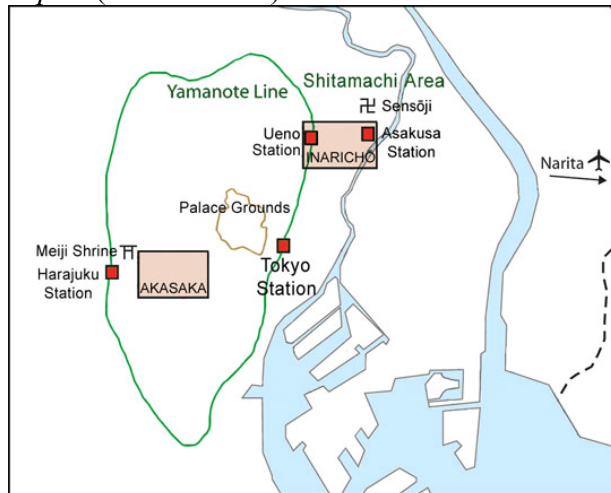
who committed suicide when the emperor died in 1912. All of the sites in this neighborhood are frequented throughout the days of the week by ritual participants who often casually walk in from the street for individual prayer or to take part in festival cycles.

Inarichō (literally “Inari town”), which takes the name of the fox deity, is located near famous Sensōji Kannon Temple in Asakusa (many first-time visitors and even some old-timers conflate this name with cross-town Akasaka) and is also close to Ueno Park, which contains many Edo period temples/shrines as well as modern museums. Traditionally, this area was the home of marginalized people and taboo endeavors ranging from the entertainment/geisha quarters to the shogun’s execution grounds and crematoriums. The association with death derives from the presence in the early modern period of temples which cared for the spirits of the otherwise unprotected deceased such as criminals or young geishas suffering from venereal disease. In a city known for specialty shop areas ranging from electronics, watches, and cameras to Japanese dolls and used books, Inarichō today features a row of over 50 Buddhist and Shinto altar shops selling a variety of ritual accessories. Some stores cater to particular sects while others are pan-sectarian. The row of shops is across the street from another specialty area known as Kappabashi, which houses food ware stores where plastic models are produced.

Nature of Sacrality

In general, Akasaka rituals emphasize life (health and wealth) whereas Inarichō focuses on death (memorials and purification). Despite considerable differences, both neighborhoods reveal the way that remainders of religiosity from early modern Japanese society continue to function and

thrive in contemporary Tokyo. While Tokyo appears highly secularized and antithetical to tradition, it retains a vibrant ritual life that must be sought out amid the evidences of modernity. The appeal of traditional religiosity is what I refer to as “impractical worldly benefits,” a phrase that plays off the title of a recent study of contemporary Japanese rituals by Ian Reader and George J. Tanabe, Jr., *Practically Religious: Worldly Benefits and the Common Religion of Japan* (Hawaii 1998).



Two Tokyo Neighborhoods:
Akasaka in Yamanote and Inarichō in Shitamachi

Using the term “worldly” does not suggest that there is a disbelief in the supernatural or superstition on the part of ritual participants. Certainly, there is ample evidence of the presence of divination, geomancy, exorcism and other rites supporting the view that many modern Japanese remain committed to what might be termed a pre-modern mythical worldview despite embracing other aspects of modernity. This is an area that requires further exploration, but the main point I will focus on is a contrast with the above work’s emphasis on practicality.

Whereas Reader and Tanabe stress the role of seeking to attain practical worldly benefits (*genze riyaku*) in the votive prayers of believers who long for prosperity, longevity, healing, or safety from hazards, my approach stresses that everyday Japanese have additional motives for visiting these locations which are worldly but not necessarily “practical.” In Akakasa, participants seek a reprieve or sanctuary from the hustle and bustle and fulfill a nostalgic drive to touch base with a not-so-forgotten and at times vividly imagined past. In Inarichō, members of various sects Buddhist and Shinto purchase ritual utensils used in a variety of mortuary rites for ancestor veneration, connecting them with memories of the past both in the familial and more general social senses of the term.

Workplan

This proposal requests funds to cover expenses for conducting fieldwork for two weeks during the summer of 2008. Partial funding for airfare to Japan has been committed by my institution, and I seek housing, per diem, local travel in Japan, and materials costs. Over the years, while in Tokyo pursuing Buddhist studies at Tokyo and Komazawa Universities, I have done preliminary research on the Akasaka sites. Some of these findings were partially disseminated over the last couple of years in presentations at Yale University and the annual meeting of the Southern Japan Seminar, among other venues. They also form part of a chapter in a new book dealing with Zen Buddhist rituals, *Zen Skin, Zen Marrow: Will the Real Zen Buddhism Please Stand Up?* (Oxford 2007), since one of the Inari sites in Akasaka is actually a Zen temple.

Now, I plan to expand significantly the scope of this research by focusing on Inarichō, which I have visited but not had a chance to study in depth. The goal will be to produce a major article for an outlet such as the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* and to begin planning a book project on the topic of sacred space in Tokyo.