Stephen Robertson*

Hope that sustains: revisiting New Year’s divination at Suwa Taisha

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Abstract: This paper details the “cylinder-gruel rite” (tsutsugayu shinji) observed annually on 15 January at Suwa Taisha, a Shintō shrine complex in Nagano Prefecture. The oracular ritual is an instance of the Japanese tradition of New Year’s divination (toshiura), and involves the boiling of hollow reeds or bamboo in rice gruel to augur crop yields and economic prospects for the coming year. Whereas Japan’s modernization and shift away from an agricultural economy has rendered such observances archaic, their continued practice cannot be explained solely by their heritage value as survivals of pre-modern tradition. Careful analysis of the Suwa oracle’s formal structure within the frame of Shintō practice reveals that the ritual works to intimate a transcendent sociality, an infallible source of divinatory revelation that provides a sustaining source of hopeful momentum. Consideration of the documentary history of the ritual further suggests the ways that the ritual has been leveraged by various actors throughout history to support imagined aspirational trajectories. Following Zigon’s anthropological critique that hope does not obviate human agency but necessitates and sustains it, this paper discusses the possible implications of these generative/sustaining and imagined/instrumental modes for an anthropological engagement with hope.

Keywords: rice gruel divination, Suwa Taisha, hope, ritual practice

Apollo […] may well be familiar with vapours and oracles, but has conquered them and has them serving in his temple. (Ernst Bloch 1995 [1959]: 103)

1 Introduction: intimations, disaster, and hope

On 14 March 2011, in the wake of the disasters triggered by the Great East Japan Earthquake, Tokyo’s then-Governor Ishihara Shintarō notoriously characterized
the manifold crisis as a “heavenly punishment” (tenbatsu) sent to cleanse Japan of the sin of pervasive material desire. Ishihara’s rhetoric, sharply criticized by a public unwilling to see the tragedy moralized in such a bald fashion, was nevertheless neither alone nor unprecedented in framing the catastrophe in cosmological terms (Komano 2011; Rambelli 2014). Less controversially, and certainly less sententiously, this supernatural trope was also echoed in fancifully speculative and retrospective claims that the disaster had been foretold months earlier in an instance of the ancient Japanese custom of New Year’s rice gruel divination (kayu-ura).

On the morning of 15 January, the Shintō shrine complex of Suwa Taisha [the Grand Shrines of Suwa] in Nagano Prefecture had marked the annual observance of its oracular “cylinder-gruel rite” (tsutsugayu shinji), a custom once believed to augur crop yields and other economic prognoses for the coming year. The following day, local and regional news media carried a summary of the oracle’s results, quoting the interpretation proffered by the shrine’s deputy chief priest (gon-gūji), Kitajima Kazunori:

> The reeds exhibited a different aspect than usual, remaining adrift in the kettle whereas they normally come to rest. This bodes a frightful year […] All will begin well, but I would ask that we take care that our feet not be swept out from under us. (Shimosuwa Shimin Shinbun 16 January 2011, p. 1)

It is more in the nature of oracles to be celebrated for predictions that bear out as accurate than to be doubted for their failures, and in the normal course of events, it seems unlikely that this statement would have attracted further comment. In hindsight of the 2011 disaster, the oracular statement’s seemingly uncanny accuracy attracted the attention of the national tabloid press (perhaps partly as a distraction from the then still-unfolding crisis), burnishing the aura of efficacy that the oracle has long enjoyed among those willing to entertain (and be entertained by) its intimations.

For those not so willing, however, it would be fair to ask what, if anything, to make of this episode. How should we understand the priest’s words and their reach? It might be tempting to suggest that the priest’s exegesis was somehow channelling a wider societal malaise that has accompanied the metaphorical “liquefaction” of Japan’s economic and social foundations under the global regime of twenty-first century neoliberalism, as the contemporary Japanese zeitgeist has recently been characterized (Allison 2013). To do so, however,

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1 See, for example, the article “Nagano Suwa Taisha kyōji yogen” (‘Calamitous prophecy at Suwa Taisha in Nagano’) in the 29 March 2011 issue of Tōkyō Supōtsu (p. 10), a popular daily sports tabloid with a circulation of over two million.
would be to make the same error of attribution as believing that the oracular message referred to the literal liquefaction of the 3/11 disaster, circling back to impose meaning after the fact in the service of a jaded present. In this paper, I seek a different route to answering this deceptively simple question, with a slight nudge from recent anthropological approaches to the interrelated phenomena of divination and hope.

For anthropologists, mantic practices have long offered insight into alternate ways of apprehending the world, as locally variable techniques of knowledge production. Martin Holbraad (2012: 55) refers to this as the analytical challenge posed by the “alterity of divinatory truth,” inherently non-intuitive for outsiders. Holbraad’s provocative analysis of Cuban divination practice, critiquing the traditional analytical vectors of social function, symbolic expression, and rationality, takes seriously the idea that the truth value of oracular pronouncements is axiomatic – that “what makes divinatory verdicts worth interpreting in the first place is the fact that they must be true” simply by virtue of their being understood as oracular (Holbraad 2012: 70). Taking my cue from Holbraad, in this paper, I contextualize the Suwa oracle in order to understand its purported infallibility in the event, rather than as proven true by post hoc interpretation. In doing so, however, I am not suggesting a perspective incommensurable with rational thought. David Sneath (2009), writing in a similar vein to Holbraad on the divinatory practice of scapulimancy in contemporary Mongolia, notes how traditional practices, as “technologies of the imagination,” are not mutually incompatible with more recognizably modern processes – a point he illustrates by comparison with the introduction of electric light in the Soviet era. The historical experience of the Suwa oracle bears out Sneath’s observations in the Japanese case, as we shall see.

While it is neither practical nor necessary here to undertake a review of the vast anthropological literature on divination (for which see Holbraad 2012: Ch. 2), it is worth mentioning that rice gruel divination is but one of many forms of divination observed in Japan (see Picone 1995). Yet unlike the impromptu readings characteristic of more familiar commercialized modes of fortune-telling (see, e.g., Kawano 1995; Suzuki 1995), gruel oracles are almost exclusively observed in accordance with prescribed calendars of institutionalized religious observance, usually in Shintō shrines and (more rarely) Buddhist temples, even though their archaic nature situates them ambiguously vis-à-vis contemporary orthodoxies. Predictive rather than diagnostic, gruel divinations are a subset of the wider Japanese phenomenon of yoshuku, “celebrations in anticipation” of harvests to come. This calendrical context and prevenient situation relative to their object, mean that such observances are necessarily informed
by attitudes of hope or anxiety toward the future that are generally accessible (Stafford 2007: 63).

As an analytical vector, therefore, hope would seem a promising line of approach to understanding the oracle on its own terms. Helpful in this regard is the critique advanced by Jarrett Zigon (2009), responding to recent engagements by Vincent Crapanzano (2003, Crapanzano 2004) and Hirokazu Miyazaki (2004, Miyazaki 2006), that hope need not be a passive or exclusively future-oriented disposition, but may rather be characterized as a resource to sustain day-to-day perseverance on the one hand, and reflective ethical/intentional (instrumental) action on the other. Zigon’s insight that hope “is a resource that can be called upon not only for perseverance, but also for the activity needed to maintain this perseverance” (Zigon 2009: 259) is informed by explicit discourses of hope he encountered among his Muscovite interlocutors. While I shall leave further discussion of hope to the final section, the resonances of these discourses, encapsulated in the Russian maxim “You can put your hopes in God, but you still have to act” (Zigon 2009: 259), will be readily apparent in the agrarian tradition of Japanese rice gruel divination described here.

This paper also affords the chance to elaborate a particularly understudied technique of divinatory practice in its ethnographic and historical context. Despite extensive documentation by native observers, scholarly and otherwise, references to Japanese rice gruel divination in European languages have thus far been limited to brief mentions in reference works and broad introductory surveys of Shintō and Japanese folk religion (e.g., Katō 1988 [1935]: 159–162; Takeda 1949 [1943]: 106–110. See also Herbert 1967: 153–154; Ponsonby-Fane 2013 [1953]: 306–308; Satow 1879: 400–401). Conversely, with some few exceptions, more detailed in-depth native treatments tend to eschew interpretation in favour of salvage-style documentation and rapportage, either because their assumed readership is already well-versed in local knowledge, or else perhaps by dint of visiting folklorists’ limited access to local discourses.

The latter reason, in fact, may also explain this want of closer anthropological consideration, namely the difficulty such rituals present for traditional fieldwork. Calendrical observances, naturally, limit opportunities for first-hand observation at more than one occasion in a given year. And while, with careful planning, a lone researcher might take advantage of varied regional circumstances to schedule attendance at two or three instances in a season, any meaningful analysis of the local interpretation and reception of the ritual will be predicated on local access (and familiarity) nurtured through longer engagements. While my own doctoral fieldwork in the Suwa area focused on the imbrications of local community with civil society (Robertson 2012), my interest in and regular attendance at the shrine’s observances over a total of five years...
spent living in the community between 2003 and 2015 afforded me the connections and experience necessary for this project. Thus, rather than a general study, my intention here is to present a single tradition in careful detail, as an exercise in hopeful ethnography.

2 Suwa Taisha’s tsutsugayu oracle

Suwa Taisha is a Shintō shrine located on Lake Suwa, situated in the middle of Nagano Prefecture in central Japan. Suwa District, once proclaimed as the “Switzerland of the Orient” for its precision electronics industry and mountain lakeside setting, has in recent years been increasingly reliant on a flagging secondary industry of smaller workshop-style manufacturing. The shrine, which is believed to date from the early Heian period (794‒1195), is in fact a distributed complex of two twinned sets of shrines on opposite shores of the lake, and is the locus of an eponymous Shintō sect noted for its characteristic and archaic ritual elements (see Faure 2007).

The “cylinder-gruel rite” (tsutsugayu shinji) is one of these elements, though not completely unique to Suwa Shintō. One of many similar rituals observed across central Japan, the oracle takes place over the night of the fifteenth day of the New Year, the traditional “little New Year” (ko-shōgatsu) that once marked the year’s first full moon of Japan’s old lunisolar calendar.2 Preparations begin days or weeks beforehand, while the ritual itself occurs in two stages: the ritual preparation of the gruel on the evening before and the morning divination ritual in which the oracle is interpreted and announced.

2.1 Preparations

As practiced in Suwa, the oracle calls for common reeds (Phragmites australis), though other long-stalked plants such as bamboo or bamboo grass are used elsewhere. Early in the New Year, shrine novices harvest a hundred or so reeds of a standard size from wetlands near the shrine, selecting carefully for sturdy

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2 Rice gruel (kayu or okayu) is an easily digestible preparation of rice much like congee. The Japanese tradition of eating adzuki bean gruel at ko-shōgatsu (also known as mochigayu no sekku, the ‘feast of red-bean gruel’) is associated with fertility and protection, and likely pre-dates the Heian period. A proverbial explanation from the Segen mondō, a sixteenth-century catechism of popular wisdom, links the practice to ancient China (cited in Shimada and Mogi 2004: 42–43).
ness, uniformity of colour, and the absence of blemishes. These are prepared by being pithed and cut to a uniform length, their ends sliced at an angle to facilitate the task of cutting them open during the divination ritual. Once prepared, the cylinders are inspected anew, and those that are too fat, slender, or crooked are winnowed out until only the requisite forty-four remain. These are bound with hemp cord into a sort of mat, then rolled and secured into a bundle, the excess cord being woven to create a handle (see Figures 1 and 2). This method fixes the cylinders into relative position, associating each with a particular crop in an ordered list.

Reeds are referred to variously in Japanese as either ashi or yoshi. In ritual contexts such as this one, the latter appellation is privileged as the more auspicious (the two terms being respectively homonyms for “wickedness” and “goodness”). Reeds are a symbol of divine presence in Shintō and folk religious contexts; reed arrows are fired from bows of catalpa or willow wood to exorcise evil influence, and shrine parishioners pass through hoops of woven reeds (chino-wa) for purification at midsummer. The folklorist Nakayama Tarō (1876–1947), concluding a list of similar examples in a catalogue of “organic and inorganic materials for use in occult practice,” wrote that “I will now leave off from such enumeration, as one might continue with like examples ad infinitum. From these examples possession of reeds will be seen as proof of the deity’s manifest presence, it scarcely needing to be said that this follows from a belief system that recognizes reeds as vested with magical properties” (Nakayama 1930: 185).
2.2 The rite of kindling the fire (hi’ire shinji)

On the evening of 14 January, the ceremony begins when the chief priest (gūji) and other ritual participants (sai’in), cleansed with ritual ablutions, file clockwise in ranked procession around the shrine’s central Hall of Sacred Dance (kagura-den) to take their places before the Hall of Offering and Worship (heihai-den). Here, another purification (shubatsu) is performed on all others who are present (i.e., participants, two parish deacons, and onlookers), as well as on the tsutsugayu-den, a small building on the western edge of the shrine precinct used exclusively for the preparation of the gruel. Reed-cylinders, rice, and adzuki beans for the gruel, also purified, are placed on offering stands (sanbō) before the heihai-den.

After the participants make their obeisances to the shrine deities before the heihai-den in descending order of rank, the gon-gūji distributes the ingredients and bundle to three participants. The procession resumes as these three, holding their charges reverently aloft, are led by a lantern-bearer to the tsutsugayu-den, strung with lights and festive bunting for the occasion. Here, the bearers break away to wait with sharp attention as their fellows precede them through the hall’s lattice doorway. Measuring about 3.3 metres squared (i.e., one tsubo or the area of two standard tatami mats), the small structure is just large enough to accommodate the eight priests, who kneel on circular woven mats around a sunken central hearth.

The lighting of the fire is chiefly the responsibility of the gūji and a senior priest (negi), who sit on the far side of the hearth opposite the doorway. To kindle a pure, spontaneous, and unpolluted flame (imubi), a hardwood spindle or fire-drill (hikiri-gine) and hearth board (hikiri-ita) are used to generate friction to spark a flame (saika or toribi, lit. ‘catch’ fire). First the negi, then the others take turns as necessary rubbing the spindle rapidly between their palms to produce a flame. This may take only minutes or the better part of an hour, depending on conditions. Using a practiced technique, the priests vie with one another to kindle the fire quickly. Once lit, the flame is transferred to a small wand used by the gūji to ignite a bed of dried evergreen needles and hinoki kindling under a waiting kettle.

The ingredients are added and stirred with a large spoon (shamoji), and the reed bundle is lowered into the mixture. As the fire begins to blaze, the priests begin chanting the Shintō Prayer of Great Purification (ōharae no koto-ba) in unison, repeating the litany ten times without pause, each recitation taking about five minutes (see Figure 3). This completes the ceremonial portion of the evening and, if all has gone well, the gūji and gon-gūji retire around ten o’clock. Damped to a steady simmer, the gruel fire is tended overnight by the
other priests in shifts, sometimes accompanied by interested observers, who are allowed to sit in on the midnight vigil. Pending a final inspection of the gruel, the fire is extinguished around three in the morning.

2.3 The rite of the divine oracle (kami uranai shinji)

An hour later, the reed bundle is retrieved from the kettle, still warm, and placed on a stand before the heihai-den along with consecrated offerings of fruit and sake. By about four-thirty, the previous evening’s crowd of parishioners, media, and local notables begin to return, joined by new faces who have arrived to attend the morning’s divination.

At five o’clock, still two hours before dawn, the ceremony begins with a procession that recapitulates that of the previous evening. The reed bundle and offerings are formally presented before the deity, and those assembled uncover and bow their heads as the gūji intones the high-pitched, half-sung cadences of a liturgical prayer (norito). After the dedication of an evergreen sakaki branch (tamagushi) to sanctify the occasion, the gūji returns to his seat.

The reed bundle is taken by the gon-gūji into the heihai-den, where the appointed diviner (either the gon-gūji or a negi) slices open the tough reeds with a traditional workman’s knife (kogatana) to reveal the oracle. The amount of gruel that has seeped into the cylinder signifies the prospective harvest (deki) for the crop associated with each reed.3 The results are ranked using an inter-

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3 In order, these are: Japanese mustard spinach (“bush warbler greens”), early barley, summer daikon radish, barley, potato, mulberry, spring silkworms, early wheat, green pea, common bean, black-eyed pea, eggplant, gourds, hemp, sweet corn, bottle gourd, capsicum/pepper, summer silkworms, autumn silkworms, persimmon, taro, apples, quince, pear, early rice,
pretive rubric of nine possible outcomes, ranging from “utmost of the high” (jō-no-jō) when the gruel has infused the entire reed, through “midst of the middle” (chū-no-chū), to “least of the low” (ge-no-ge) for a reed whose core is empty. Each result is announced in turn and recorded into a ledger by another priest serving as secretary (see Figure 4).

The interpretation of the final reed, said to portend the “state of the world” (sesō or yo no naka) is overseen carefully by the gūji. In contrast to the relative ranking assigned to the others, this final reed is given a numerical score out of five. Interpretive guidelines vary by diviner, more conservative practitioners refraining from giving results over four, which may be seen as “overly positive” (yosugiru), as was reported in 1922 when the oracle returned an unheard-of score of six. Other portents, such as the difficulty of kindling the fire, the movement of the reeds in the kettle, or the consistency of the gruel, may provide additional grist for interpretive nuance.

When the divination is over, the gon-gūji proclaims the tallied results before the deity and assembled onlookers (o-tsuge). The priests make obeisance and the ceremony concludes with the withdrawal of the procession. The onlookers then queue up for a printed copy of the results from the shrine to take home as talismans to place on their household kamidana, or Shintō altar (see Figure 5). For those unable to attend the ceremony, the results are featured each year in local newspapers on the following day.

mid-season rice, glutinous rice, upland rice, tobacco, foxtail millet, barnyard millet, millet, soybean, adzuki bean, autumn daikon radish, Asian ginseng, burdock root, turnip, pickling greens, buckwheat, late-season rice, Chinese yam, and finally the “state of the world.”
At this point, it may be observed that, unlike the kind of individualized fortune-telling that relates future events to personal biographies, the formalized ritual structure of gruel divination suggests that it is a socially generative event, recalling Maurice Bloch’s (1986, Bloch 1992) influential analysis of circumcision rituals in Madagascar. In temporal, spatial, and material terms, the rite is structured as a series of separations: the liminality of the cusp of the year, the overnight vigil, the selection of the reeds from the boundaries of human settlement, the successive purifications undergone by the participants, the manipulation of ritual language, and the shrine precinct itself – all of these elements serve to set the oracle at a remove from everyday experience, intimating the existence of an occulted, collectively imagined alternate world. Though the shrine priests, by virtue of their primacy as ritual actors, may have privileged access, all who attend the ritual and bear witness accept the oracular verdict as being extrinsic to the participants themselves. This point could be elaborated at length, but as we may also recall that the derivation of the Japanese term for divination, _uranai_, has the sense of perceiving “that which is behind, and hence is invisible” (Satow 1879: 425n5), we may reasonably assume a provisional congruence between native interpretations and anthropological theory that should not hinder access to understanding the oracle on its own terms.
3 Contexts of hope: the production of historical records

The earliest references to the use of rice and rice gruel in divinatory contexts in Japan date from the early ninth century CE, and these ancient precedents have been speculatively linked to contemporary practices by folklorists and Shintō scholars since the nineteenth century (see Ban 1909 [1844]). The accuracy of this genealogy notwithstanding, Suwa Taisha’s extensive documentary legacy allows a rare level of insight into the history of its own version of this oracular rite. This section surveys references to the tsutsugayu rite in records dating from the medieval Kamakura shogunate through to the modern period. Rather than simply documenting the successive descriptions of the oracle in shrine records, however, the goal here is to understand the historical contexts of their creation, to understand how the oracle was leveraged toward instrumental goals. While it would be correct to point out that references to the rite generally constitute only a fragment of such materials, the oracle’s manifest inclusion in this wider ritual heritage seems adequate testament to its relevance. Just as the ritual process described in the previous section contributes only partially to a transcendental sociality in Japanese religious practice more generally, even scattered references to the oracle will likewise serve to illuminate the strategies of which they were a part.

3.1 The Kamakura period (1185–1333)

The earliest surviving reference to the oracle, as one of Suwa’s “seven mysteries” (nana-fushigi), is found in an appendix to the “Mourning Code of the Upper Suwa Shrines” (Suwa kamisha buuki-ryō no koto), a catalogue of ritual prohibitions, observances, and customs modelled on the Buddhist “Sutra of Filial Piety” (Bumo on jūgyō) (see Takei 1999). The relevant passage briefly notes the timing of the oracle on the fifteenth day of the New Year, details the cutting, binding, and boiling of reeds, and explains the method of interpretation, and ends with an assertion of popular credence in the oracle’s efficacy on the part of the local populace (domin). Entries for several other mysteries use the term “seeker” (nozomibito, lit. ‘hoping person’) to refer to those pilgrims and worshippers who came to appreciate the shrines’ mysteries.

The document purports to date from 1238, when Kujō Yoritsune (1218–1256), fourth of the Kamakura shoguns (r. 1226–1244), ordered a delegation of monks from Izusan Shrine in Atami to compile the code and undertake a survey of the
“great rites and secrets of Suwa Shintō” (see Takei 1999: 123). Several appendices detail the shrines’ deities, legendary origins, and sacred geographies (seven stones, seven trees, seven mysteries). Interestingly, the shrine at Izusan was patronized by the powerful Hōjō clan, imperial regents from around this period until the end of the Kamakura period (Takei 1999: 125n20). Drawing on the historiography of medieval Suwa, a thesis by Lisa Grumbach relates how the Hōjō began instituting special exemptions for Suwa shrine festivals from 1239. Grumbach interprets the clan’s considerable investment in the shrines over the next century as evidence of an aspiration to develop the shrines as a “central locus through which retainers could express their loyalty to the bakufu [shogunate]” (Grumbach 2005: 178‒186). This earliest attestation of the oracle may thus be situated in the context of an aristocratic clan’s attempt to harness the ritual authority of the shrines in the interests of its temporal power.

3.2 Muromachi period (1336–1573)

With the downfall of the Hōjō at the end of the Kamakura period, however, the shrines’ fortunes waned, and the ritual calendar was curtailed as its priests sought patronage elsewhere (Itō 1979; Takei 2000). Against this backdrop, the mid-fourteenth century saw the production of a celebrated edition of the “Illustrated Tale of the Great and Illustrious Suwa Deity” (Suwa daimyōjin ekotoba, 1356), with which shrine authorities sought to promote the shrines to a wealthy metropolitan aristocracy, and the “Old Record of the Annual Ritual Calendar” (Nennai shinji shidai kyūki, c. 1380s; see Figure 6), a liturgical manual intended for internal use as a record for future generations of priests, detailing ritual offerings, sacred dances (kagura), liturgical prayers (norito), and other ceremonial protocols. The entry for the tsutsugayu oracle in this document refines the sketch contained in the earlier Mourning Code, elaborating instructions that the reeds employed by the oracle should be repurposed from consecrated wands (gohei) used on the eve of the New Year, and that the augured results were to be spoken before the deity in the presence of the assembled clergy and worshippers. The text of a norito is also included, a prayer entreatng the Suwa deity to “banish malign influence to another land before the arrival of the rice spirit” in the coming year (Takei 2000: 187n37).

In the tumultuous final years of the medieval period, the shrines secured the patronage of the Takeda clan in neighbouring Kai (present-day Yamanashi) when the latter forcibly subjected the Suwa clans as vassals. Revering the Suwa deity as a god of martial valour, the Takeda invested heavily in the shrine, restoring many rituals that had fallen out of practice. This brief renaissance
was cut short, however, when the shrines were razed by Oda Nobunaga in 1582. Miyachi’s (1937: 394) review of the shrine’s historical documents indicates that observance of the tsutsugayu oracle at the Upper Shrines fell off around this period, its prospective thanksgiving (yoshuku) function later absorbed in the Edo period by a sacred paddy revel (ta-asobi) celebrated at rice-planting time. Today, a plaque and small enclosure mark the supposed former site of a tsutsugayu hall at Honmiya, the principal of the two Upper Shrines.

3.3 Edo period (1603–1868)

It was not until the late eighteenth century that the shrines were able to recover. The heihai-den that now grace the Lower Shrines, Akimiya and Harumiya (both designated Important Cultural Properties of Japan in 1983), were completed in 1780 as architectural testaments to this revival. It was thus in what must have been an atmosphere of hopeful renewal that the priests of the Lower Shrine produced the “Protocols for the Ceremonies of the Shrines of Lower Suwa” (Shimosuwa jinja saiten-shiki, 1778), a ritual almanac containing the earliest surviving reference to the oracle in the context of the Lower Shrines (Kanie 2004: Document 84; also see Municipality of Shimosuwa 1985–1990, vol. 3: 1091–1092).

This document, proclaiming anew the oracle’s infallibility, specifies the forty-two crops then augured by the oracle (distinguished from those of the modern oracle by an absence of fruits and the presence of many more varieties of rice). The text also specifies the time of the observance (“at the Spring Shrine
at the Hour of the Hare” – i.e., between 5 and 7 a.m.) and gives instruction on the selection and preparation of the reeds, noting that while formerly sent from Kai, the reeds were now harvested in the Suwa region. The reputation of the oracle attracted farmers and other interested pilgrims from well beyond the local area, and a vivid first-hand account of the 1784 oracle remains, penned by the traveller, physician, and amateur ethnologist Sugae Masumi (1754–1829).4

3.4 Modern Japan (1868–1945)

As a part of the Meiji government’s re-organization of Shintō as a state-sponsored religion, the Upper and Lower Shrines were unified in May of 1871 as Suwa Jinja and ranked as an Intermediate National Shrine (kokuhēi chūsha). The following year, Iwamoto Naokata (1835–1907), a former samurai retainer from Takashima Domain (as Suwa District had been known through the Edo period) and a student of national learning (kokugaku) in the tradition of Hirata Atsutane, was appointed negi at the newly integrated shrine, where he became gūji in 1873. Iwamoto spent his career advocating the elevation of the Suwa shrines to the highest rank of Grand Imperial Shrine (kanpei taisha), an ambition posthumously fulfilled in 1916.5 Where the touchstone pre-war histories of the shrine (Itō 1979; Miyachi 1937) refer to the Suwa oracle in the modern period, their descriptions are based on the ritual almanacs drawn up by Iwamoto and his colleagues in their bid to improve the shrines’ national standing (Iwamoto 1985 [c. 1904]: 147–148; Yashiro and Nobukawa 1985 [c. 1875]: 66–67).

Japan’s rapid modernization at the end of the nineteenth century under the slogan of “civilization and enlightenment” (bunmei kaika) understandably gave scant credence to the oracular claims of gruel divination, and efforts were made to recast such practices as superstition. An illustrative example is provided by none other than the Meiji intellectual, educator, and diplomat Nitobe Inazō (1862–1933), best known as the author of Bushidō, his treatise on samurai ethics. A German-trained agricultural economist, Nitobe sought to discredit gruel divination in his Discourse on Agriculture (Nōgaku honron) by comparing the results of gruel oracles at Afuri Jinja and Kawawa Jinja, two celebrated shrines located only twenty kilometres apart from each other in Kanagawa Prefecture.

4 Sugae’s (1971) account quotes contemporary pilgrims’ awe at the oracle’s alleged prediction of the previous year’s disastrous eruption of Mount Asama, which killed thousands and indirectly prolonged a famine that claimed more lives than even the 2011 disasters.

5 Tanigawa (2008: 146–160) details Iwamoto’s petitions toward the Meiji state on educational and religious policy.
The discrepancies in their auguries, he argued, were conclusive testament to the spuriousness of their claims (Nitobe 1898: 254‒257).\(^6\)

Such enlightened efforts came to naught, however, in the face of Shintō’s ascendancy. Within the newly rationalized Shintō hierarchy, archaic gruel oracles were positioned as “distinctive rites” (tokushu shinji), embraced but kept separate from more orthodox protocols. A sense of the continuing significance of these observances during this period is suggested by the elaboration of a similar rite at Toga Shrine in Aichi Prefecture. The shrine’s chronicle reports that, in 1920, talismanic placards printed with the outlooks for the twenty-seven crops augured by the shrine’s gruel oracle were distributed to households in three parish districts in acknowledgement of hatsuho (lit. ‘first fruits’; i.e., donations signifying a household’s initial rice harvest). From 1922, such placards were distributed free of charge to 130,000 households across ten surrounding districts (Toga Jinja 2012 [1944]). Similar placards at Haruna Shrine in Gunma Prefecture were printed and distributed throughout the Kantō region by religious confraternities (kō).\(^7\) In Suwa, over a thousand onlookers attended the 1933 oracle, by which time the observance had been paired with a nagemochi (‘rice-cake throwing’) component, wherein pressed cakes of pounded glutinous rice (mochi) were thrown to the assembled crowd as a lottery for distributing good fortune (Nanshin Nichinichi Shinbun 16 January 1933). Throughout this phase of the oracle’s history, the names and neighbourhoods of the three “fortunate ones” (kōunsha) who caught particularly auspicious cakes (regarded as such by virtue of being branded with the “state of the world,” the referent of the final reed), were regularly featured in local newspaper coverage.

### 4 Contemporary representations

#### 4.1 Post-war newspaper coverage

The incipient tradition of publishing the oracular results in local newspapers continued regularly after the Second World War. This coverage reveals an ongoing fascination with the tsutsugayu ritual and other traditional observances, usually in the frame of “local interest stories” designed to appeal (sometimes self-ironically) and to contribute to collective identity discourses. As “local

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\(^6\) Like the Suwa oracle, however, the tradition remains active at both shrines.

\(^7\) See Aston (1905: 341‒342). On a recent visit to Haruna Shrine, I was told that the print run for 2014 was 3,000 copies.
readings of local experience” (Geertz 1973), such stories may also be read as instances of the manipulation of what Sneath (2009: 79) describes as “metonymic fields” – i.e., “schema that invite the attribution of pattern and interpretative narrative” – by relating local identity with national discourse in the contingent context of a globalizing world.

Coverage follows a more or less predictable pattern, with a run-down of the year’s results on 16 January, often accompanied by a photograph of the shrine priests seated around the tsutsugayu kettle (see Figure 3). Historic or unusual occasions merit special attention, such as with the rebuilding of the old tsutsugayu-den in 1958, the filming of the oracle for television broadcast in 1961 (by the Tokyo-based studio TBS), a visit by officials from the Agency for Cultural Affairs in 1978, ongoing difficulties securing reeds due to the development of the lakeshore (1977 and 1981), as well as the purchase of a new kettle in 1985. Otherwise, the rote, almost boiler-plate coverage of the oracle year on year is quite in keeping with the cyclical regularity of the observance itself.

A contrasting diachronic counterpoint, on the other hand, emerges in the editorial propensity to interpret the augury of the final reed, the “state of the world,” in the light of global events, even amidst repeated affirmations of the oracle’s obsolescence at the dawn of the space age. A full-page article featuring in the New Year’s Day edition of the Kokoku Shinbun for 1964, for example, expressed the hope that the annual oracle might augur the best possible results in time for the Tokyo Olympics. Coverage in 1972 suggests waggishly that shrine elders might face some difficulty reconciling the previous year’s buoyant augury with the economic disruption of the “Nixon Shock” of 1971, which had seen the rapid appreciation of the yen in the wake of the US departure from the Bretton Woods system. A one-point drop in the outlook for 1980 over the previous year was reported anxiously in light of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and Iranian Revolution in 1979. Articles in the 1980s, harking back to a string of favourable results through the late 1960s and 1970s, salute the oracle’s insight and ruminate as to whether the national weal might recover to the level enjoyed during that golden period of rapid economic growth. Such playful references evoke contemporary anxieties and suggest the hope of transcending them, prospectively through the purported truth of the oracle as well as retrospectively through the cultural and historical identity encoded in the tradition itself.

4.2 Lessons of hope

Less frequent than these imaginative narratives, though perhaps more sincere, is the coverage of the priests’ oracular interpretations, which came to feature
regularly after the 1990s. It is only in these homilies that hope is explicitly acknowledged as a key theme in the contemporary significance of the oracle as seen by its stewards, specifically with reference to the relationship between hope and human effort. This relevance is first suggested early in the post-war period in an invited column written by Miyasaka Kiyomichi (1914–1973), a historian and negi at Suwa Taisha:

I have myself taken part in this rite, and trembled before the oracle’s magnificence. Yet even now, as farming households turn gradually to scientific agriculture, I pray this year of all years that, as we seek a superior path to increased crop production, we might adopt a spirit of great hope, sustained by the agrarian faith handed down from our forefathers. (Minsei Shinbun 16 January 1953)

For Miyasaka, the “spirit of great hope” that he implores readers to adopt (“ōki-na kibō o motte seishin shite itadakitai”) is a continuation of the hope (koinegai) that he elsewhere ascribes to the pre-modern seekers who looked to the oracle for the promise of the rice-spirit’s revival in the New Year (Miyasaka 1980). He sees no contradiction between hope in the oracle and the active striving for technological advancement; the latter, rather, is sustained by the former. The magnificence of the oracle does not in itself deny the efficacy of human agency or promote passivity, but rather provides motivation with a future promise that can only be realized through sustained effort (doryoku). This is consistent with Zigon’s (2009: 267) discussion of hope as the enabling “energy” that allows people to act in their daily lives.

In the same way that Reader and Tanabe (1998: 108–112) have discussed the Japanese distinction between “good luck” (kōun) and “moral luck” (kai-un) – the kind of fortune that favours the prepared – an oracular promise of bounty is not the promise of reward without effort, nor a calamitous one a sentence of impotence. The implicit mechanics of this interpretation, affirmed in my own discussions with shrine priests, are illustrated by an early twentieth-century explanation of the gruel oracle of Nukisaki Shrine in Gunma Prefecture: “Farmers revere the divine oracle (shintaku), exercising extreme caution with those crops that ‘stride low’ in the hope of increasing yields, and planting extra of the crops that ‘stride high’ angling for a bumper crop [...] Thus, all unawares, are they encouraged in their labours” (Yajima 1909: 2–3).8

More recent oracular interpretations bear out this complementary, rather than oppositional, relationship between hope and effort:

8 Importantly, this does not deny the possibility of the oracle’s instrumental exploitation, and may suggest a reason for the spread of such rituals during the agrarian consolidations of the early Edo period, a question I intend to develop elsewhere.
Gauging from the crops, there seems little promise for the economy. Even so, we may not rest assured simply because the omens are good, nor can we lose heart simply because they are bad; effort is required in either case. (*Shimosuwa Shimin Shinbun*, 16 January 2005, p. 1)

We humans, who live amidst nature’s bounty, will put ourselves on the right path by honouring its blessings [...] Even so, it is not enough simply to drift at leisure; we must not neglect care and effort. (*Shimosuwa Shimin Shinbun*, 16 January 2007, p. 1)

It seems all things will begin well [...] and it appears that we may grow short of breath and find progress painful in the latter half of the year [...] Yet if we are constantly prepared and proceed prudently in all things [...] they will turn out well. (*Nagano Nippō*, 16 January 2012)

In other words, there is no effort without hope; no hope without effort. The two sustain each other. This interpretation suggests that the disenchantment of the oracle is of no import in terms of its practical and social significance; there is no mutual exclusivity between the promise of divine bounty and hopeful striving in a secular world. For Miyasaka, writing in the 1950s, hope was envisioned as a buttress (*urazuke*) for the collective effort that would drive Japan’s emergence as a democratic state economy. In 2011, the oracular warning “not to be swept off our feet” may be understood as an entreaty to his listeners not to lose hope in the face of overpowering adversity, but to continue striving, and in that striving find hope.

## 5 Anticipating a future: an evening by the fire

Having approached the oracle on its own terms, we may now with some confidence affirm the validity of the interpretation that the Suwa oracle, in popular discourse, opens an imagined field for projecting collective hopes and anxieties in a globalizing world, and that, from the priests’ point of view, the oracular message is one of sustaining hope for living day to day. A final question, then, is how the ritual is consumed by those who attend it. To this end, I will quote the following ethnographic vignette gleaned from my field notes after attending the evening component of the ritual in January of 2014:

A full moon tonight. At the shrine, I recognize some faces from earlier visits. Mr. Hattori, a retired engineer and amateur photographer I know as a deacon at a neighbourhood shrine in a neighbouring city is here in his capacity as a parishioner and blogger of local events, jostling for space with dozens other shutterbugs and professional media. Tomonori, an old student of mine, is now fourteen and a junior high school student. He is here for the fifth time. He has joined the shrine’s *gagaku* [sacred Shintō music] troupe
as a flute player, and has his heart set on training to become a Shintō priest after high school. With a fan’s enthusiasm, he eagerly shares an encyclopaedic knowledge of the significance of the observance, the ranks of the priests, and the ritual regalia.

As we wait, I introduce myself to other visitors. A grey-haired lady I fancy to be a farmer – her diminutive hunched frame and sturdy winter clothing evoking a hardy, pragmatic life – turns out to be the outgoing chair of a local volunteer tourism guide association. She has lived all her life just across the river from the shrine, often intending to but never quite managing to take in the oracle. Her retirement has spurred her to bring her successor along, that she might have first-hand knowledge to interpret local heritage for the busloads of tourists who visit the shrine on weekends. Another woman, visiting from Yokohama, has come to experience the atmosphere of the oracle at a friend’s recommendation. Curious as to my own interest in Shintō, she urges me to visit a certain shrine in Chiba Prefecture, another “power spot” for mystical sensibilities.

The fire is lit, and as the eight priests chant the Prayer of Great Purification, I find a photocopy of the norito placed into my hand by Mr. Saito, another volunteer guide (the director of a district-wide guide certification program, in fact). He pushes these on chilled but excited onlookers, providing jocular encouragement in a (mostly unsuccessful) attempt to lead us along with the humming dirge of the priestly chorus. With him is Emisanc, a trainee guide in her forties. Born in Kansai, she spent her twenties in the USA and her thirties in Tokyo, and has now joined the “i-turn” trend, leaving urban Japan for a slower-paced life in the countryside. Apprenticing with Mr. Saito is her way of learning about the local area herself. They introduce me to Hanaoka-san, in his twenties, self-proclaimed “Suwa otaku” and the organizer of a fan convention centred on the “Touhou Project” (Tōhō purojekuto, aka “Project Shrine Maiden”), a series of video games and themed products featuring plots and characters that draw heavily on the mythos associated with Suwa Taisha.9

This vignette suggests that, while not explicitly foregrounded in the minds of my informants, hope may yet be seen implicitly in their own interactions with the oracle, if not in the sustaining sense discussed above, then in the instrumental sense of a symbolic resource for achieving imagined future goals – career, community development, self-realization, or creative accomplishment. The conspicuous presence of tour guides in 2014, hoping to leverage the shrine’s ritual heritage in service of a wider tourism-based economy (an aspiration that to some degree also informs the heavy media presence), parallels the ways in which the oracle has appeared through history in shrine records, as a strategic resource for worldly advancement.

Yet even if those whom I spoke with did not spontaneously elaborate their own ideas about hope, it remains striking how closely the sustaining hope of oracular revelation tracks with Zigon’s formulation of hope as the enabling condition for perseverance in daily life, and for maintaining that perseverance in the face of moral adversity. I hinted in the introduction that such an ideology

9 Pseudonyms used.
of hope is particularly well suited to agrarian traditions such as the one discussed here and presumably, if perhaps at a further remove, that of Zigon’s Muscovite interlocutors and their forebears. In light of this sympathy, it is worth pausing to wonder how Zigon’s formulation might be reconciled with other modes of production, such as for example the foraging of the Vezo fishing people of Madagascar, whose “disposition and willingness to be ‘surprised’ at every unfulfillment of their hopes about production preserves this hope [...] So long as one is prepared to be ‘surprised’ when things go wrong, one can continue to hope that things will never go wrong again and act accordingly” (Astuti 1991: 101; cited in da Col 2012: 7–8). It remains an open question whether Zigon’s philosophically informed conceptualization offers a valid analytical stance for a comparative approach to hope, or whether it reflects specific historical and cultural predispositions.

Moreover, the interpretation, advanced at the end of Section 2 above, that the “source” of sustaining hope (a question on which Zigon is conspicuously silent) might lie in an imagined sociality generated by communal ritual seems worthy of further anthropological consideration, especially in light of the fact that an attitude of “perseverance” should be regarded as hope’s achievement. This is especially the case if modes of subsistence or production should prove salient to the ways in which hope is conceived. Maurice Bloch’s theory of ritual (Bloch 1986, Bloch 1992), which is also a theory of political ideology, was in part an attempt to understand the role ritual plays in reinforcing relations of hierarchical power. The possible implication, almost Pandoran, that hope’s origins may be found in the same space as the mechanisms of its denial seems a fertile and necessary direction for further study.

References


