



Cultural Heritage, Religious Practice, and Contemporary Tourism in Nishiarai Daishi Temple

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ABSTRACT

Japanese Buddhist temples have long served as centers of both spiritual devotion and cultural interaction, shaping the social and religious fabric of their surrounding communities. This study examines Nishiarai Daishi Temple in Adachi Ward, Tokyo, One of the “Three Great *Kantō Yakuyoke* Monasteries” as a case study of how urban religious institutions in Japan balance sacred tradition with modern cultural and touristic engagement. Founded in 826 CE by the monk Kūkai (Kōbō Daishi), the temple’s origins in esoteric *Shingon* Buddhism and its reputation for protection against misfortune anchor its enduring religious significance. Over centuries, Nishiarai Daishi has evolved into both a pilgrimage destination and a communal hub, integrating architectural symbolism, folk practices, and seasonal aesthetics into its sacred landscape. The temple’s monthly *ennichi* festivals and the *Osame no Daishi* year-end celebration illustrate how ritual practice, local commerce, and social participation interweave to sustain community life and spiritual continuity. These events transform the temple precinct and surrounding streets into liminal spaces where sacred and secular experiences converge. In recent years, guided tours and intercultural programs have expanded Nishiarai Daishi’s role as a site of cultural tourism, allowing international visitors to participate in traditional rituals and experience intangible heritage firsthand. Through historical, ritual, and intercultural analysis, this study argues that Nishiarai Daishi exemplifies the adaptive resilience of Japanese Buddhist institutions. It demonstrates how temples mediate between devotion and display, preserving authenticity while embracing globalization, thereby functioning as living embodiments of Japan’s religious and cultural heritage.

Keywords: Japanese Buddhism, Religious Tourism, Cultural Heritage Preservation, Nishiarai Daishi Temple.

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INTRODUCTION

Japanese Buddhist temples are not only sacred sites but also hubs of cultural interaction, local identity, and heritage tourism. They have historically functioned as loci of religious practice while simultaneously shaping the social and cultural fabric of their surrounding communities.^{1,2} In contemporary Japan, temples remain embedded in both religious devotion and cultural consumption, balancing the preservation of sacred tradition with the demands of modern tourism and globalization.³

Among these, Nishiarai Daishi in Adachi Ward, Tokyo, occupies a unique position as both a spiritual center and a cultural landmark. Officially named *Gochisan Henshōin Sōjiji*, the temple is widely recognized as one of the “Three Great *Kantō Yakuyoke* Monasteries” (*Kantō Sandai Yakuyoke Daishi*), a title that

underscores its long-standing reputation as a site for protection against misfortune and illness.^{4,5} The temple’s history dates back to 826 CE, when the revered monk Kūkai (774–835), also known as Kōbō Daishi, is said to have enshrined an image of the eleven-faced Kannon Bodhisattva in response to a devastating epidemic. Since then, Nishiarai Daishi has developed into both a pilgrimage site and a community focal point, sustaining its prominence through the Edo period and into the present day.⁶

In addition to its religious importance, Nishiarai Daishi serves as a vibrant cultural venue. The monthly *enichi* festivals, and particularly the *Osame no Daishi* held in December, embody the interweaving of sacred ritual, seasonal celebration, and local commerce. Such events create a liminal space where worshippers, residents, and tourists converge, illustrating how temples function as dynamic sites of

religious economy and social life.⁷ As tourism scholars note, the adaptation of ritual spaces into cultural experiences for both domestic and international audiences reflects a broader trend in which Japanese temples act as gateways to intangible cultural heritage.^{8,9}

This study explores Nishiarai Daishi through three analytical lenses: (1) its historical foundation and enduring religious significance, (2) its vibrant festival culture and embedded community practices, and (3) its contemporary role in fostering intercultural exchange through tourism. This paper contributes to the understanding of how urban religious institutions in Japan negotiate the balance between sacred tradition, cultural identity, and global tourism.

Historical Background

The origins of Nishiarai Daishi Temple can be traced back to 826 CE during the Heian



Figure 1.¹⁰ Front Yard of Nishiarai Daishi.

period (794–1185), when the revered monk Kūkai (774–835), also known as Kōbō Daishi, established the site as part of his broader mission to spread Shingon Buddhism in Japan.^{11,12} According to temple tradition, Kūkai carved an image of the eleven-faced *Kannon* (*Avalokiteśvara*) in response to an epidemic that afflicted the local population. This act of compassion not only marked the foundation of the temple but also situated it within the larger discourse of Buddhist healing practices, which were central to the spread of esoteric Buddhism in medieval Japan (Faure, 1998). Since that time, Nishiarai Daishi has been venerated as a locus of spiritual power for protection against disease and misfortune.

During the Edo period (1603–1868), Nishiarai Daishi rose in prominence as part of a broader popularization of pilgrimage culture. The temple became exceptionally well known as a place where women prayed for protection against bad luck and for familial well-being, reflecting broader gendered dimensions of Edo religious practices.¹³ The growth of Edo-period urban centers, coupled with improvements in transportation networks, facilitated the integration of Nishiarai Daishi into a vibrant circuit of pilgrimage destinations within the Kantō region.¹⁴ This accessibility helped to establish the temple as one of the “Three Great *Kantō Yakuyoke* Monasteries,” consolidating its reputation as a powerful site of spiritual protection.

Architecturally, the temple complex

exemplifies the syncretic nature of Japanese religious culture. The *Niōmon* Gate, flanked by guardian statues, reflects the esoteric Buddhist emphasis on protection. At the same time, the *Sansōdō* Hall’s unique design once symbolized a microcosmic pilgrimage through multiple levels of Buddhist cosmology. Meanwhile, the Salt *Jizō* statue, covered with layers of salt offered by devotees, embodies the intertwining of local folk practices with Buddhist devotion, where healing and protection are sought through tactile ritual interaction.¹⁵ The Peony Garden, one of the temple’s celebrated seasonal features, illustrates the aestheticization of sacred space, blending Buddhist cosmology with Japan’s cultural emphasis on seasonal beauty.¹⁶ Together, these architectural and ritual features testify to the enduring adaptability of Nishiarai Daishi, which has long functioned as both a religious sanctuary and a cultural landmark.

Festivals and Ritual Practice

A defining feature of Nishiarai Daishi is its monthly *ennichi* (縁日), held on the 21st of each month in honor of Kōbō Daishi. The practice of *ennichi* or special days believed to have stronger spiritual connections between the divine and devotees, has long been an integral part of Japanese temple and shrine culture.³ At Nishiarai Daishi, the *ennichi* not only reinforces devotional practices but also sustains a recurring cycle of religious engagement between the temple and the community.

Among these events, the Osame no

Daishi on December 21st is the most significant. Known as the final *ennichi* of the year, it serves as both a ritual closure and a preparation for the New Year. Large crowds gather to participate in temple rites, including incense purification (*jōkō*), drawing fortunes (*omikuji*), and the *goma* fire ceremony. On the *goma* fire ceremony, a Shingon Buddhist would conduct ritual of burning wooden tablets as an offering to deities, intended to dispel misfortune and invite blessings.¹ These practices embody the dual function of the temple as both a site of personal spiritual renewal and a locus of collective community protection.

The approach to the temple through *Shoueikai* shopping street further amplifies the festive atmosphere. Visitors encounter stalls selling *senbei* rice crackers, roasted beans, and *daruma* dolls, which themselves carry layers of ritual and symbolic significance in Japanese culture.³ These commercial activities extend the ritual space beyond the temple precincts, transforming the neighborhood into a liminal zone where sacred and secular experiences converge. Turner’s (1969) theory of liminality is particularly relevant here: festival days create a temporary suspension of ordinary social roles, enabling communal solidarity and intercultural exchange between locals and visitors.¹⁷ Thus, the festival and ritual practices at Nishiarai Daishi exemplify the interweaving of religion, commerce, and tourism in contemporary Japan. They reinforce spiritual traditions, sustain local economies, and create opportunities for cross-cultural encounters that enrich both community identity and visitor experience.

Nishiarai Daishi and Intercultural Exchange

Recent initiatives, such as guided tours organized by Emblem Hostel Nishiarai, have emphasized the temple’s potential for cultural tourism. These tours allow international visitors to engage not only as passive observers but as active participants in Japanese religious and cultural practices. Activities such as drawing *omikuji* (fortunes), performing incense purification, and purchasing symbolic souvenirs like *daruma* dolls provide visitors with tangible points



Figure 2.¹⁸ Salt Jizo statue at Nishiarai Daishi.

of cultural contact. Importantly, these practices act as vehicles for transmitting intangible cultural heritage across cultural boundaries.¹⁹

Such initiatives reflect what MacCannell (1999) has described as the “quest for authenticity” in tourism, where visitors seek meaningful encounters that connect them to the cultural essence of a destination. In the case of Nishiarai Daishi, authenticity is not simply staged for outsiders but embedded in centuries-old traditions that continue to attract both local worshippers and global travellers. This convergence of the sacred and the touristic creates a hybrid space of

intercultural dialogue.¹⁷

Moreover, guided experiences mediated by local institutions like Emblem Hostel illustrate the concept of cultural brokerage.²⁰ Staff members act as intermediaries, translating ritual meanings and ensuring respectful participation by visitors. This process not only enriches the foreign visitor’s experience but also contributes to what Smith (2006) terms “performative heritage,” wherein the act of participation becomes a means of sustaining cultural traditions in the contemporary age.²¹

Observations reveal that foreign participants often express both wonder and

educational enrichment when engaging with these practices. Such experiences highlight the temple’s role in fostering intercultural understanding and mutual respect in a globalized Tokyo. Japanese religious heritage sites are increasingly reimagined as transnational cultural assets, serving as platforms for dialogue between Japan and the wider world.²² Nishiarai Daishi thus represents a microcosm of how local religious institutions contribute to global cultural flows while retaining their spiritual and communal significance.

DISCUSSION

Nishiarai Daishi exemplifies how religious institutions in urban Japan adapt to contemporary needs while preserving tradition. The temple maintains its identity as a sacred space rooted in Shingon Buddhist practices, particularly through its monthly ennichi and annual Osame no Daishi festivals, while simultaneously functioning as a cultural and social hub for both residents and tourists. This dual function reflects what Reader and Tanabe (1998) identify as the “pragmatic syncretism” of Japanese religion, in which rituals and institutions adapt flexibly to societal changes without losing their spiritual foundations.

The temple’s festivals further demonstrate the endurance of Buddhist ritual within a modern metropolitan context. The incorporation of ritual practices such as incense purification, omikuji, and goma fire ceremonies ensures the transmission of traditional religious knowledge, while the presence of seasonal flowers and food stalls contributes to the aesthetic and sensory dimensions of the sacred experience. Such practices align with Nelson’s (2013) argument that Japanese religious institutions rely on performative and participatory elements to maintain relevance in an increasingly secularized and urbanized society.

Equally significant is the temple’s integration with local commerce, which sustains a vibrant community economy. The Shouekai shopping street leading to Nishiarai Daishi illustrates how pilgrimage routes often become commercialized cultural corridors, where local specialties such as senbei and daruma dolls gain new meaning as both religious symbols and

tourist commodities. This phenomenon resonates with Graburn's (1989) notion of "tourism as a sacred journey," where consumer practices intertwine with spiritual experiences, blurring the boundaries between devotion and leisure.

At the same time, the increasing popularity of Nishiarai Daishi among international visitors raises questions about the commodification of sacred practices and the negotiation between authenticity and accessibility. As Cohen (1988) observes, tourism often transforms religious rituals into performances for outsiders, creating tensions between local worshippers and global visitors. While guided tours and hostel-organized visits facilitate cultural exchange, they may also risk reframing the temple primarily as a tourist attraction rather than a religious institution.^{23,24} Similar debates have been noted in studies of Kyoto temples (Reader, 2016), where heritage branding and tourist marketing sometimes overshadow spiritual functions. Thus, Nishiarai Daishi becomes a case study in the balancing act between preserving ritual authenticity and engaging with heritage tourism economies.

Nevertheless, Nishiarai Daishi illustrates the resilience and adaptability of Buddhist institutions in contemporary Japan. It not only preserves ritual traditions dating back to the Heian period but also integrates them into a globalized cultural marketplace. This capacity for adaptation is a key reason why Japanese temples continue to thrive as both religious centers and cultural landmarks in urban environments. Conclusion

Nishiarai Daishi is more than a religious site; it is a living cultural institution where spirituality, heritage, and tourism converge. Its historical significance as a center for warding off evil, its dynamic festival culture, and its growing role in intercultural exchange position it as a valuable case study for understanding the evolution of Japanese temples in the 21st century. Future research may further explore the tension between preservation and tourism in sustaining the cultural vitality of such heritage sites.

CONCLUSION

Nishiarai Daishi Temple stands as a multifaceted institution that bridges Japan's religious heritage with its contemporary cultural and touristic realities. Rooted in the esoteric Shingon Buddhist tradition since the Heian period, the temple continues to serve as a locus of spiritual devotion, community interaction, and cultural expression. Its historical role as a place of healing and protection has evolved into a broader function that integrates religious ritual, local identity, and intercultural engagement. The temple's monthly ennichi and the annual Osame no Daishi festivals sustain the spiritual life of the community while also generating spaces of social cohesion and economic vitality through ritual performance, local commerce, and tourism.

In the modern context, Nishiarai Daishi also functions as a hub for cultural tourism, offering domestic and international visitors' opportunities to engage with living Japanese traditions. Through guided tours and participatory rituals such as incense purification, omikuji, and goma fire ceremonies, the temple becomes a site for both religious practice and cultural learning. These practices exemplify how sacred spaces adapt to globalization by fostering mutual understanding and respect across cultures. However, as the discussion highlights, this adaptation requires a delicate balance between maintaining ritual authenticity and accommodating the commodifying forces of tourism. The case of Nishiarai Daishi demonstrates the ongoing negotiation between sacred preservation and cultural performance, as a negotiation that is emblematic of many religious heritage sites in Japan today.

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