

AT THE INTERSECTION OF PROFIT AND THE SACRED: AN ANALYSIS OF ISE DAI KAGURA FROM THE BUSINESS MODEL PERSPECTIVE

Carmen SĂPUNARU-TĂMAȘ¹
Masanao KAWAKAMI²

*If money doesn't matter to gods, why isn't their
Temple made from sticks and clay?*
Trudy Canavan

Abstract

This paper is a multidisciplinary approach (business and anthropology) to the analysis of a Japanese enterprise closely associated with the sacred: Ise Dai Kagura, an itinerant group of artists who at the same time perform sacred rituals, and who are currently a designated intangible cultural property in Japan.

The current study looks at the Ise Dai Kagura group from the business model perspective, attempting to analyze the mechanism that ensured the economic survival of these groups across centuries. How did they develop a business model starting from prayer and performance? What type of profit generation does their business follow? How is it sustainable in the 21st century—is it self-supporting or is it based on government support? These are some of the questions that are addressed (and hopefully answered) in this paper, using both ethnographic and business model tools.

Keywords: business model, performance, profit, sacred, Kagura.

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1. Business and the Sacred

And Jesus went into the temple of God, and cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the moneychangers, and the seats of them that sold doves, and said unto them, It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves. (Matthew 21:12-13 King James Version)

The paragraph above is probably one of the most quoted parts of a sacred text when it comes to arguing that the sacred is just that, sacred, and should never be tainted by associations with profane endeavors whose only purpose is profit and benefit in the daily world of flesh and blood. Nevertheless, a quick glance at world history shows that religious practices and behavior that leads to the accumulation of wealth are two

¹ Carmen Săpunaru-Tămaș, University of Hyogo, tamas@em.u-hyogo.ac.jp.

² Masanao Kawakami, University of Hyogo, kawakami@em.u-hyogo.ac.jp.

of the most consistent patterns in the evolution of *Homo sapiens sapiens*, and it is interesting to note that neither is essential for the survival of the species. Our society is hierarchy-based, and the way to the very top goes through wealth, religion, or an interconnectedness of both, which means that the theoretical principle proposed by the *New Testament* has been consistently contradicted by social practices across history.

The "love of money" is seen as "the root of all evil" in the *New Testament* (*First Letter of Paul to Timothy* 6:10), yet the Roman Catholic Church is one of the most powerful religious institutions in the world, which also makes it one of the wealthiest organizations. Estimating the overall wealth of the Catholic Church appears almost impossible, but the limited research done on Vatican (its core) shows that "per capita GDP of the Vatican is estimated to be \$21,198, making Vatican City the 18th wealthiest nation in the world per capita." (Hund, 2022) More concrete information is available for the Romanian Orthodox Church (part of the second biggest branch of Christianity, the Eastern Orthodox Church) which, according to the data published by the Ministry of Public Finances, had a revenue of one billion lei (over 200 million euro at the current exchange rate). The wealth of religious organizations has also represented a perpetual bone of contention with the secular institutions of various states, a clear example being a law promulgated in 1863 in the United Principalities of Moldova and Wallachia, which transferred the land owned by churches and monasteries into the property of the state. It is worth mentioning that at that time, the revenue of the Church represented one-sixth of the entire country budget³.

The universality of human patterns of thought and behavior becomes apparent if we look towards Japan, where a similar phenomenon intersected the economic and religious spheres. Starting with the Nara Period (8th century CE), Buddhism followed an ascending economic path in Japan, developing what Randall Collins calls "religious capitalism" (Collins, 1997: 852) only for the Buddhist temples and monasteries to lose their lands and many of their assets during the secularization act implemented by the Meiji government in 1871. The difference in the two political acts that transformed private property (belonging to religious organizations) into government property lies in the fact that the Orthodox Church remained an important (and influential) institution in the Romanian Principalities, while the Meiji government "aimed at the elimination of Buddhism's influence on society in order to construct a new political and social order." (Hotta, 2012: 61) The religious persecution did not last long, however, and in the 21st century Japan there are 85,000 Buddhist institutions which "contribute significantly to the Japanese economy by circulating economic transactions between individuals, temples, organizations, external stakeholders, and the state." (Borup, 2022: 43)

³ Official data provided by the Romanian Orthodox Church

The examples above are just a few aspects related to the continuous connection between religion and business/ economy, a relationship that has remained more consistent across millennia than the one between sacred texts and their practical enactment through ritual, which has undergone considerable changes over time. Research on the relationship between the sacred and the secular, religion and the state, religion and economy, spirituality and business is extensive, and a comprehensive review is not the purpose of this paper. Regardless of their declared purpose and proposed ideals, almost, if not all, religious organizations function based on economic principles which lead to some kind of profit. This statement can be easily verified in an empirical manner: enter a church, or temple, or any other type of place of worship, and you will see that monetary transactions are present in one form or another, be they entrance fees, requests for donations, fees for special prayers, the sale of candles, incense, religious images, and the list could continue. Of interest of us here is the business model upon which these organizations are established and/ or continue to exist. Collins (Collins, 1997: 853) explains how Buddhist temples in the early Middle Ages influenced Japanese economy and the expansion of Japanese society in general by widening markets for commodities (providing places for artisans and craftsmen to ply their trade) and by engaging in foreign trade. While not ignoring the wide array of social, political, and economical factors that led to this particular context, we must emphasize the fact that this phenomenon was possible at a time when (not only in Japan, but in most parts of the world as well), religious institutions were also learning and educational centers, affecting a strong influence on political leaders.

What happens, however, in a secular contemporary society, when economic trends are no longer contingent upon religious factors? How do religious organizations survive and make a profit (if any)? The present paper will attempt to offer a partial answer to these questions by applying business model analysis to an itinerant religious group, Ise Dai Kagura.

2. Ise Pilgrimages and the Tourist Business

Ise Jingû (or Jingû in its official denomination, as it signifies THE Grand Shrine on the Japanese religious map) is a complex of 125 shrines in Ise City, Mie Prefecture which represent the absolute core of the Shinto tradition, “the most revered shrine in Japan” according to the Association of Shinto Shrines. While the date when the Ise Shrines were founded is debatable (the official website only offers the mythological version of its establishment, approximately 2,000 years ago, as a consequence of a prophetic dream in which the sun goddess Amaterasu showed herself to an imperial princess), there are historical records related to pilgrimages to Ise dating more than 1,000 years ago. Discussing the system of beliefs centered on the Ise Shrine Complex, Masayuki Nakanishi states that “even as early as the 934 Kanname Festival, the *Daijingû shozôjiki* records that the shrine attracted ‘100,000 pilgrims from all walks

of life.’ The Kamakura period work *Kanchûki* (1287), records the following passage, relating a tremendous number of visitors: ‘Pilgrims came to visit the shrine from every corner of the country, and it is impossible to count how many tens of millions there were.’” (Kokugakuin University Shinto Encyclopedia <https://d-museum.kokugakuin.ac.jp/eos/detail/?id=9029>)

Throughout centuries of changes and historical and social turmoil, visiting the Ise Shrines has remained a constant in the religious life of the Japanese, with records showing that one tenth of the Japanese population during the Edo Period made the pilgrimage. Just like the medieval Buddhist temples mentioned above created new markets and expanded the existing ones, the Ise center of Shinto worship became the starting point of a flourishing tourist business largely managed by *onshi* 御師, a type of low-ranking priests who became both intermediaries between the Shrine and the regular people, and agents who facilitated all aspects of travel for the believers. The extensive Encyclopedia of Shinto created by Kokugakuin University uses the term *oshi*—a shortened version of either “*oinorishi* (person who prays) or *onnoritoshi* (*norito* reciter)”, or *okitôshi*, while in Ise the preferred term is *onshi*. *Onshi* had a nationwide network of connections with Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines (we must note here that until the 19th century Meiji reforms, Buddhist and Shinto practices were not clearly separated, quite the opposite, temples and shrines coexisted, with priests of both religions performing rituals together) and a system of *danka* (“parishioners”) to whom they provided both prayers and religious amulets at their residences in the country, as well as accommodation and other types of travel arrangements when the *danka* made a pilgrimage to Ise. According to records from the Ise Shrines, during the Edo period there were approximately 2,000 active *onshi*, with 600 lodgings (Figures 1 & 2 are photos of one of the few remaining such lodgings) available only in the Geku (the Outer Sanctuary of the Ise Shrines) area, and 4,218,584 affiliated households (*danka*) throughout the country, which represented 89% of the number of total households at the time. *Onshi* provided full services for their *danka*: travel arrangements to and from Ise, lodgings and food, access to prayer and special rituals, amulets to take home, and even loans under special circumstances. The diaries of pilgrims from the Edo Period attest that the “*oshi* inn was essential to the Ise experience,” their “staging of the sacred *kagura* dance in the inn’s *Kagura* halls” being one of the highlights of the pilgrimage (Teeuwen & Breen, 2017: 147)



Figure 1 & 2. Maruoka Residence in Ise City, the former house of an *onshi* family, currently a registered cultural heritage. Photo by Carmen Sapunaru-Tamas, taken and published with permission.

Considering the socio-economic context above, it should come as no surprise that one of the oldest banknotes in the world appeared in Ise, in 1610, when *Yamada Hagaki* (Figure 3) was created as the country's first type of fiduciary money—formal papers issued by special agents that could be used instead of carrying and exchanging actual coins. The issuing of this new type of “paper money” represented a significant development in the tourist industry, as pilgrims could now travel without worrying about possible robberies on the way, and it also emphasized the relationship between religious and business practices. The interconnectedness between business and the sacred becomes even more apparent here when we consider the fact that paper was also one of the offerings presented to the deities at the Ise Shrines, used in the creation of amulets, and regarded as so sacred that up to the present day visitors are not allowed in the area where paper for the Ise Shrines is made at the Ise Washi Japanese Paper Mill.



Figure 3. Yamada Hagaki at Ise Kawasaki Syoninkan (The Merchants' Museum in Ise Kawasaki). Photo by Carmen Sapunaru-Tamas, taken and published with permission.

3. Ise Dai Kagura 伊勢大神楽

Ise Dai Kagura are groups of itinerant performers whose artistic endeavors create a bridge between prayer as a purely religious practice and performing arts as divine offerings and entertainment. Their performances begin with an abridged version of the *shinji* (Shinto ritual) which includes classical Shinto gestures and objects (purification, the use of bells and *gohei* wands), followed by dancing, juggling, comic skits, and even acrobatic feats.

Mircea Eliade's (1987) structure of the ritual world presents a clear division between the sacred (seen as the *illo tempore* world of the gods and its reenactments in society) and the profane, the world of the humans. On the other hand, referring specifically to Japanese rituals, Herbert Plutschow states that "there is no sacred and profane times, but sacred and extraordinarily sacred ones. Matsuri are extraordinarily sacred within a basically sacred world." (Plutschow, 1996: 26) Ise Dai Kagura seem to float between these two periodically overlapping worlds, re-sacralizing the daily world with each performance they stage.

Currently there are several Ise Dai Kagura groups active in Japan; the current study is based on research done within the Yamamoto Kandyû group, which is one of the six *kôsha* (groups) forming the Ise Dai Kagura Association. The Ise Dai Kagura Association was legally established in 1952, when it was also designated a cultural asset of Mie Prefecture and a National Important Intangible Folk Cultural Asset. While it may seem as a relatively new cultural item, Ise Dai Kagura has strong ties to the past and to the religious center represented by the Ise Shrine Complex. The

official website of Ise Dai Kagura Yamamoto Kandayû mentions their ties to performing groups that were active throughout the country during the Edo Period (1603-1867) as messengers of the Ise Shrines—people who would travel to the provinces to spread the blessings of the goddess Amaterasu in ways that would reach the common people more than the solemn prayers conducted at the Shrines.

Yamamoto Kandayû Group trace their lineage to a village in Mie Prefecture originally called Kaminouenomura, where members of all the households were either priests or *onshi*. This led to the name of the village being changed by the ruler of the Kuwanahan area (an area in the Ise region) to Taiyû—*taiyû* being the itinerant performers who traveled around the country connecting the *onshi* with their *danka*. In other words, the Ise ritual world had the Shrines at its center, as an immovable and utterly sacred apex, connected to the secular world through the work (and business spirit) of the *onshi*, whose links to the provinces and the regular people were strengthened and supported by the activities of the *taiyû*.

The activities of the *onshi* were suspended during the Meiji Period, when political trends turned the Ise Shrine Complex into a national Shinto center, and *onshi* lost their rights to perform religious rituals and distribute prayer amulets—which represented the sacred core of their work. In 1871 a major reform was implemented at the Ise Shrines with “the goal of restoring ancient ways. The ritual intercessions and kagura performed at homes of the *onshi*, as well as their right to distribute talismans, were abolished. The following year, an imperial proclamation of the Meiji emperor decreed that the production and distribution of Ise amulets would be undertaken by the Grand Shrine Administration.” (Jingû Shichô—the official website of the Grand Ise Shrine Complex). These reforms effectively meant the disappearance of *onshi* and their ritual tourism business, but the performing groups continued to exist and saw a revival during the Showa Period (1926-1989), and the current Ise Dai Kagura Association was established.

Ise Dai Kagura Yamamoto Kandayû Group are legally registered as a 一般社団法人 (“general incorporated association”)—and they are a non-profit organization whose main purpose is to conduct cultural activities. They do not appear officially as a religious organization (which means that their income is taxable), nor do they have any stated commercial purposes. Their main activities continue the *taiyû* tradition: they travel from place to place, taking time to visit their *danka*, bless their houses and offer protective talismans, as well as offer performances at shrines, museums, and other cultural institutions that might extend invitations.

As mediators between the secular and the sacred, Ise Dai Kagura perform rituals similar to those performed by Shinto priests: purification rites (for individuals, in various contexts, or for the house and the entire household in a more formal ceremony), writing and presenting *taiima* (the talismans connected to the Ise Shrines,

which are believed to have the same efficacy as if the recipient would have gotten them directly from Ise, and which the *onshi* had been forbidden to distribute during the Meiji Period), as well as prayers for fertility and prosperity. An essential part of these rituals is *shishi mai*—the lion dance—a type of performance associated with prayers for good luck and fertility, and well as purification and warding off evil whose appearance is not limited to the Ise Dai Kagura groups, but which is a defining characteristic of their activities. In his representative volume on Japanese ethnology *Nihon no Minzoku. Matsuri to Geinô*, Hideo Haga (Haga, 1997: 261) actually refers to Ise Dai Kagura as offering iconic (and highly relevant from a ritual perspective) *shishi mai* performances, the one most connected to the sacred taking place on December 20 at their “home base,” Masuda Shrine in Mie Prefecture.

Shishi mai is generally performed by two men: one who dons and manipulates the wooden lion head (the shapes differ from region to region), and one who moves the cloth symbolizing the lion’s body. A folk-art originating most likely from China (although it appears in other parts of Asia as well), *shishi mai* is widespread around Japan, either as a temporary performance, associated with a specific annual event, or as a periodic ritual whose purpose is purification and community bonding (Sakurai 1988). Its importance within the Ise Dai Kagura is emphasized by the fact that the Ise Dai Kagura Association (established in 1952/ Showa 27) was initially named “The Shishi Mai Union” (獅子舞同盟, a name used from the Edo Period until the re-naming during Showa Period), while the current Yamamoto Kandayû Group refer to themselves as the “Wayfaring Lions” (旅する獅子).



Figure 4. Shishi Mai performed in front of a private residence in Kishiwada City, Osaka Prefecture. Photo by Carmen Sapunaru-Tamas, taken and published with permission.

Ise Dai Kagura, however, are not only working for the divine in solemn and formal contexts; quite the opposite, it is their declared mission to make the sacred more approachable and to help regular people experience it in a comprehensible way. To this purpose, their ritual performances are interspersed with acrobatic acts and short comedic interludes meant to attract wider audiences, engage them, and (this is where the transition from the sacred to business, the main theme of this paper) ensure the financial support essential to the continuation of their activities.



Figure 5. An acrobatic dance performed at Takabe Shrine, Otsu City, Shiga Prefecture. Photo by Carmen Sapunaru-Tamas, taken and published with permission.

4. At the Intersection of Business and the Sacred

As previously mentioned, it is not the purpose of this paper to offer a comprehensive view of the relationship between religion and business, not even a detailed look into how this relationship has developed in Japan. Literature on the subject is abundant (worth mentioning here are the recent studies by Ioannis Gaitanidis—on economy and spirituality in Japan, and by Jørn Borup—on the economy of Buddhism, both published in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Japanese Religions*) and we do not find it beneficial to reiterate already known facts and research results. What we are particularly interested in here is to analyze what kind of business model organizations such as Ise Dai Kagura apply. First, they do represent a particular case, placing themselves in a liminal area between official religious institutions and artistic groups, while legally being a non-profit organization. The non-profit part does not mean they are free and encumbered by financial obligations, as their members do not have other jobs outside Ise Dai Kagura and they obviously need funding not only

in order to be able to continue their religious and cultural activities, but also in order to meet their basic daily needs. And this leads us to the second incentive for our research: since profit is necessary for the survival of the group, what methods do they use in order to achieve the minimum necessary goal? For the purpose of this analysis, the nine-cell business model proposed by Kawakami in 2011 will be applied.

A business model is, to put it simply, a “framework for making money” (Afuah, 2003) where the customer represents an indispensable entity. In other words, businesses should strive to make a profit while bringing value to their customers—again, we must emphasize here that in the particular case of our analysis, the profit is not something that cannot be divided among group members but must be used to further their officially declared activities. In order to design a practical business model, a three-component structure has proved highly efficient: customer value, profit, process, elements which are common to most widely accepted definitions of business models. The images below show the organization of nine basic cells that constitute the business model components, in a framework that provides structural clarity.

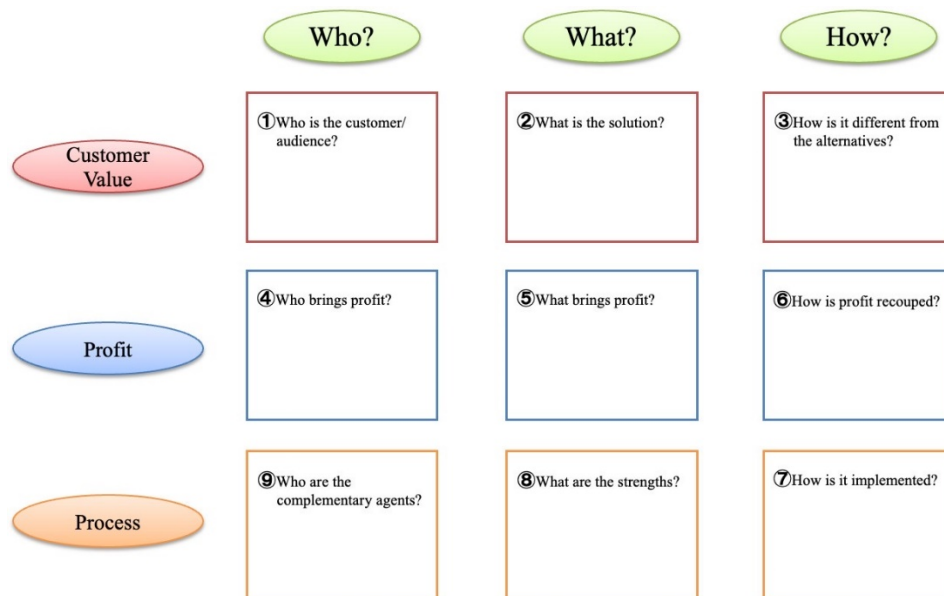


Figure 6. The nine-cell business model (Kawakami 2011, 2013)

Among the components listed above, customer value is of the highest importance, as it refers to the main objective of any company—that of offering value to their customers (Customer Value Proposition). For a customer value proposition to be successful, three elements must be clearly identified:

- 1) “Who is the customer/ audience”—a category which includes the specific jobs to be done of the target customers/ audience

- 2) “What is the solution”—that is, what is the concrete solution that the company offers to the needs of the customers
- 3) “How is it different from the others”—a category which emphasizes the original characteristics of the solution offered by the company by comparison with other similar products on the market.

The next component is profit generation, profit being a *sine qua non* of the survival of any business, as it represents both the source of investment towards future customer value, as well as a safety net for the company. By identifying 4) “who brings profit”, 5) “what brings profit”, 6) “how profit is recouped”, companies can clearly establish a mechanism for profit generation—the “profit formula.”

The last component is profit—a guide to 7) implementing the concepts of customer value proposition and profit generation discussed above by emphasizing the 8) strengths of a company and indicating the 9) complementary agents that may provide support and additional resources where necessary.

5. Profit-Generating Sacred or Business for Preserving Tradition

The nine-cell business model created by Kawakami is not only a factual analysis, but also a practical handbook for practitioners, which raises the question of how it can be applied to the activities of a group of itinerant performers with religious affiliations. However, as explained in the introduction, religious organizations are no strangers to the business world, as revenue remains indispensable to the survival of any entity regardless of its connections (or lack thereof) with the sacred. Business models are mainly concerned with profit (defined as “the excess of total revenue over total cost during a specific period of time”, Encyclopedia Britannica), but basic revenue (“income that a firm receives from the sale of a good or service to its customers”) is absolutely necessary for the survival of any enterprise. Moreover, one aspect that cannot be overlooked in this context is that of fixed costs in creative activities: “costs that do not vary with the quantity of output produced.” (Caves, 2000: 223) Regardless of how many performances they have in one month or one year, for Ise Dai Kagura the investment in the training of their performers, ritual objects, costumes remains the same. According to Richard E. Caves, “the profit seeking enterprise will stay in the game if it can cover those costs [...] The non-profit, unless it enjoys some special advantages, cannot survive without covering the same costs.” (Caves, 2000: 225)

As a non-profit organization, Ise Dai Kagura cannot distribute the potential profit obtained through their activities among their members as personal revenue, but it can be used to enhance their activities, and a revenue equal to their operating costs (living costs for the members, transportation, creation/ acquisition/ purchase of ritual objects, training costs) must be attained for the continuation of their work. By applying the

nine-cell framework, we shall attempt to establish the business model which ensures the economic success and survival of Ise Dai Kagura.

5.1 Customer value

According to the first component, customer value, we must identify the target audience, the solution proposed by the organization, and the features which made it stand out in comparison to other similar entities. Following in the footsteps of their ancestor *onshi*, Ise Dai Kagura groups have certain affiliated households called *danka* (“parishioners”) from whom they periodically receive financial contributions in a system similar to the subscription systems currently implemented by numerous companies. In return for these fixed contributions, Ise Dai Kagura visit the houses of these parishioners at set times throughout the year, offering blessings and limited entertainment (the great shows with acrobatic feats are reserved for events of a larger scales, not for visits to individual households)—an activity which led them to name themselves the “Wayfaring Lions.” The people attending public performances are also part of their target audience, but in this case, they are customers by proxy, as these public performances are usually sponsored by other organizations, and members of the audience attend for free. The solution, or better said, the product offered by Ise Dai Kagura is the combination of ritual and entertainment, which gives their audiences the double satisfaction of feeling blessed/ purified while having attended an artistic performance, and this relates to the third cell, their innovative approach. Their religious association provides the audience with a connection to the world of the sacred in an approachable manner: they bless and they tell jokes, they offer prayer tablet and juggle with swords, the “lions” will symbolically bite the members of the audience after having danced with confetti and umbrellas. More than that, unlike shrines and temples, which are tied to their physical location, Ise Dai Kagura are mobile and adaptable: they can travel to any places they are invited to, and while they do have certain structural rules to follow, they are flexible and can adjust their performance to the needs of the audience and the space in which they have to perform.

5.2 Profit / benefit

The second component, profit (or rather, revenue in this particular case) is something that our students, who have often accompanied us on field trips, have inquired about. Ise Dai Kagura present themselves as a highly skilled group of performers, who have visible ties with what is often perceived as Japanese “tradition,” and as such the question of who is responsible for financing their activities often arises. The direct payers are the parishioners (*danka*)—on a permanent basis, or at least until they decide to interrupt the subscription, and various organizations, such as shrines, museums, educational institutions, who make one-time payments for appearance in

specific events. As a National Important Intangible Folk Cultural Asset⁴, Ise Dai Kagura are entitled to some governmental funds, but the current *iemoto* (“leader”) of Yamamoto Kandyû Group, Mr. Shinya Yamamoto, stated that these funds are not always reliable and the amount has decreased drastically in recent years: “With performing arts, it is a matter of life and death if subsidies are reduced or revised (in terms of supply and demand, there is no demand without cultural added value for people today). In the case of Ise Dai Kagura, the amount of subsidies is probably quite small among all important cultural properties, and the impact on the actual situation is negligible.⁵” As such, the “special advantages” mentioned by Caves are clearly not sufficient to cover the fixed operational costs, and the performers must look elsewhere for financing.

Their main source of revenue are the affiliated individuals and cultural institutions mentioned above, supplemented by the sale of original souvenir items. According to Mr. Shinya Yamamoto, the Ise Dai Kagura Association has over 100,000 formal *danka* (“parishioners”), and during one year they visit and bless over 200,000 households. The sale of original items is a fairly new addition to their activities and is still in the incipient stages, with cotton towels such as the one in the image below being sold for their symbolic value, as protective amulets, rather than practical use. In terms of timing, profit is recouped immediately: Ise Dai Kagura offer a product (their ritual performance) for which they receive immediate financial benefits, as opposed to the business models which are based on the idea of recouping profit over time (for example, by offering products which require long-term servicing, warranties, etc.).

⁴ Folk cultural assets are elements related to traditional arts, crafts, costumes, and other aspects designated by the Agency of Cultural Affairs of Japan as being highly relevant for the Japanese culture. Dances and other performances belong to the category of “intangible folk cultural assets.”

⁵ Interview conducted on February 2, 2025.



Figure 7 & 8. A hand towel sold by Ise Dai Kagura. The pattern is similar to the cloth symbolizing the body of the lion during *shishi mai*, and there is also a stylized image of the lion head. Photo by Carmen Sapunaru-Tamas, taken and published with permission.

5.3 Process

The process component of the nine-cell framework provides structural insights into which kind of enterprises work in collaboration or offer support to Ise Dai Kagura, what are their strengths—the specific features which ensured the continuation of their activities even after major social and religious changes, even when the practical work of the *onshi* became obsolete, and what tools they implement to put the business process into practice. Besides the formal purpose of their activities—that of traveling through the country to bless the houses of their parishioners and any other households willing to receive them, Ise Dai Kagura work in close collaboration with various shrines and other institutions. Besides Masuda Shrine, where the protective deity of Ise Dai Kagura, Masuda Dai Myōjin, is enshrined, Yamamoto Kandyū Group has close connections with Hata Shrine in Hannan City, Osaka Prefecture, and Takabe Shrine in Otsu City, Shiga Prefecture, where they have annual performances (July at Hata Shrine and February at Takabe Shrine). Due to their location, these are obviously events more focused on the sacred and religious aspects, the art being presented as an offering to the deities, but secular performances are implemented as well, at museums (Figure 9), in the context of history-centered festivals, or even in educational institutions (Figure 10).



Figure 9. National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka.



Figure 10. University of Hyogo, Kobe.

Photos by Carmen Sapunaru-Tamas, taken and published with permission.

The strengths of Ise Dai Kagura are in fact the features that ensure their survival and their continuation through decades of hardships (their itinerant activities were drastically reduced when the *onshi* ceased to be a vital element in the Ise Pilgrimage), both social and financial: their intellectual property, the fact that they are the owners and beneficiaries of a specific type of cultural inheritance. While a regular enterprise is forced to offer first and foremost a quality product that attracts customers, Ise Dai Kagura is an enterprise backed by centuries of Japanese tradition in the field of sacred performative arts. The oldest chronicle in Japan, *Kojiki* (712) mentions Ameno-Uzume, a shaman/ dancer who danced in order to bring back the hidden sun, the goddess Amaterasu who had hidden in a cave—a mythological description of the first offering of art to a deity. The Ise Shrines, where the history of the “wayfaring lions” began, is also dedicated to the Sun Goddess Amaterasu, and makes it possible for Ise Dai Kagura to claim a direct connection to an idealized past. Their performances are what Mircea Eliade calls “emerging from ordinary temporal duration and reintegration of the mythical time,” re-enactments of a sacred history through which “primordial time is made present.” (Eliade, 1987: 68-69) Moreover, the use of traditional Japanese clothing, objects associated with religious ritual, and even outdated songs and rhymes are practices associated with what Catherine Bell calls “traditionalization”: “repetition of activities from an earlier period, the adaptation of such activities in a new setting, or even the creation of practices that simply evoke links with the past.” (Bell, 2009: 145) Traditionalization is a “powerful tool of legitimation” (Bell, 2009: 145), something that entices audiences by making them feel they are placed in a special context which has deep roots in the past and can extend the experience into the field of the sacred. For those not looking for the sacred element, such as tourists, photographers, and even our students, Ise Dai Kagura offers a complex cultural experience due to its historical ramifications, as well as religious and artistic associations.

This history-tradition scaffold contributes to the implementation process as well. Unlike new enterprises, the customer base of Ise Dai Kagura was established centuries ago, and all current performers have to do is follow into the footsteps of their predecessors and maintain the relationship with their *danka* and the major shrines hosting their performances. They do apply modern methods as well, such as posters advertising special events, announcements on social media (both pre- and post-performance), but these efforts are still small scale and secondary to traditional practices.

In terms of business success, a conservative and reliable method of earning profit is obtaining compensation from users. This is a basic strategy, but a difficult one in terms of making real profit, as the customers must agree to the price proposed by the enterprise. Nevertheless, in the case of Ise Dai Kagura, this is a viable method, because they are already established as a “brand,” a sacred enterprise which gives people a sense of participating in something higher than ordinary life, something for which they are willing to pay the required price.

6. Conclusions

The present paper is a case study which combines theoretical methods from anthropology, ethnology, and ritual studies, as well as extensive fieldwork, with a business model framework, in order to identify the survival mechanism of an organization which is secular from a legal perspective (a registered non-profit organization) but which has obvious connections with the world of religion and that of performative arts. Ise Dai Kagura Association was created less than one hundred years ago, a span that seems almost insignificant in the context of human culture and history, but they have deep roots in the past, claiming organizational and cultural affiliation with *onshi*, a group of low-ranking priests who provided all the necessities for those making the sacred Ise Pilgrimage, from accommodation and meals, to prayer rituals and lay entertainment. Ise Dai Kagura preserved only the sacred entertainment aspect, being groups of itinerant artists who travel the country to offer blessings and a wide array of performances, from *shishi mai*, the lion dance, to juggling and comedy interludes, to their regular parishioners as well as other diverse audiences. For anybody who follows their activities for an extended period of time, one of the most prominent questions that arise is how are their performances sustainable from an economic perspective? How did they develop a business model starting from prayer and performance and what type of profit generation does their business follow?

In order to answer these questions, we decided to use the nine-cell business model framework, developed by Kawakami in 2011 and currently applied by various business in Japan. The diagram below shows the aspects and categories that form the Ise Dai Kagura business model: one in which intellectual property represented by

the cultural assets transmitted through generations of performers represents the major strength of the organization.

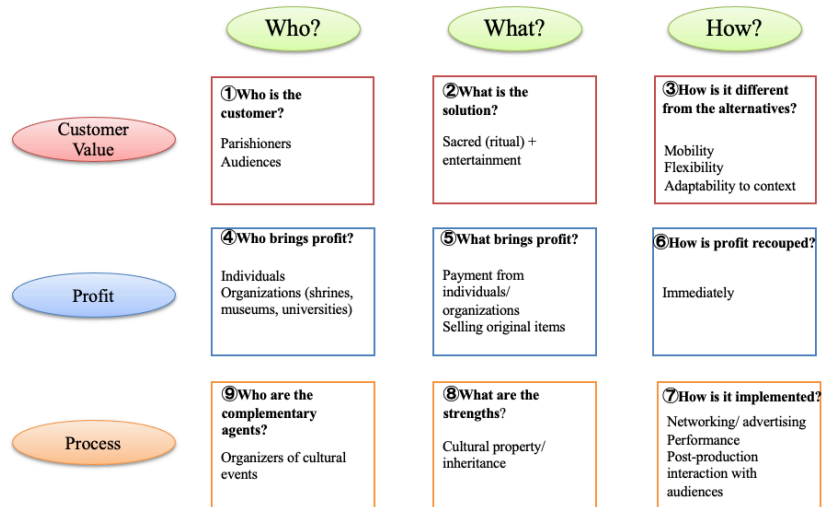


Figure 11. An analysis of Ise Dai Kagura using the nine-cell business model

Ise Dai Kagura offers a unique product: sacred ritual combined with accessible and yet elaborate entertainment, which is different from other types of sacred performances in Japan due to their mobility, flexibility (the performance program can be modified according to the demands of the audience and the availability of performers), and adaptability to context (they can perform in almost any space, adjusting to the existent conditions). Profit generation is not a surprising mechanism, on the contrary, it is a simple and predictable model: audiences pay for the ritual performance, and the sale of original items adds fairly insignificant amounts to the profit of the group. Even with governmental support (due to Ise Dai Kagura's status as National Important Intangible Folk Cultural Asset), making enough profit to cover the fixed costs and provide a living for the group members would appear problematic, but Ise Dai Kagura's product is something that cannot easily be replicated. Their performances recreated the mythical times of the deities, granting the audiences a much-needed connection with the sacred while keeping them anchored in the mundane. They perform accessible rituals for the humans, and offer spectacular acrobatic feats to the deities, thus creating a "brand," an enterprise that can survive based on a conservative business model, re-enacting tradition and sacred history in an ever-changing society.

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The author

Carmen Săpunaru-Tămaș. Professor, University of Hyogo. Research area: cultural anthropology and ritual studies, with a focus on Japanese festivals. Author and editor of the *Beliefs, Ritual Practices, and Celebrations in Kansai I~III* (Pro Universitaria, 2018~2022).

Masanao Kawakami. Professor, University of Hyogo, Special Visiting Professor, SOAS. Research area: business models. Most recent book: *Emotion-Based Business Model: The Future of Value Creation Inspired by Art* (Toyo Keizai, 2025).