



Shinto literally means “the way of the gods.” It is Japan’s ancient indigenous animist religion, far older than Buddhism which only came to Japan via China and Korea in the 6th century AD. Shinto’s origins are lost in the mists of time. It has no founder or prophet. There is no scripture. It centers around nature and life forces — wind, rain, rivers, mountains, rocks, trees, forests, fertility, procreation. Each of these has spirits associated with it — these spirits make up the pantheon of innumerable Shinto spirit-gods, known as *kami*. The greatest *kami* of all is the sun goddess, **Amaterasu**, from whom the first Emperor and all Japanese people are descended, according to the creation myth chronicled and propounded in ancient oral tradition and major written treatises such as the early 8th century **Kojiki** and its slightly later companion the **Nihon-shiki**.

Shinto is fundamentally optimistic, but maintaining optimism requires acknowledgement of evil spirits so as to avoid them. This is done via prayer, purification rituals, festivals (*matsuri*) and offerings. Shinto shrines are usually denoted with a suffix: *jinja* (a general term for shrine), *taisha* (reserved for special ‘grand shrines’ like those at Ise and Izumo), or *jingu* (shrines dedicated to an Emperor, such as Meiji Jingu in Tokyo). Shrines are thought to be homes to the *kami* and are special places to worship them. A shrine is a conduit for its *kami*. They are places of quietude and especially lovely to visit. Japan has over 80,000 Shinto shrines, some massive and elaborate and others as simple as a large boulder. Shinto priests, both men and women, perform rituals at shrines, usually wearing white kimonos. Typically the priest – or individual worshippers as well – will bow twice, clap hands twice, and then bow again. Clapping is said to draw the attention of the *kamis*, express appreciation, and ward off evil *kami*. There is often a bell above a Shinto shrine altar. If so, it is traditional to ring the bell by pulling the rope that dangles down – this is usually done first, before bowing and clapping.

At the entrance to many shrines is a *temizu-ya*, a washing/purification area. Central to this is the **chozubachi** water basin, usually made of stone and often beautiful in and of itself. If you would like to perform *temizu* correctly, here’s how it’s done: First, take the dipper in your right hand and scoop up some water. Pour some of the water onto your left hand. Then transfer the dipper to your left hand and pour some water onto your right hand. Transfer the dipper back to your right hand again, cup your left palm, and pour water into it, from which you take some water into your mouth and gently swish it around without swallowing it. Then quietly spit it out into your cupped left hand (not into the reservoir). Never drink directly from the dipper. Finally, holding the handle of the dipper in both hands, turn it *vertically* so that the remaining water washes down over the handle. Then replace it where you found it on the edge of the basin. If this is too much for you, an alternative way of ritual purification is to simply stand under a waterfall. (Really.)

Those who die become *kami* and their essence (as ancestral spirits) lives on in the world. This promotes a sense of continuity with one’s ancestors. However, those who performed misdeeds in life or who were wronged or feel they were wronged in life may hold a grudge (*urami*) and come back as evil *kami* who seek revenge (*aragami*). This is closely related to the Buddhist concept of a “hungry ghost,” and it’s anyone’s guess which came first. The vengeful spirit of Lady Rokujo in The Tale of Genji has its roots in the Shinto influence on Heian tradition. While Buddhism was promulgated at the court, it was largely as a tool of the state rather than a popular religion in that era. Shinto remained strong. In fact the advent of Buddhism was the best thing that ever happened to Shinto: it forced the followers of the ancient Japanese folk tradition to define and name their religion. There is no record of the term Shinto or any other name for Japan’s indigenous religion before the 6th century AD. Because religion in Asia is syncretic, and Buddhism in particular is both absorptive and readily allows itself to be absorbed into other religions, the two complemented each other well. Over time many Japanese came to view the *kami* as manifestations of the Buddha. This is consistent with the Mahayana Buddhism that came to Japan via China and Korea. Unlike the Theravada Buddhism of Sri Lanka and southeast Asia, Mahayana Buddhism developed a pantheon of demigods and saintly humans known as **bodhisattvas** in Sanskrit. The Japanese word for *bodhisattva* is **bosatsu**, and you will see this commonly refer to both anthropomorphic and zoomorphic Buddhist deities of Shinto origin. In the Late

Heian period c. 1000AD, a school of **Ryobu** “Dual Aspect” Shinto developed which combined Shinto and Shingon Buddhism- with the supreme deity having a dual character- both Sun God and Buddha.

As with any religion, there is a wide range of practice and style. Formal “shrine Shinto” would be seen in sophisticated Kyoto and its great shrines such as the Heian-jinja and Yasaka-jinja, whereas informal “folk Shinto” is associated more with nature, divination, and shamanistic healing. Fushimi-Inari Taisha on the southern outskirts of Kyoto has elements of both.

It is still very common in Japan in both the home and in places of worship to see a mixture of Shinto and Buddhist symbols and rituals. Weddings and birth (optimistic times) are commonly Shinto, while funerals are typically Buddhist. The aphorism “**Japan is 80% Buddhist and 80% Shinto**” says it all. And the two syncretic religions have greatly influenced each other.

The classic defining symbol of a sacred Shinto space is the iconic **torii** gate at the entrance. Another defining symbol of a sacred Shinto space is the **shimenawa**, a woven straw rope usually tethered across the entrance to a shrine or sometimes encircling a sacred (spirit home) object such as a large boulder on top of a hill. The *shimenawa* often has white paper lightning-bolt-like decorations hanging on it, known as **shide**. These serve an apotropaic function. At Shinto shrines (and also sometimes at Buddhist temples) you will often see many strips of white paper tied onto a tree. These are known as *omikuji* and it works like this: for a small payment one can get a piece of paper with a prediction on it, very much like a fortune cookie which likely derives from *omikuji*. If it’s a good *omikuji*, you keep it. If it’s not so good, you tie it onto a tree at the shrine and the bad luck no longer belongs to you. You may also see many small wooden plaques with pictures of animals painted on them hanging at Shinto shrines. These are votive plaques designed to bring good luck, good health, or success in endeavors such as business, love, or exams. One typically writes a wish on them before hanging them. They are called **ema** and like *omikuji* they are purchased at the shrine for a small payment.

From the Meiji Period, which began in 1868, through the end of World War II, Shinto was hijacked. This is not dissimilar to the way Islam has been hijacked by radical fascist extremists today. Shinto was declared the official state religion, and the Emperor was re-declared a Shinto god directly descended from Amaterasu (this had already been a core belief long exploited in ancient times to promote fealty to the Emperor). The connection of Shinto with Buddhism was lacerated. Conditions of the Japanese surrender, which were then written into Japan’s post-War constitution by MacArthur and others, included the abolition of Shinto as state religion - in other words, the separation of church and state. It also included explicit acknowledgement that the Emperor was not divine. Shinto was thus freed from fascist extremism and returned to its roots. Nevertheless, there is still some unsettling connection between Japan’s dark wartime regime and the Shinto faith: the controversial Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo where Class A war criminals are interred is in fact a sacred Shinto shrine.

Overall, Shinto today exists in a very positive framework. It is practiced by those hoping to bring themselves and their family good fortune. It provides a way to celebrate life and the life force itself. It promotes strong ties with one’s family and community, as well as positive relations with ancestors. Shinto feeds on and also augments the great love and reverence for nature that is so intrinsic to Japanese culture. Today it is (almost) entirely divorced from militarism and the mythology of Japanese divine descent. It is a religion which looks more at the present than at the after-life, and hence it is associated with joyous *matsuri*, births, and weddings. Japanese culture is imbued with Shinto aspects even today, from a profound love of nature, to an ever-present sense of mysticism, to a deep respect for elders, ancestors and ancient traditions. The Japanese penchant for cleanliness can be traced to ancient Shinto purification rituals, and the grudge-holding ghosts of Japanese horror films, *anime*, and *manga* harken back to Shinto’s *aragami*. Shinto has no eschatology and largely keeps the Japanese rooted in the present world, bringing depth, joy, and meaning to life — for many thousands of years.