

# The Way of the Kami: Shinto Then and Now

## In this chapter

...we will survey a diversity of Shinto shrines, ancient and modern, of deities of varying types and meanings, and explain the word kami, designating a Shinto god. We will see how Shinto may be observed throughout the calendar year, and in individual rites of passage. Finally, major aspects of Shinto will be summarized in terms of five keynotes; the core narrative of the ancient Shinto mythology outlined; and the issue of Shinto as a religion discussed.

## Main topics covered

- The Grand Shine of Ise and its twenty-year rebuilding
- The meaning of kami, the term for Shinto god
- Major shrines of diverse types: Inari, Miwa, Meiji, Togo, Nogi, Yasukuni, Tenjin
- The Shinto year and life-cycle rites passage, including New Years and weddings
- Five keynotes of Shinto: purity vs. pollution, traditionalism, importance of practice, sociological role, polytheism
- The core Shinto mythology, found in the ancient books called Kojiki and Nihonshoki
- Issues involving Shinto as a religion

## The Grand Shrine of Ise

Let us begin at the heart of Shinto.

The [Ise shrine](#), which has been called the National Cathedral of Japan, is not located in the center of a capital ancient or modern, like St. Peter's in Rome. Its plain wooden buildings, rustic and unpretentious by most standards, dominate a lonely site near the Pacific Ocean some 225 miles south of Tokyo, 50 from Nagoya, and not much farther from Kyoto and Nara. Like ancient Japanese dwellings and granaries, Ise's edifices are set off the ground on posts, the roofs are thatched, and the timber unpainted, save for gold tips on the roof beams. They are surrounded by four wooden palisades, which block easy viewing and access. Once again, the sacred in Japan, especially in Shinto, is not clothed in glory but left lonely and obscure, and is all the more mysterious for that.

A great western scholar of Japan of the nineteenth century wrote that Ise is "so disappointing in its simplicity and perishable nature,"<sup>1</sup> but modern taste has instead discovered in Ise an architecture of clean, austere effectiveness.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the simplicity of style is compensated by majesty of setting. Near the cold and clear Isuzu River, amid cypress groves of wondrous and numinous beauty, Ise suggests that little could be added by human hands to provide a suitable place for worship of the greatest of the [kami](#).

The Grand Shrine is really two shrines about five miles apart, plus several lesser, outlying places of worship. The two are the Naiku, or Inner Shrine, and the Geku, Outer Shrine. The Naiku is dedicated to Amaterasu, the sovereign solar deity who is ancestress of the imperial line; this edifice has as its *shintai* (or *mitama-shiro*), or representation of the divine presence, the *yata kagami* ("eight-hand mirror," a term probably referring to its

width) which Amaterasu gave her grandson when he descended to earth to found the Empire. The Geku is dedicated to Toyouke, the ancient Food Goddess. In each the Kanname-sai, or Harvest Festival as celebrated at Ise, is the most important of annual events. The offering ceremony then is presented twice, identically, in the evening and early morning.

The two shrines are roughly the same in form. Each has a Shoden or main building containing the sacred object, two treasures houses holding imperial offerings, and a white graveled expanse for rituals, plus a partially-covered pavilion for use in inclement weather. Each is rebuilt every twenty years, and with this sacred drama we enter into the mysterious and mystical realm that underlies Ise's placid exterior.

Immediately beside the rectangle of the shrine buildings and their fences is another enclosed space of the same size, spread merely with white gravel except for a tiny wooden structure in the center. This expanse is the alternative site of the shrine. The tiny structure covers the wooden foundation post, preserved after the tearing-down of the old shrine. The post is never actually seen by outside observers, and there are said to be many secrets about it.

Every twenty years a new shrine is built on the alternative site; the next shikinen sengu or rebuilding year from the time of writing will be 2013. The construction is done by traditional means, without nails, the wood fit together by a kind of joinery. Many of the highly skilled craftsmen employed are from families in whom the privilege of working on rebuilding the Grand Shrines goes back many generations. For a time in the fall of the rebuilding year two identical shrines will stand together, side by side. Then, at the Kanname-sai or Harvest Festival at Ise, of a crisp October evening, the *mitama shiro* will be transferred from the old shrine to the new by priests in solemn procession, including imperial envoys bearing offerings from the court – swords,

bows, arrows, shields, quivers, cloth. In the center of the procession is its most dramatic entry, a rectangular wall of white silk, held and carried by twenty persons. Enclosed by it walk the two Chief Priests and certain other senior clerics, carrying the palanquin containing the Naiku's sacred Mirror, or the *shintai* of the Geku. The holy relic is followed by an imperial princess/priestess, called the Saishu.

When the Divine Presence is carried out, one priest makes the sound of a cock: "Kakeko" in the Inner shrine, "Kakero" in the Outer. This intriguing custom, reminding one of the cock which cried at Amaterasu's hiding and re-emergence in the myth presented in Chapter 1, immediately suggests rebirth symbolism, the dawn of a new sacred cycle. So it is that the Ise rebuilding makes the most sacred of all Shinto shrines both ancient and ever new, like eternity itself: the pattern goes back to prehistory, the actual wood is always fresh.

Note that the Harvest Festival at Ise has several things in common with the imperial accession Daijosai, also fundamentally a Harvest Festival, presented in Chapter 2. Both are done at night, and both involve an odd doubling: in both the ceremony is repeated twice, in both (at the shikinen sengu) two identical buildings sit side by side.

Ise has a number of auxiliary buildings. Outside the main Naiku and Geku buildings stands a shrine to the *aramitama* or "rough spirit" of that goddess; this is the deity in her vigorous, aggressive, active mood, in contrast to the *nigimitama* or "smooth" spirit in her main house. Buildings for preparing offerings complete the complex, together with side shrines to deities of the wind and weather, to Tsukiyomi the moon god, and to the primal parents of the mythology, to be reviewed later, Izanagi and Izanami. There are barns for sacred horses, presented by the Emperor, which are led before the shrine three times a month, and a



*The Torii Gate at the bridge to the Grand Shrine of Ise*

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*kagura-den* or dance platform where divine dances are performed by priests and *mai-hime*, colorfully-garbed shrine maidens, who also assist in preparing materials for worship and work in the offices.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to sending offerings for major festivals, the Emperor informs his ancestral deities at the Grand Shrine in person of major events in the history of the nation. In 1945, Emperor Hirohito visited Ise to report Japan's defeat in the great world war.

## **What Is a Kami?**

Before we go further into Shinto, the Kami Way, this question must be dealt with. In a sense, it might be better to leave it alone, and just let the reader intuit a kind of meaning from many accounts of Shinto shrines and their worship; this would be the poetic Japanese approach. Any general definition might be too abstract or theological. Nonetheless, for the benefit of those who expect definitions in textbooks, something will be said.

The eighteenth century Shinto scholar Motoori

Norinaga commented that a kami is anything that can fill us with wonder and awe. The reference can be to wonderful and awesome places -- splendid old trees, waterfalls, or mountain peaks; to demarcated sacred places, especially ones that are very old, such as shrine precincts; to natural events, like the growth of plants and their harvest, or the birth of babies; to the spirit guiding an ancient tribe, or which can possess a person like a shamaness; or to an especially majestic person, such as an emperor or hero. All these objects of wonder and awe have been experienced as kami, and part of the wonder derives from the way they are perceived as outside oneself and greater than oneself, though still bound to a particular place: god as well as natural, something "added on" to natural glory.\* What makes them kami in the traditional sense, of course, is that this is not just a personal experience, but one that belongs to a group of people, a tribe or village, and so is demarcated by a shrine with *shintai* and *torii*.

The kami can be spoken of as gods in the polytheistic sense, as we will see, and we have noted that Shinto can be compared to the polytheistic religion of pre-Christian Europe, such as that of the Greeks, Ro-

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\* In visiting places of great natural beauty in Japan, I often saw tiny shrines to the minor kami of the place, or perhaps just a *shimenawa* (sacred rope) or *gohei* (white strips of paper), indicators of divinity, around a fine old tree or ancient rock. These never seemed to clash with natural beauty, but to add something to it, suggesting someone has recognized here the added glow of the sacred in the natural. Back in the United States, driving through splendid national parks such as Yellowstone or Sequoia, seeing their "beauty bare," I somehow missed those indicators, knowing that in Japan Shintoists would perceive something numinous enough in the geysers of Yellowstone or the giant sequoia trees to sense a bit of kami in them, over and above the geological or biological marvel.

mans, and northern peoples. Shinto has certainly been, and still is, a civic religion as were those, in which the people of a community – family, village, town, factory workforce, nation – pray for, purify, and celebrate their common life in companionship with their *ujigami* or guardian deity. But if the ultimate meaning of *kami* is a bit elusive, that is because none of this depends on a precise understanding of the term.

## The Inari and Miwa Shrines

Another face of Shinto is presented by the [Inari family of shrines](#). These are visible everywhere by those who are aware of them, for Inari is the Shinto god of fertility, fortune, fields, and foxes. This popular deity, famous for responsiveness to ordinary human desires, has easily moved from the rice-paddy to the business districts of modern Japan's great cities, where his (or her, for this deity can appear in both male and female form) distinctive shrines are evident in shops and atop banks and department stores, as well as in urban corners, wherever a little space can be squeezed out. A recent report tells us that devotion to Inari is now especially high among firms dealing in stocks and securities. Some such companies have their own Inari shrine on the premises; some organize visits by their employees to the great Fushimi Inari shrine, to be discussed in a moment, to pray for prosperity.<sup>4</sup>

You can always tell an Inari shrine by its bright red torii, and by the two red-bibbed foxes, one holding a stick in his mouth, and the other a ball or jewel (*tama*, which can also mean "soul"), on either side of the torii. They are guardians or messengers of the *kami*, a deity who may appear as a long-bearded old man carrying a sack of rice, or as a woman with long flowing hair carrying two sheaves of rice, accompanied



*Fox statue at the Inari shrine adjacent to Todaiji in Nara.*

by one or two white foxes. The deity is said to start the year in the mountains, to come down into the rice fields in the spring, aid in their growing to harvest, then return to the mountains again at the Harvest Festival (for the Daijosai, Kanname-sai, or Niiname-sai harvest festivals are merely state or Grand Shrine versions of what is done in every village shrine). Inari winters in the heights, away from the people and close to heaven, to return again the next spring. Virtually all ancient Shinto deities ultimately have such descending and as-



ending features, and links to the agricultural year, as they rotate between being a *yama no kami*, mountain god, and a *ta no kami*, rice-paddy god.

The fox, *kitsune*, is an interesting entry in itself. Many are the stories told in Chinese and Japanese folklore of trickster foxes who have done mischievous or even cruel things, causing accidents or, with their shapeshifter capability, appearing as a lovely maiden who leads astray some country lad, or promises someone a bucket of gold which, come morning when the mysterious companion is gone, turns out to be nothing but dry leaves. And usually a fox, or even only the tail of a fox, will be just glimpsed disappearing out of the corner of the eye at the critical moment. (I have myself heard modern, well-educated Japanese relate that someone they knew saw a fox run across the road just before a serious auto accident. . .) But this is the *kitsune* on its own, and Inari cannot be blamed for these antics; the foxes that are her guardians or messengers seem to be well under control. Nonetheless they remind us this is a deity with deep folkloric roots.

The main Inari shrine, head of some 30,000 Inari shrines throughout Japan, is Fushimi Inari, in a suburb of Kyoto. The impressive main shrine edifice, with its large, stately vermilion torii, is at the base of a high hill. But what is most remarkable is the path up the hill to auxiliary shrines along the way and at the top; this trail is covered with countless red torii, becoming virtually a tunnel. All have written on them the name of the donor, most often a company, hoping for a share in the prosperity Inari is believed to bestow. The walk up this torii-arcaded way takes two to three hours (many joggers do it in less), and is an interesting experience in entering the archaic/modern world of Shinto.<sup>5</sup>

Even more archaic is the Miwa shrine, not far from Nara. The shrines of prehistory seemed not to have had a struc-

tural *honden*, wherein the *shintai* or sacred object was contained, but to have worshiped the kami directly in nature, or at an altar in an open, set-apart sacred space. Here, at the very ancient shrine of Miwa, the kami-presence is still an entire holy mountain, and the shrine altar simply faces toward it. No one is allowed to set foot on Mt. Miwa, save once a year, when priests ascend to its summit to present offerings.

## The Meiji, Togo, and Nogi Shrines

Shinto is not only about the remote past. In the center of Tokyo stands one of the most famous and impressive, and most often visited, of all Shinto shrines: the [Meiji Shrine](#). It is dedicated to the spirits, now revered as kami, of the Emperor Meiji and his consort, the Empress Shoken. Meiji presided over the rapid modernization of Japan together with, not incidentally, the revival of state Shinto that accompanied the “Meiji Restoration.”\* He died in 1912 and she in 1914; the shrine was dedicated in 1920, destroyed in World War II, but rebuilt afterwards. The Meiji Shrine is set amidst a large parklike area, and beyond it the “outer garden” contains extensive sporting facilities, including two baseball stadiums, a golf driving range, a tennis club, swimming pool, skating rink, and much else.

The Meiji Shrine complex offers two important insights. First, it manifests the intimate connection of Shinto with the needs of people, above all in the vast crowded cities of today, for open air, natural beauty,

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\*The Meiji Restoration will be discussed later; briefly, in 1868 militant factions, determined that Japan should open itself to the West and modernize industrially and militarily, brought an end to rule in the name of the emperor by shoguns. In theory the reformers “restored” direct power to the young Meiji emperor. On the one hand this meant rapid



*The Meiji shrine, Tokyo*

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and opportunities for recreation. Similar concerns are close to the heart of the kami, who always want their places of worship to be surrounded by at least a patch of green, and unceasingly yearn to share simple joys and earthly pleasures with their people, especially those associated with health and family. Many shrines, especially since the war, have tried to develop such community service facilities as preschools and playgrounds, though none on the scale of Meiji. It is important to remember that Shinto is generally concerned with enhancing and making holy life in this world, not with otherworldly or afterdeath matters.

Second, the Shrine shows us how intimately Shin-modernization; on the other the regimentation that process was thought to require was justified by appeal to ancient Shinto myths and ideologies making the sovereign a descendant of Amaterasu and an *ikigami*, "living god," entitled to unquestioning obedience. In support of this doctrine, the Meiji Restoration also brought about a Shinto revival, especially as a nationalistic religion centered on the imperial institution supporting, and supported by, the state. Buddhism, considered foreign, was briefly persecuted, and radically separated from Shinto.

to is connected with Japan's history, especially in the State Shinto era between the Meiji Restoration and 1945. Shinto has always recognized that the kami are not only spirits connected with nature, or primordial mythological figures, but can also be divinized great souls of yesterday and today, particularly those who had a notable historical role. Most such men or women made kami are imperial, though not all.

Also in Tokyo is a shrine dedicated to Admiral Togo Heihachiro (1848-1934), a great naval hero of the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05); despite his strongly-expressed resistance in life to being divinized after his death, he was so enshrined in 1940, at the height of Japan's militaristic surge. As it were in companionship with Togo is a shrine to General Nogi Maresuke (1849-1912), another Russo-Japanese War hero, who chose to accompany his sovereign in death, the practice known as *junshi*. He and his wife Shizuko committed *seppuku*, the ritual suicide considered honorable among samurai, shortly after the emperor's funeral cortège had left the palace. They bathed, put on white kimonos, and shared a cup of sake before the household shrine. The General then sliced his stomach open with his sword in the approved manner, and lastly cut his throat. Shizuko stabbed herself in the chest. Faithfulness unto death fulfilled, they entered the world of kami, or so it was thought by enthusiasts for traditional values in those days when Japan hovered between two worlds, old and new. Apart from a few extremists, theirs is a world now largely left behind.

## The Yasukuni and Tenjin Shrines

Something of that world, however, still lingers in the [Yasukuni](#) ("Pacification of the Nation") Shrine, as it keeps alive memories of war and death. Located on a spacious hilltop in the Tokyo University area, this edifice honors and enshrines the spirits of all those who

have died in Japan's modern wars. Grieving widows, parents, and children have often worshiped in its precincts; so also, more controversially, have political figures. As recently as August 15, 2006, the 61st anniversary of Japan's surrender in World War II, Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro visited the shrine, despite vociferous protests from China and Korea, as well as from domestic quarters. Critics associate Yasukuni with Japanese militarism and assert that many of those honored therein were guilty of unspeakable atrocities, as many Japanese soldiers certainly were. Others see Yasukuni, though in Shinto guise, as no different in principle from the military memorials and cemeteries many countries maintain.<sup>6</sup>

By way of contrast to these warlike modern figures, mention should be made of the Tenjin family of shrines, which comprise no less than some 11,000 of the 80,000 Shinto shrines in Japan. They honor the deified spirit of Sugawara Michizane (845-903), a scholarly court official, historian, and poet who was advanced by the emperor to counter the all-powerful Fujiwara house. But Sugawara was outmaneuvered by rivals, who managed to have him exiled to Kyushu. There, mourning the loss of the cultured capital he loved, he died two years later.

Soon after, however, lightning struck the main Fujiwara residence, igniting a fire that destroyed much of the city. Popular opinion attributed this and other disasters to the enraged spirit of the exiled courtier. The government was forced to make elaborate amends, including the erection of a shrine, followed by many others, to him as kami under the name Tenjin ("heavenly kami"). Here then is an example of a deified historical human being in Shinto who was not warlike, but represents another side of tradition Japanese culture, that of scholarship, poetry, and aesthetics. He is considered a

patron of learning and the arts of peace.

## The Shinto Year

As you can probably imagine, the succession of festivals and worship occasions at a Shinto shrine keeps its priests and supporters busy. While there is no weekly service quite like the sabbath or its equivalent in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, bimonthly offerings, originally tied to the phases of the moon, are presented regularly in some shrines; some major shrines even have daily offerings. More important is the well-packed schedule of special or occasional events, some unique to the particular shrine. January at the large [Suwa shrine](#) in Nagasaki, for example, brings not only New Years, but also, on the 5th, Chinka-sai, to control fires and protect the local fire department; Saiten-sai, the coming-of-age ritual for 20-year-olds, on the 15th; and Kenae-sai on the 19th, when members recite poems to the kami. February offers special rituals for Setsubun matsuri on the 3rd, a popular festival when beans are thrown to drive away demons; Kenkoku kinen-sai, the controversial national holiday commemorating the mythological founding of the nation; and Kinen-sai, prayers for a bountiful harvest, among others. Later months bring numerous other worship events, including the ancient Oharai, or Great Purification, at the end of June and December; and in early October the Okunchi matsuri, the festival of the patronal kami of this shrine, lasting over several days, involving numerous rituals and the carrying of the Suwa kami in great *mikoshi* or palanquins to visit different areas of his domain. At Suwa, the procession becomes a parade with many floats, TV cameras, food and souvenir stalls, and a general public holiday.<sup>7</sup>

As we have noted, New Years is especially important in Shinto, as befits what Mircea Eliade called cosmic religion, a religion directly depended on the terrain and cycles of the earth, including the turn of the seasons, and of the cosmos, rather than on historical events like those defining Judaism, Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism. In Japan, New Years is a time for ceremonial visits to employers and family elders, and likewise for cleaning house, settling debts, and ritual purification (*oharaï*). Countless individuals visit shrines, especially famous ones, on New Years night, to pass through a great purifying ring of evergreen, and to purchase talismans, such as a *hamaya* ("evil-destroying arrow"), a symbolic arrow placed in one's house to repel or absorb malignant influences. Old *hamaya* from the previous year are collected in baskets at the shrine, to be burned later and so finally to destroy the evil. New Years crowds at shrines can be immense; Ian Reader tells us that at Fushimi Inari one year it took him 45 minutes to proceed from the station to the shrine gate, a walk that ordinarily would have taken only four or five minutes.<sup>8</sup>

Another interesting perspective on the year can be seen in the spiritual life of a modern factory. David C. Lewis, in an illuminating article on this topic, has traced the religious practices of a large synthetic fabrics plant employing some 4,000 people. On New Years day the three top managers of the firm go to three different shrines in the city, where they pray for the safety of their employees during the coming year, and give the shrines substantial donations from company funds. They also pray at each of five small shrines on a hillside behind the factory for which the firm takes responsibility. Then, on the first workday of the year, all employees pray together at a Shinto altar in the plant. In spring and autumn, at the times when in agricultural settings the mountain kami are believed to descend to the fields, and ascend back to the mountains in the fall, Shinto priests perform purifications, prayers and offer-

ings in the plant, the offerings being presented in turn by managers, the union leader, representatives of male workers and female workers, and of the plant caterer. All then go to the hillside shrines in back of the plant for further prayers. At the end of the working year, a major purification (oharai) is performed by a Shinto priest, using strips of cloth to which impurities are ritually transferred; these are later burnt at a shrine.<sup>9</sup>

Shinto also has a role in celebrating stages of individual life, what are called rites of passage. About a month after birth infants (boys at 30 days, girls at 31), clad in a colorful baby kimono, are customarily taken to the family's ujigami (paternal or protecting deity or kami) shrine to be presented to that god as his or her newest godchild. This miyamairi (shrine visit) typically entails prayers chanted by the priest while one of the shrine maidens performs a sacred dance and gives the child a blessing.

Children visit the shrine at the Shichi-Go-San (7-5-3) festival on Nov. 15, when girls of three and seven, and boys of five, dress up in new clothes and pray for a safe and healthy future. On January 20, a national holiday recognizes those who have reached age 20 and so are recognized as adults; though modern and largely secular, this occasion may include shrine visits.

Weddings, on the other hand, are very often celebrated with Shinto rites, with the bride wearing elaborate traditional Japanese formal garb, though today often at a Shinto altar in a hotel, where large receptions can more easily be managed, rather than a shrine. The high point is the bride and groom exchanging the "three times three" cups of sake, followed by their offering of an evergreen sakaki branch on the altar, and prayers by the priest. Today, the western custom of exchanging rings is also often observed. Lately Christian weddings have also become fashionable, even among those who have



no intention of becoming Christian; more on this later. It must also be noted that the Shinto shrine or hotel wedding of today is actually a modern development. Premodern Japanese nuptials were family ceremonies, held in the bride's home. If done properly, however, a Shinto priest would be brought in to do purifications, say a *norito*, and supervise the exchange of cups. A banquet would follow. For many Japanese the Shinto rite maintains the air of tradition people like to associate with matrimony, and connects well with the usual relation of Shinto and the kami to fertility and the good things of this life.

## General Features of Shinto

We have observed numerous examples of Shinto in all its diversity. What then can we say about the religion that is generally true? Five features come to mind:

- Emphasis on purity vs. impurity;
- Traditionalism;
- The importance of matsuri and the "practical," worship form of religious expression;
- The importance of the sociological role of religion;
- Polytheism as a special aspect of the "theoretical" expression of Shinto.

We will consider each of these in turn.

*1. Purity versus impurity.* The importance of sacred space and time is evident in the least acquaintance with Shinto. The torii or gate clearly demarcates the boundary between the outer world of pollution, and the kami-world of purity. In the same way, the time of matsuri or Shinto festivals is clearly, like all traditional holy days, a different kind of time from that of the workaday world. In Shinto space

and time, one feels close to the purity of nature and to the ultimate essence of things in the divine spirits which animate it. In nature one is no less close to renewal, for one must in spirit return in order to renew. New Years, the great Shinto occasion, is such a time of renewal.

The streams, trees, and stones of nature are pure. Above all so are the hilltops and mountaintops from which, anciently, the gods descended. The human realm is less pure, which is why ideally shrines were on high ground, across a stream from the village. Particularity polluting are blood, sickness, and death, which should not be brought into a Shinto shrine; for this reason funerals are usually a Buddhist preserve, rarely Shinto. The Shinto feeling is instead the joy of happy love and marriage, of children, of green open spaces, of joyous dancing, laughing, colorful festivals, of the clean, clear peaks of sacred mountains.

At shrines of any size in populated areas, one can usually see passers-by enter and approach the holy place for a [moment of prayer](#). First the worshiper passes through the torii, as it were leaving one world for another, the world of the street for a pure, sacred place linked to the primordial past with all its spiritual power. She or he then washes hands and mouth in a basin, clearly a gesture of purification. Arriving at the front of the shrine, the *haiden* or place of prayer, she then claps her hands twice, seemingly to attract the attention of the kami, but also, in a subtler way, letting the sharp sounds punctuate a moment of sacred time; all words or actions in a religious setting that are different from what one would do “outside” — perhaps would even look very odd if not done in temple, shrine, or church — are indicators of a special, sacred setting. The Shinto devotee bows his head for a word of prayer, probably for health, success, family welfare, one’s business, or some other personal or local boon, for that is the spiritual level the kami know and on which they

work. She then tosses an offering into a grill at the front of the *haiden*, turns, and leaves, departing the pure realm for that of the everyday world.

2. *Traditionalism.* As we have noted before in connection with the Daijosai and Ise, doing things as they have “always” been done is important to Shinto. The fire to cook the rice offerings at shrines is started by friction with the use of a kind of archaic fire-drill. Rituals like passing through the evergreen ring at New Years for purification, and clapping twice at the beginning of prayer, are done by modern people who may or may not believe deeply in them in an intellectual sense. They are more like acts of common courtesy, such as (in Japan) bowing slightly to an acquaintance, or apologizing for an inadvertent rudeness — but then gestures of courtesy are very important in Japan, keeping the wheels of interpersonal relationships well oiled, and the same applies to relations with the kami, and the tradition they represent, whatever one think the kami means.

Sometimes, as in the case of the Daijosai, some traditions may be so old most people have forgotten what they are supposed to “mean” — but in Japan it is not always important that religious actions have to “mean” something in an intellectual sense; it is sufficient that they express poetic or devotional feelings, and cement participation in a shrine community. In a survey conducted in the company whose Shinto rites were presented earlier, many responded that the rites have no real effect, or if they do the effect is only “spiritual” or only on one’s own feelings, yet they continue to be performed.<sup>10</sup>

However, if Shinto were only traditionalism, it would never change, yet the evidence is clear that it has changed over the centuries. But the changes have

occurred in ways which also reinforce tradition on a higher level, by invoking authority that is sanctioned within the tradition. That authority is of two types, both ultimately dependent on the existence of *ikigami*, “living kami,” or *hitogami*, “man-gods,” in our midst.

The first type is that of the state in the person of the emperor as living kami and “high priest” of Shinto, or of Shinto officials following general policy; as we will see later, particularly in the Meiji Shinto revival, on imperial authority state rites were constructed or restored, local shrines were combined and their rituals standardized, and new practices like venerating the emperor’s portrait in schools promulgated.

The second type of authority is that of shamanism: persons believed to be “channeling” a new revelation from a kami, or responding to a divine sign. Many shrines were established in this way; the medieval amalgamation of Shinto and Buddhism was legitimated by oracles from Ise and other shrines; many new sects and religions of Shinto style derive from individual shamanistic inspiration.

*3. The Importance of Practices.* We are indicated that practice is often more important than subjective or intellectual belief in Shinto, and that rites are performed in a highly traditional manner. [Matsuri](#) or festivals, we have noted, can be thought of as following a set sequence: purification, presentation, prayer, participation, and the “participation” part will probably have a vigorous, celebrative character, like Carnival or Mardi Gras in the west, with many customary features valued by the particular community. We also noted the forms of individual shrine worship — which may also be roughly followed at home or business shrines.

Another important Shinto practice is pilgrimage. Persons will travel good distances, often in groups, to

visit a shrine that is particularly important to his or her family or occupation. The Miwa shrine, mentioned above, for example is not only extremely ancient, with its sacred mountain as the divine presence, but its kami is also a particular patron of *sake* (rice wine) makers, who assemble there on special pilgrimage days. The Ise shrines drew huge companies of pilgrims in the Tokugawa period.

Sacred mountains are especially ancient, famous, and important as pilgrimage sites in Japan, going back to when the kami were thought to dwell on their cold and lonely heights, descended into the fields during the rice-growing season — but to visit them in their mountaintop home was, and is, especially exhilarating and purifying. Of these peaks, Mt. Fuji is undoubtedly best known. That incredibly beautiful and graceful mountain, the very symbol of Japan, attracts countless climbers every year, and in a sense they can be considered pilgrims, for there are Shinto shrines along the trail of ascent and at the summit.

Characteristically, the precise deity honored at Fuji is a little vague. The name seems to be derived from an Ainu\* fire-god, appropriately given the mountain's volcanic character, but was later replaced by a goddess called Konohana ("Flowering Tree"), of whom a romantic myth is told. Taking hu-

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\* The Ainu are a non-Japanese people (indeed, perhaps partly Caucasian) who dwelt in Japan before the present Japanese, but were pushed out by them and now live only in scattered communities on the northern islands of Hokkaido and now-Russian Sakhalin. They are probably the same as, or closely related to, the prehistoric people known as the Jomon (see next chapter), and the medieval Emishi (referred to at the end of this book in connection with the movie Princess Mononoke) driven back by the Japanese. Like the Native Americans, they have left place-names where they themselves have disappeared.

man form, she was beloved by and married a husband. In time she felt required to return to the realm of the immortals atop the peak, but out of compassion for his sorrow gave her spouse a mirror in which she could always be seen. However, unable to contain his love, he followed her to the peak. There he jumped off a precipice, and the smoke issuing from the volcano is the burning ardor of his passion. On the other hand, sectarian Shinto groups that organize Fuji pilgrimages, of which the principal are called Jikko-kyo and Fuso-kyo, believe on the grounds of their own revelations that the sacred mountain was the dwelling place of three gods of creation, and so truly the spiritual center of the world.

At the same time, the syncretism, the combining of different traditions, that has long characterized Japanese religion, above all on the popular level, is evident at Fuji. Until they were largely suppressed by Meiji Restoration Shinto, the peak and access to it was controlled by *yamabushi*, "mountain priests," followers of Shugendo. This path, nominally Buddhist, involves esoteric and ascetic practices done in the mountains. It will be studied later. Shugendo surely had sources in ancient Shinto shamanism and mountain lore as well as in the imported faith. Even today, the ascent of Fuji is laid out on sacred diagrams not only in Shinto terms, but no less as entailing traversing the ten realms of existence of esoteric Buddhism, and the high summit represents Enlightenment.

4. *The sociological role.* Clearly, Shinto's foundation lies in its relation to communities: family, business, town, nation. Participation in its Shinto worship is a manifestation of one's identity as a member of a community in Japan. State Shinto, and the accompanying Shinto worship in schoolrooms and on military parade-grounds, is not now what it was 1868-1945. But there remain essentially Shinto public events, like New

Years with its shrine visits (including vast groups of uniformed school children), and national holidays with Shinto overtones, especially the controversial Kenkoku Kinensai (“Foundation of the nation commemoration day”) on Feb. 11. Originally established as part of the Meiji Shinto Restoration under another name, it was restored in 1966; though officially secular, it is based on Shinto myth about the first emperor.

It is its more local manifestations, however, that the sociological importance of Shinto is most evident. We have illustrated the role of company and community matsuri, and family occasions. Mention might also be made of the importance of such Shinto ceremonies as dedicating new buildings, when priests are brought in to perform cornerstone-laying rites, and purifying edifices before use; this too can get into a “gray area” when it comes to dedicating public structures such as schools and government offices. As always, the question remains whether Shinto is “a religion” in the western sense, or something else unique to Japanese culture and almost indefinable in outsider terms, but undoubtedly very important to Japanese identity.

5. *Polytheism.* As a religion, if so it is, Shinto is of great interest for a further reason: it is the only thorough-going polytheistic religion — having many gods — still extant in a major advanced society today. For while Hinduism and Taoism, and in a sense Buddhism, have plural deities, the emphasis is always on how they are but manifestations of the One, and the distinct religious experience of polytheism as a way of seeing the sacred universe seems to be lost.

To be sure, in medieval and early modern times various schemes were developed, some in conjunction with Buddhism, some based on Neo-Confucianism, to bring the Shinto kami into philosophical oneness. But

the real focus in Shinto still lies in the gods' distinctiveness and local character. The distinguished theologian Paul Tillich once commented that the difference between monotheism (one God) and polytheism, like that of ancient pre-Christian Europe, is not a matter of quantity but of quality. It is not just that the former has but one deity whereas the latter has two or more. Rather, polytheism means the sacred world is experienced in a different way: as varied, nuanced, pluralistic, not reducible to a single entity or a single all-powerful will. There is a god for love and for war, for this sacred waterfall and that holy hill, each with distinct mood and myth, and as one moves from one to the other in time and space, one can intuit the difference.

The modern Shinto theologian Hirai Naofusa once told me that Shinto is the most democratic of religions, because in it has the kami decide matters by discussion and consensus, not arbitrary fiat. It creates, in the title of one of the great American philosopher William James' books, *A Pluralistic Universe*. Even though, as we know, one also finds strong conformist messages in Japanese society, the relativistic and reaching-a-consensus mentality is certainly part of the national character.

A polytheistic system requires cycles of mythology to give embodiment to its deities. Shinto has this in its two ancient books, the *Kojiki* ("Chronicles of Ancient Times") from 712 C.E. and the oldest extant Japanese book, and the *Nihongi* or *Nihonshoki* ("Chronicles of Japan"), 720 C.E. Both were written by order of the court at a time of rising Buddhist influence to keep alive a pre-Buddhist narrative of the country, and to present accounts legitimating imperial rule. While Chinese models were clearly used, and the propagandistic mission exerted its influence, the two works surely contain much very ancient and important material. The longer



*Nihongi* in particular is remarkable for its ability to present, almost in the manner of a modern folklore scholar, several variant and even contradictory versions of the same story.

The core narrative goes like this. The two primal parents, the male Izanagi and his consort Izanami, came down from the High Plain of Heaven on the Floating Bridge of Heaven; the earth was then all empty ocean as far as they could see. Izanagi dipped his spear into the watery waste and stirred it until it congealed into a bit of land, with the spear as a central pillar. The two kami deemed this a suitable place to dwell, and therein, after an initial disastrous experiment, began begetting much that was beautiful: the islands of Japan, kami of the mountains, sea, rivers, trees, and rice. But then, when Izanami gave birth to a fire-god, she burned herself terribly and had to descend to Yomi, the underworld land of the dead. Distraught, Izanagi followed, but found she had decayed and could not return again. Repelled by the horror and filth of the place of death, the male deity returned above.

He bathed in the ocean by way of purification. From the washings of his left eye the beautiful goddess Amaterasu of the sun came forth; from his right eye the moon-god Tsukiyomi; from his nose the wind-god Susanoo. This last deity, however, was rambunctious and unpredictable; a real trouble-maker, like the typhoons that ravage Japan. He went up to visit his lovely sister, and after a contest of procreation between them became enraged, violently destroying her rice-fields and weaving-hall, together with other outrages. Distressed, Amaterasu retreated to the rock-cave of heaven.

The "eight hundred myriads" of kami gathered on the banks of the heavenly river to seek a way to bring Amaterasu back out of the cave. They placed cocks,

her sacred bird, normally the herald of dawn, near her cave. One kami manufactured a special mirror; he waited with it near the entrance of her hiding-place. Then the goddess of dawn, Ama-no-Uzume, standing on an upturned tub, began doing a lewd dance which caused the kami to laugh uproariously. The sun goddess, curious as to what was going on, put her head out of the cave. The roosters crowed; the god with the mirror held it before her face. Entranced by the brightness of her own reflection, she emerged further out, and a kami put a sacred straw rope (*shimenawa*) across the entrance to the cave so she could not return.

Susanoo was barred from heaven and exiled below. However, in a later mythical episode, he redeemed himself somewhat by rescuing a maiden from a dragon and, marrying her, establishing a divine land around Izumo, in the western part of Japan. The Izumo shrine is now second only to Ise in antiquity and mythological fame. He and his descendant Okuninushi, "Lord of the Land," are there enshrined; he and Izumo are the subject of intriguing myths that in some ways present alternatives to the core myth just outlined. It was during the time of Okuninushi's rulership in Japan that Amaterasu became disturbed by the chaos, the struggles between good and evil kami, here below, and sent down her "Divine Grandson," Prince Ninigi, or Honinigi, to establish a dynasty to settle matters. She gave him the sacred mirror to remember her by; this is the mirror that drew her out of the cave, and is now hallowed at Ise. According to the myth, his great-grandson in turn, Jimmu, was the first emperor, enthroned in 660 B.C.E. by the western calendar; Emperor Akihito, who succeeded in 1989, would be the 125th in that line.

## The Meaning of Shinto

What does all of this mean? Is Shinto really a separate world-class religion, to be set alongside others like Christianity and Islam, as it is in some world religions textbooks? Is it really the ancient, pre-Buddhist religion of Japan still extant in modern times? Or is all of this a sort of delusion, or at worst deliberate deception? This has been a matter of much scholarly controversy. Some still contend that Shinto is, at least to a significant extent, primordial Japanese religion. Others argue that it was anciently so influenced by Chinese religion, in the middle ages so reconfigured by its symbiosis with Buddhism (when the same priests might service both the buddhas and the kami), and in modern times so reconstructed by the Meiji Restoration, with its “invention of tradition” and its drastic separation of Shinto and Buddhism, as to be little more than a new religion passing itself off as old.

We cannot settle this issue here. My own inclination would be to take a middle ground, acknowledging much of what revisionist critics say, but pointing out that nonetheless all through the centuries, in places like Ise and Izumo, even in the imperial court, as well as in numerous local traditions, something distinctively Shinto, or at least not explainable in any other terms, can be found, whether in texts, or in rituals, or in sacred places.

In any case, for us what is important to understand is Shinto in Japanese social and spiritual life today. Here it is separate and Buddhism and has a distinct “flavor” and life of its own, even though most Japanese may relate to both it and Buddhism.

## KEY POINTS YOU NEED TO KNOW

- The Grand Shrine of Ise is the main national shrine, dedicated to Amaterasu, mythological ancestress of the imperial line
- Other representative Shinto shrines include those of the Inari, Miwa, Meiji, Yasukuni, and Tenjin types
- Basic Shinto terms include kami, honden,shintai, torii, gohei, oharai, and shimenawa
- The Shinto year, beginning with New Years, contains many special occasions, some special to particular shrines, though most will include planting and harvest festivals, and the oharai or great purification twice a year. and of
- Shinto also offers individual rites of passage, including the dedication of children as ujiko and weddings
- Five keynotes of Shinto are: Purity vs. pollution, traditionalism, importance of practices, the sociological role, and polytheism
- The core Shinto myth is found in the Kojiki and Nihonshoki

## FOR FURTHER READING

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## Notes

1. Sir Ernest Satow, "The Shinto Temples of Ise," *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan*, vol. I, No. 2 (July 1874), p. 121. [Return to text.](#)
2. See, for example, Kenzo Tange and Noboru Kawazoe, *Ise: Prototype of Japanese Architecture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1965. [Return to text.](#)
3. See Robert Ellwood, "Harvest and Renewal at the Grand Shrine of Ise," *Numen*, XV, 3 (November 1968), pp. 165-190. [Return to text.](#)
4. Ian Reader, *Religion in Contemporary Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991, p. 75. [Return to text.](#)
5. See Karen Smyers, *The Fox and the Jewel: Shared and Private Meanings in Contemporary Japanese Inari Worship*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999. [Return to text.](#)
6. See Klaus Antoni, "Yasukuni-Jinja and Folk Religion," in Mark R. Mullins, Shimazono Susumu, and Paul L. Swanson, eds., *Religion and Society in Modern Japan*. Asian Humanities Press/ Nagoya: Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, 1993, pp. 121-132. This article points to an alternative interpretation of Yasukuni (also Ankoku: "Pacification of the Country") some have raised: not the orthodox view that these spirits protect the country, but rather that they themselves, having died violently and perhaps vengeful, are pacified. [Return to text.](#)

7. John K. Nelson, *A Year in the Life of a Shinto Shrine*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996. [Return to text.](#)
8. Reader, *Religion in Contemporary Japan*, p. 71. [Return to text.](#)
9. David C. Lewis, "Religious Rites in a Japanese Factory," in Mullins, Shimazono, and Swanson, *op. cit.*, pp. 157-170. The above summary is considerably simplified. [Return to text.](#)
10. *Ibid.*, p. 167. [Return to text.](#)