

# Shinto

## (part 1 of 2): What is Shintoism?

*According to the Princeton online dictionary Shintoism is the ancient indigenous religion of Japan. It lacks a formal dogma and is characterised by the veneration of nature spirits and ancestors.*<sup>[1]</sup>

*The name Shinto comes from Chinese characters for Shen ('divine being'), and Tao ('way') and means 'Way of the Spirits'.*<sup>[2]</sup>

It is extremely difficult to estimate the number of Shinto adherents throughout the world. Some sources give numbers in the range of 2.8 to 3.2 million. Others state that 40% of Japanese adults follow Shinto; if that was the case there would be about 50 million adherents. Yet other sources assert that about 86% of Japanese adults follow a combination of Shinto and Buddhism, which would put the number of adherents to Shinto at 107 million.<sup>[3]</sup>



Shintoism is concerned with ritual rather than dogma; thus the Japanese people do not consider it as a religion, rather it is considered an aspect of Japanese life. It is for this reason Shintoism has existed easily with Buddhism for centuries. There are no missionary efforts in Shinto, it is rarely practised outside Japan and there is no book or guide. Shinto and its rituals are handed down from generation to generation.

There is also no sacred scripture in Shintoism, but there are books of Japanese mythology and folklore, the Kojiki or 'Records of Ancient Matters' (712 CE) and the Nihon-gi or 'Chronicles of Japan' (720 CE).<sup>[4]</sup> According to the Kojiki, gods are believed to have created Japan as their image of paradise on earth, and the ruler of Japan, the Emperor, is a direct descendent of the Sun-goddess Amaterasu. The Japanese concept of the divinity of the Emperor is often misunderstood by those outside Japan. Neither the Emperor nor most of his people ever thought that the Emperor was a God in the sense of being a supernatural supreme being. However, the myths have in the past led some Japanese people believing that Japan and its people are special and more worthy of protection than those of different ethnicities.

Shintoism began around 500 BCE and was originally "an amorphous mix of nature worship, fertility cults, divination techniques, hero worship, and

shamanism."<sup>[5]</sup> It is polytheistic, whereby adherents venerate natural objects believed to contain spirit beings; these include mountains, rivers, water, rocks, and trees. Ancestors are also revered and worshipped. Shinto's morality and ethics are based upon what is of the most benefit to the entire community.<sup>[6]</sup> "Shinto emphasizes right practice, sensibility, and attitude." All human life and human nature is sacred.

The essence of Shinto however is devotion to the invisible spirit beings that are called Kami. They are not God or gods but spirits concerned with the Japanese people. If they are treated properly with ritual devotion they will intervene in people's lives with many benefits such as health and success. Most Kami do not have names but are referred to as the Kami of such and such a place. There are however three types of Kami that are of particular importance. The first of these are the Ujigami, the ancestors; humans become Kami after they die and are revered by their families as ancestral Kami.<sup>[7]</sup> The second type are the Kami of natural objects and the forces of nature and the third type are the souls of particularly righteous dead people. All humankind are regarded as Kami's children, thus believers revere "musuhi", the Kami's creative and harmonizing powers, and they aspire to have makoto or sincerity.<sup>[8]</sup> However not all Kami are good, some apparently can be downright evil.

The early texts briefly talk about the "plain of heaven" and a "dark land", the unclean land of the dead, but make very little mention of an afterlife because Shinto is wholly devoted to life in this world and emphasises humankind's essential goodness. Apparently evil Kami enter the world from the outside and effect humankind with such things as disease, and decay. When people act wrongly, they allow pollution and evil into the world and obstruct the flow of good energy. Consequently, the purpose of most Shinto rituals is to keep away evil spirits by purification, prayers and offerings to the Kami.

The introduction of Buddhism to Japan in the sixth century CE did not cause the abandonment of Shinto. Instead, both religions were expanded and Buddhist figures adopted complementary Shinto identities. Thus new converts to Buddhism were not obliged to abandon their traditional beliefs. In Japan Shinto places of worship are referred to as shrines while Buddhist places are called temples. The Kami live in the shrines and every village, town or district has its own Shinto shrine. It is rare for shrines to contain statues, however if statues do exist they are not worshipped rather they represent certain animals, like the fox or horse, that serve the Kami. Shinto worship is highly ritualised, and can take place in the shrines or in homes.

Many Japanese homes contain a place set aside as a shrine, called a Kami-dana. It is here that offerings of flowers or food are made, and prayers are said. The Kami-dana is a shelf that usually contains a tiny replica of the local shrine. It may also include amulets to ensure good luck or absorb bad luck and a mirror that connects the shelf to the Kami.

Shintoism pervades Japanese life at all levels. Japanese culture includes Shinto architecture and ancient art forms such as Noh theatre, Japanese

calligraphy and gagaku. It also includes ancient dance music that originated in the courts of Tang China (618 - 907). Throughout Japan a large number of wedding ceremonies are held in Shinto style. Death, however, is considered a source of impurity, and thus there are virtually no Shinto cemeteries, and most funerals are held in Buddhist style.<sup>[9]</sup>

In part two we will compare the Kami with the spirit beings of Islam, the jinn. We will look closely at festivals and rituals and discuss the fact that the followers of Shintoism are shackled to the ritual superstition that is often associated with polytheistic religions.

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### Footnotes:

[1] ([wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn](http://wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn))

[2] (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/shinto/ataglance/glance.shtml>)

[3] (<http://www.religioustolerance.org/shinto.htm>)

[4] (<http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Shinto/index.aspx>)

[5] (<http://www.shinreikyo.or.jp>)

[6] (<http://www.trincoll.edu/>)

[7] (<http://www.japan-guide.com/e/e2056.html>)

[8] (<http://www.religioustolerance.org/shinto.htm>)

[9] (<http://www.japan-guide.com/e/e2056.html>)

## (part 2 of 2): An example of Polytheism

The Shinto religion could be described as very localised. Adherents are concerned with worship either in their local shrine or in their home. It is a much ritualised religion that emphasizes humankind's essential goodness. Although Shinto teaches and requires high moral and ethical standards, it has no commandments or laws as such. There is no Supreme Being or God, and Shinto has no founder. Basically Shinto consists of belief in and worship of Kami. To allow for easy understanding Kami are often described as divine beings, however they are not like the gods and demi gods of other faiths.

Kami are not omnipotent, they do not exist in another universe or spiritual plane and they are not perfect beings. They make mistakes, behave badly and on occasions are downright evil. The Kami have many qualities in common with human beings and it is their duty to protect human beings. In turn human beings should look after the Kami, thus the ritual worship and offerings made to the Kami at shrines and home shrines across Japan. The word Kami can be translated to spirits or spirit beings, but it also refers to the essence of existence that is found in everything.

Kami is the sacred or mystical element in almost anything. It is in everything and is found everywhere, and is what makes an object itself rather

than something else. The word Kami means that which is hidden. In Islam we also have creatures that are often described as spirits and are called jinn. The Arabic word jinn is from the verb 'Janna' and means to hide or conceal. They explain the strange phenomena that effect and often harass human beings. People not aware of the reality of the Jinn, are usually not able to explain such events or attribute them to the souls of the dead.

The jinn are a creation of God, with no divine attributes. They live in the world with us but apart from us and are capable of being good or evil. In Islam however the great majority of jinn are evil and have been responsible for tempting and leading many people into the great sin of polytheism. The Kami are given offerings in the hope of appeasing them and encouraging them to protect and intervene in the lives of humankind. In Islam such adoration of the jinn would be considered a very great sin and could possibly result in eternal hellfire. In Islam we are taught to shun the jinn and learn ways to protect ourselves from their mischief and evil doing.

Islam also states categorically that none is worthy of worship apart from God alone. While the emphasis on good and righteous behaviour that is found in Shintoism is commendable, it is however brought about by something that Muslims consider to be totally unacceptable. In Islam it is God alone who directs the affairs of humankind. No matter how many offerings are made before a shrine or altar, it cannot change the fate decreed by God. Engaging in such behaviour serves little purpose other than tying a person to superstition and fear.

When making their offerings the followers of Shintoism engage in purification rituals. The agents used in the rituals performed at the beginning of any religious ceremony are usually water and salt. Shubatsu is a purification ritual in which salt is sprinkled on priests or worshippers, or on the ground to purify it. One notable use of salt in purification is found in Sumo wrestling when the fighters sprinkle salt around the ring to purify it. One of the simplest purification ritual is to rinse the face and hands with pure water at the start of a shrine visit in order to make the visitor pure enough to approach the Kami. Purity rituals also include bathing and standing under waterfalls.

Shinto festivals (matsuri) generally combine the solemn rituals with joyful celebrations that sometimes include drunken behaviour. The purification rituals and the offerings are often combined with music, dancing, and praise, and Shinto priests bless everything with the branch of the sacred sakaki tree dipped in holy water. Another, shamanistic type of Shinto ritual exists, usually in rural areas, in which miko (women shamans) speak for the Kami by falling into a trance. At the shrines the most traditional five offerings are rice, rice wine (sake), water, salt, and evergreen branches. They are offered in small, symbolic quantities, presented in white pottery containers and depending upon the region, season and festival, local produce including fruit and vegetables are also offered. It is traditional to offer any delicacy to the Kami before the people partake of it.

Another important element of Shinto festivals are processions, in which the local shrine's Kami is carried through the town in a palanquin. It is the only time of the year that the statues leave the shrine. There are also decorated floats in which people sit, and these are pulled through the streets to the accompaniment of flute and drum music. Some festivals are calm but many are energetic and noisy. To many outsiders, this combination of ritual and solemnity combined with vulgarity seems very irreverent however the followers of Shintoism believe it encapsulates the relationship Shinto has with the real world.

Shinto shrines and home altars not only contain statues and idols but a range of talismans to keep people safe while travelling or to provide them with good health, success in business, safety during childbirth etc. Special talismans are purchased at Shinto shrines to bring good luck and ward off evil spirits. They include arrows, small charms and small plaques (ema) which have a blank side on which people can write a wish or request. In most Shinto shrines there is a wall covered with wooden ema that contain requests written to the Kami.

A Muslim understands that the worship carried out in Shinto involves many elements of *shirk*<sup>[1]</sup>. Giving offerings, keeping statues and talismans and believing that creatures other than God can affect our lives are all aspects of polytheism. It is God who controls everything and nothing happens without His Will. In the religion of Islam belief in One God, without partners or associates is essential; it is the focal point of the religion. It is for this reason that Islam is often referred to as pure monotheism. It is not adulterated with strange concepts or superstitions such as the rituals that exist in Shintoism. God poses a question, am I not better, He asks.

**Is not He (better than your so-called gods) Who originates creation, and shall thereafter repeat it, and Who provides for you from heaven and earth? Is there any deity with God? Say, “Bring forth your proofs, if you are truthful.” (Quran 27: 64)**

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#### Footnotes:

<sup>[1]</sup> *Shirk* is the sin of idolatry or polytheism. It is the deification or worship of anyone or anything other than the One God.