

# CIS Bulletin: Shintoism

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**Number of Shintoists:** The number is uncertain as most Japanese practice more than one religion at a time, usually Shintoism and Mahayana Buddhism, or are non-religious. Shinto and Buddhism typically do not require professing faith to be a believer or a practitioner. It is typical in Japan to register or celebrate a birth at a Shinto shrine, while funeral arrangements are generally dictated by Buddhist tradition

Officially, there are currently 119 million practitioners of Shinto in Japan. However, at birth, all Japanese are registered as Shintoists and as such are regarded as “kami’s child.” Some Shintoists believe all Japanese are descendants of kami and thus are sacred. There are about 80,000 Shinto shrines throughout Japan.

**Number of Shintoists in the United States:** There are only a few Shintoists outside Japan; estimates for Shintoists in the USA are around 1,000.

**Shinto is the indigenous animistic religion of Japan.** Some scholars believe this practice began as early as 500 B.C. as a mixture of “nature worship, fertility cults, divination techniques, hero worship, and shamanism.” The name Shinto was coined in the 6th century A. D. to separate it from the influence of Buddhism and Confucianism. The name comes from the Chinese word *shen*, “divine being,” and *tao*, “way.” Japanese translate the word Shinto as “the way of the *kami*.” *Kami* are sacred powers or spirits present in all things, including animals, trees, plants, mountains, and oceans. Humans can become kami at death.

**The origins of Shinto** are not known; Shinto arose from the traditions and practices of Japanese animistic religions before historical records were available. Shinto has no founder, no agreed system of doctrine, and no collection or canon of sacred scriptures, though its mythology is collected in the “Records of Ancient Matters” and the “Chronicles of Japan”, written in the early 8th century.

Shinto is practiced at shrines (*jinja*), which are most easily distinguished from Buddhist temples by the torii gates that mark the entrance, and in homes.



This Shinto Torii Gate located in the Inland Sea marks the division between the secular and the sacred.

**T**he first raid on the Japanese islands during World War II was led by Lt. Col. Jimmy Doolittle, who with a squadron of 16 B-25B medium bombers bombed the island of Honshu on 18 April 1942. The raid, launched from the U. S. aircraft carrier, the Hornet, was not intended to cause serious damage to the Japanese military, but was launched for three reasons: to give the Americans a badly needed morale boost after the sneak attack on Pearl Harbor; to show the Japanese people that their military could not protect their homeland; and finally, and perhaps most important, to show the Japanese people that their gods or the Emperor could not protect their “divine islands.”

Because the bombers could not land on the aircraft carrier, the planes continued on to China where they either landed or crashed. Several crewmen were executed by the Japanese, but most eventually returned to the U.S.

Early Japanese mythology holds that the Japanese islands themselves are divine. According to this myth, a divine couple (*kami*), *Izanagi* (Japanese: “He Who Invites”) and *Izanami* (Japanese: “She Who Invites”), gave birth to the Japanese islands.

Actually brother and sister, they were the eighth pair of gods to appear after heaven and earth separated out of chaos. They then procreated numerous other islands. Their children became the deities of the various Japanese clans.

*Izanami* was fatally burned after giving birth to the fire god. Her brother/husband had to bath to ritually purify himself after seeing his dead sister/wife; this is believed to be the reason for the purification practices in Shinto. *Amaterasu Omikami*, the Sun Goddess, was born from *Izanagi*’s left eye and the moon god *Tsukiyomi* was born from his right eye; the storm god was born from his nose.

*Amaterasu Omikami* is the ancestress of the Imperial Family and is regarded as the chief deity. Her shrine is at Ise.

The Bigelow Tea Company has nothing to do with Shinto but uses three symbols important in Japan and in Shino: the sun, Mt. Fuji, and the torii gate, all of which are sacred in Shinto.



Amaterasu is the chief deity, but kami are much more important.

Until the end of World War II, the Emperor was believed to have been descended from Amaterasu and this divine status was popularized during the Meiji Restoration. This did not prevent military governors (Shogun) from usurping power, but the emperor was always seen as the true ruler of Japan, even when his rule was only nominal. Although Emperor Hirohito renounced his divine status in 1946 under American pressure, the imperial family remains deeply involved in the Shinto ritual that unifies the Japanese nation symbolically.

Phenomenon which have great influences on human life are worshipped as kami, such as rain, wind, mountains, ocean, rivers and thunder.

### Four Main Types of Shinto

- Shrine Shinto is the most prevalent of the Shinto types. It has always been a part of Japan's history and constitutes the main current of Shinto tradition. Shrine Shinto is associated in the popular imagination with summer festivals, good luck charms, making wishes, holding ground breaking ceremonies, and showing support for the nation of Japan. Before the Meiji Restoration, shrines were disorganized institutions usually attached to Buddhist temples, but they were claimed by the government during the imperial period for patriotic use and systematized. The successor to the imperial organization, the Association of Shinto Shrines, oversees about 80,000 shrines nationwide.

- Imperial Shinto is the religious rites performed exclusively by the Imperial Family at the three shrines on the Imperial grounds, including the Ancestral Spirits Sanctuary and the Sanctuary of the Kami

- Folk Shinto includes the numerous but fragmented folk beliefs in deities and spirits. Practices include divination, spirit possession, and shamanic healing. Some of their practices come from Taoism, Buddhism, or Confucianism, but most come from ancient local traditions.

- Sect Shinto is a legal designation originally created in the 1890s to separate government-owned shrines from local religious practices. They do not have shrines, but conduct religious activities in meeting halls. Shinto sects include the mountain-worship sects, who focus on worshipping mountains like Mount Fuji, faith-healing sects, purification sects, Confucian sects, and Revival Shinto sects.

- State Shinto, which held that the Emperor was divine, was outlawed after the defeat of Japan at the end of World War II.



**Yasukuni Shinto Shrine in Tokyo**

The Yasukuni Shinto Shrine in Tokyo is dedicated to the *kami* (spirits) of soldiers and others who died fighting on behalf of the Emperor of Japan. Currently, its *Symbolic Registry of Divinities* lists the names of over 2,466,000 enshrined men and women whose lives were dedicated to the service of Imperial Japan, particularly to those killed in wartime. It was the only place to which the Emperor of Japan has ever bowed.

This shrine causes international outrage and diplomatic crises with Korea and China when the Prime Minister and other politicians of Japan visits the shrine each August. The shrine houses the remains of 1,082 war criminals from the Second World War who were either executed or died in prison.

The Nanking Massacre or Nanjing Massacre, also known as the Rape of Nanking, was a six-week period following the Japanese capture of the city of Nanjing (Nanking), the former capital of the Republic of China, on December 13, 1937. During this period, hundreds of thousands of civilians were murdered and 20,000–80,000 women were raped by soldiers of the Imperial Japanese Army. The massacre remains a contentious political issue, especially between Japan and China. (The Japanese government claims the massacre has been exaggerated by China, but in the early 1980s, China brought a photographic exhibit to Atlanta showing some of the murders and rapes that occurred at Nanking. I believe the massacre occurred although no one can ever give exact figures of the number of victims.)

The International Military Tribunal of the Far East estimates 260,000 casualties at Nanjing; China's official estimate is 300,000 casualties, based on the evaluation of the Nanjing War Crimes Tribunal. Some Japanese insist there were no more than 40,000 victims.

### Affirmations in Shinto

Shinto has no specific beliefs that followers must accept, but four affirmations are important.

- The importance of tradition, especially tradition related to the family in such events as birth and marriage.

- The respect of nature, the home of the kami. Japanese enjoy being close to nature and thus close to the kami. The most striking theme one notices in Shinto-

ism is a great love and reverence for nature and objects in nature. A waterfall, the moon, or even an oddly shaped rock might be a kami.

- Physical cleanliness which involved baths, washing of hands and rinsing out the mouth often for ritual cleanliness.

- Observance of the many festivals dedicated to the kami and ancestral spirits.

### Major Shinto Teachings

- Shinto is not a revealed religion with a divinely inspired scripture: the books it treats as holy are descriptions of Shinto practice, often histories. The mythical histories *Kojiki* (Records of Ancient Matters) and *Nihon shoki* (Chronicles of Japan) describe the deeds and genealogies of the gods from the creation of Japan by the primal pair, Izanagi and Izanami. These books trace the descent of the imperial line from Amaterasu and may have been compiled to validate the imperial family's claim to divine right

- Confucianism and Taoism arrived in Japan by the 5th or 6th century, so it would be expected to find these two Chinese philosophies have influenced Japanese life. Most Japanese homes have a Shinto god or kami shelf as well as a Buddhist altar.

- Shinto has no founder and no fixed creeds.

- Animistic myths discussed beginning on page 1 of this Bulletin indicate that animism was an important part of early Japanese religion — and still is. Shinto is essentially an animistic religion.

- Shinto originally had no buildings as places of worship. People worshiped things in nature that were sacred. A person might worship a tree or a mountain that was sacred to them. These places were marked by straw ropes that were hung with strips of paper.

- A part of Shinto is the worship of ancestors and national heroes. These figures from the past become gods in Shintoism.

- Kami are viewed as powerful beings who reside on earth. They are said to possess unimaginable amounts of power. Some kami are good; while other kami are bad. Kami can take for form of anything in nature, so anything out of the ordinary, such as a genetic mutation, or a strangely shaped object in nature, was believed to hold large quantities of kami. In addition, every Japanese can become a kami upon death.

Origami, from *ori* meaning “folding”, and *kami* meaning “spirit”) is the traditional Japanese folk art of paper folding, which started in the 17th century AD and was popularized in the mid-1900s. It has since then evolved into a modern art form. Since the resulting art form is considered representative of a kami, cutting and gluing is not allowed. Origami is especially popular at Japanese weddings.

- Shinto holds a generally positive view of human nature; human sin, as taught in the Judeo-Christian faiths, is not found in Shinto. Wrong deeds are called “impurity” as opposed to “purity.”

A common Shinto saying is that “man is kami’s child.” First, this means that a person was given his life by kami and that his nature is therefore sacred. In actuality, however, this divine nature is seldom revealed in man, which gives rise to the need for purification. Purification, by washing with water, symbolically removes the dust and impurities that cover one’s inner mind.

Many cars made in Japan have been blessed as part of the assembly process. Moreover, every Japanese car factory built in the United States or away from Japan has had a groundbreaking ceremony performed by a Shinto priest, with occasionally an annual visitation by the priest to re-purify.

- Cleanliness is an important aspect of Shintoism. When a person approaches a Shinto shrine they must perform several rituals of cleanliness. These include rinsing the mouth and washing the hands.

Japanese communal bath houses were traditionally used by people who did not have baths in their small homes. But some use the bath houses because they believe Men and women bathe separately and usually a female guard is positioned to watch both sides to be certain no one peaks over or around the six-foot high wall separating the men and women. A person must wash with soap before entering the communal baths. A person must pay to enter a bath house, along with soap, shampoo, etc. unless he/she brings those items from home. Public bath houses were introduced to Japan by Buddhists from India by way of China.

The number of public baths in Japan peaked around 1970.

- The Shinto view of the afterlife is ambiguous. Normally anything to do with death gets turned over to Buddhism, so there really hasn’t been much incentive to define it more clearly. The deceased will usually become kami, with their power and main characteristics determined by their activities in life.

Shinto scriptures speak of a Dark Place, like a subterranean cave inhabited by monsters, and the High Plain of Heaven as both a palace and a cave, but both places are simply mentioned in passing.

### Festivals

There are countless local festivals (*matsuri*) in Japan because almost every shrine celebrates one of its own. Most festivals are held annually and celebrate the shrine’s deity or a seasonal or historical event. Some festival are held over several days. Many festivals feature decorated floats which are pulled through the city, usually with many people riding.

The New Year is the most important holiday in Japan. People usually spend New Year's holidays quietly at home eating various food which are believed to bring health, happiness, fertility, etc. There is a custom of giving money to children during New Year's holidays in Japan. It is traditional for Japanese people to visit to a shrine or a temple during New Year's holidays, more out of custom than for religious reasons. People pray at shrines for safety, health and good fortune.

Japanese people tend to celebrate the Western New Year on 01 January rather than the Chinese New Year.

Obon or simply Bon is a Japanese Buddhist festival to honor the spirits of one's ancestors. Sometimes a dance is held to welcome the spirits and to show the spirits that they are still honored. Bon lasts for three days and can begin at different dates at different locations in Japan. Family reunions and care of cemetery lots are popular during Bon. The festival usually includes a huge carnival with rides, games, and summer festival food like watermelon. The festival ends with the floating of lanterns. Paper lanterns are illuminated and then floated down rivers symbolically signaling the ancestral spirits' return to the world of the dead. This ceremony usually culminates in a fireworks display.

The Doll Festival is a day, usually around March 1, when families pray for the happiness and prosperity of their girls and to help ensure that they grow up healthy and beautiful, and that evil spirits will not harm their daughters.

Children's Day is held on 05 May to honor mainly boys. The day was made a national holiday in 1948.

Various cherry blossom (and other flowers) festivals are held at Shinto shrines during the month of April. Excursions and picnics for enjoying flowers, particularly cherry blossoms are also common. It is a popular time to be out-of-doors.

The Star Festival originated from a Chinese folk legend concerning two stars — the Weaver Star (Vega) and the Cowherd Star (Altair) — who were said to be lovers who could meet only once a year on the 7th night of the 7th month provided it didn't rain and flood the Milky Way. It was named Tanabata after a weaving maiden from a Japanese legend, named Orihime who was believed to make clothes for the gods. People often write wishes and romantic aspirations on long, narrow strips of coloured paper and hang them on bamboo branches along with other small ornaments.

The Japanese tea ceremony, also called the Way of Tea, is a Japanese cultural activity involving the ceremonial preparation and presentation of powdered green tea. Zen Buddhism was a primary influence in the development of the tea ceremony. Tea was introduced to Japan in the 9th century by a Buddhist monk who came from China.

Calligraphy, mainly in the form of hanging scrolls, plays a central role in tea ceremony. Scrolls, often written by famous calligraphers or Buddhist monks, are hung in the tea room. A flower or flower arrangement is also important in the tea ceremony. A meal may also be served in a formal tea ceremony. On formal occasions the host — male or female — always wears a kimono. Proper attire for guests is kimono or western formal wear.

In Japan, those who wish to study the tea ceremony typically join what is known in Japanese as a "circle", which is a generic term for a group that meets regularly to participate in a given activity. There are also tea clubs at many junior high and high schools, colleges and universities.

## Geisha

Geisha, geiko or geigi are traditional, female Japanese entertainers whose skills include performing various Japanese arts such as classical music and dance. The term geisha literally translates to mean "entertainer."



Although Westerners often think of Geisha as prostitutes, few geisha have accepted money from men for sexual favors. American GIs popularized the idea that geisha were prostitutes after World War II when some prostitutes pretended to be geisha.

Prostitution was legal in Japan until the beginning of the 20th century. Traditional Japan embraced sexual delights (it is not a Shinto taboo) and men were not constrained to be faithful to their wives. The ideal wife was a modest mother and manager of the home, by Confucian custom love had secondary importance. For sexual enjoyment and romantic attachment, men did not go to their wives, but to courtesans.

In the 1920s, there were over 80,000 geisha in Japan, but today, there are far fewer. The exact number is unknown to outsiders and is estimated to be from 1,000 to 2,000, mostly in the resort town of Atami.