Shinto

Shinto is the name for the religious beliefs and practices that are believed to have developed in Japan prior to the importation of foreign religious traditions from the Asian continent, beginning in the sixth century CE. With rare historical exceptions, the Japanese have not attempted to propagate Shinto outside of Japan, believing that it was the foundation of their cultural heritage and identity. One might conclude that the impact of Shinto in world history has been minor, but this is not the case. Shinto deeply influenced Japan’s interactions with other cultures. Moreover, it continues to serve as a major religious and cultural institution in contemporary Japan.

Shinto in the Premodern Period

It is difficult to say with any certainty when Shinto began. Shinto had no founder and no scriptural tradition. Rather, the elements of what eventually became identified as Shinto developed over a period of centuries, perhaps from the fourth century BCE to the sixth century CE. During this period, ritual specialists worshipped spirits called kami. Shinto, in fact, literally means the “Way of the kami.” While “spirit” is one generally accepted English equivalent for kami, the concept of the kami defies any simple translation. One eighteenth-century scholar of Shinto offered this explanation:

I do not yet understand the meaning of the term kami. Speaking in general, however, it may be said that kami signifies, in the first place, the deities of heaven and earth that appear in the ancient records and also the spirits of the shrines where they are worshipped... It also includes such objects as birds, beasts, trees, plants, seas, mountains, and so forth. In ancient usage, anything whatsoever which was outside the ordinary, which possessed superior power, or which was awe-inspiring was called kami (Motoori Norinaga, quoted in Tsunoda 1958, 21).

Until the seventh century CE, there was no coherent state in Japan. Instead, various clans controlled their own territories. Historians believe that one of these clan leaders managed to convince other powerful clans of his ability to communicate with the kami. Over the course of the fifth and sixth centuries, the hereditary leader of this clan formed alliances with other clans, and Japan’s first state, known as Yamato, was born. The leader of the dominant clan became the sovereign of this state and the “emperor” of Japan. That clan’s connection with the kami meant that Shinto was linked with the new ruling family. Three of the most important Shinto shrines, for example, house the regalia that symbolize imperial rule. The Grand Shrines at Ise, which have been rebuilt every twenty or twenty-one years since the seventh century, are especially important as the primary site for the reverence of the kami Amaterasu, the deity of the sun and divine ancestor of the imperial family. It is at the Ise shrines that certain Shinto rituals connected with the imperial family, such as the enthronement of a new emperor, are usually conducted.

The institutional and doctrinal character of Shinto during this early period lacked coherence. Its rituals and practices were confined mostly to the social and political elites of the clans; the rest of Japanese society had their own forms of worship, which were only absorbed into Shinto in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Shinto became more clearly defined in contradistinction to Buddhism, which arrived in Japan in 538. Korean monks from the state of Paekche brought copies of Buddhist sutras with them to Japan, and many of these monks took up residence in Japan as teachers. Unlike Shinto, Buddhism had a founder, scriptural texts, and an exegetical tradition. Japanese elites were fascinated with Buddhism, which far surpassed Shinto in the sophistication of its teachings and practices. The “magic” of Buddhism, as evidenced by some Buddhist monks’ knowledge of medical herbs and healing, also seemed superior to the magic of

"Strength does not come from physical capacity. It comes from an indomitable will." • Mohandas Gandhi (1869–1948)
Shinto. During the sixth century, a rivalry developed between the adherents of Buddhism and Shinto priests, and it was during this period that Shinto began to develop a true institutional identity.

Although Shinto never lost its close association with the imperial court, Buddhism was very nearly given the status of a state religion in 745 CE by Emperor Shomu (701–756; reigned 715–749). In addition, Buddhism began to appeal more to the general populace during the eleventh century, as less esoteric, more faith-based schools of Buddhism were introduced. For the most part, Shinto leaders ignored commoner worshippers.

Ryobu Shinto
During Japan’s classical and medieval periods (seventh through sixteenth centuries), there were two important developments in Shinto. The first was the emergence, beginning in the ninth century, of an esoteric strain called Ryobu Shinto, a syncretization of esoteric Buddhism and Shinto that equated particular Shinto deities with particular Buddhist deities. In this effort, the Shinto deities were viewed as incarnations of Buddhist gods, so that the latter took precedence over the former. In Ryobu Shinto, Shinto’s doctrinal void was filled with Buddhist teachings. Ryobu Shinto was a dominant presence in the world of doctrinal Shinto until the fifteenth century.

Yoshida Shinto
A Shinto priest, Yoshida Kane-tomo (1435–1511), was dissatisfied with Ryobu Shinto because of its theological emphasis on Buddhism. He reversed Ryobu Shinto’s syncretistic hierarchy and introduced Neo-Confucian values and teachings into Shinto. The result was called Yoshida Shinto. Although there were other Buddhist-Shinto blendings prior to the seventeenth century, Yoshida Shinto gradually became associated with the imperial court and Yoshida priests became the court’s ritual specialists.

Shinto and Modern Japan
During the early modern period, roughly 1600 to 1870, scholars and intellectuals who wanted to purge Shinto of all foreign influences created a new field of Shinto scholarship. These nativist scholars (Japanese: kokuyakusha) argued that Shinto must be purified of its long-standing ties to Buddhism, since the latter was a foreign creed. Yoshida Shinto’s emphasis on Neo-Confucianism was similarly problematic because Neo-Confucianism was an intellectual import from China. The nativists believed that their mission was to eliminate foreign doctrinal contaminants from Shinto and to replace them with authentically Japanese teachings and values. They argued that these teachings could be found after a careful and thorough examination of Japan’s classical literature, especially works composed in the period from the eighth to thirteenth centuries. According to the nativists, once Shinto was properly purified, it could become the basis for asserting a truly unique Japanese culture, which they believed was the only way to rectify the problems of their society. At the same time, the nativists of the early modern period believed that Shinto’s lack of articulated teachings was one of its unique and valuable features. There was no need to govern the behavior of the Japanese people, they argued, because they were already blessed by the kami with the internal capacity to self-regulate. Another aspect of Shinto that the nativists called attention to, and that continues to be important in contemporary Shinto, is Shinto’s the reverence for nature. Scenes of natural beauty, such as mountains,
rock formations, and waterfalls, are believed to harbor their own kami. To commemorate the presence of the kami, a small shrine is erected, symbolized by a torii, a gate-like structure composed of two support beams and a crossbeam.

In 1868, when samurai political domination came to an end and the emperor was, in theory, restored to actual power, Shinto was given renewed cultural and political power. Shinto priests advocated that the new government be modeled on the one that had existed before the advent of warrior rule in 1192. Although the effort to resurrect the imperial government of the classical period was abandoned in favor of the creation of a government similar to those of the European powers, the services of Shinto priests were retained by government officials in the movement to establish a state religion. Japanese intellectuals argued that the material and technological successes of the Europeans were rooted, in part, in the strength of their religious values. The Japanese, they believed, needed to identify their own values and foreground them if they were to transform Japan into a strong nation like those of the West. After much debate, chiefly with the Buddhists, the Shinto priests succeeded in the creation and adoption of State Shinto. Thus, Shinto had an instrumental part in the emergence of Japan’s modern state.

During the 1930s and 1940s, supporters of State Shinto were vocal supporters of the view that it was Japan’s destiny to dominate the rest of Asia. When the tide turned against Japan in World War II, “special attack brigades” were formed, the most famous of which were the suicide pilots who flew their planes into enemy ships. Since the hope was that these pilots could reverse Japan’s military decline, the Japanese called them the kamikaze, the “wind of the kami” in a deliberate invocation of a typhoon that had arrived, apparently in answer to the prayers of Shinto priests, and destroyed the boats of an invading Mongol army in the thirteenth century. Just as the kami had saved Japan from the Mongols, it was hoped that they would save it from the Allies.

In the postwar period, one shrine has generated controversy beyond Japan’s borders. Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo was originally built at the end of the nineteenth century to commemorate the souls of those who had fought on behalf of the imperial court in the overthrow of the samurai government in 1868. Later, it became the site for the veneration of soldiers and sailors who had died in subsequent wars, such as the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), and World War I. In the postwar period, the ranks of those who had died in World War II were included in that

The Basic Principles
Fukkoo Kyoodan
(The Light of Happiness)
Sect of Shinto

1. To believe in a God, the creator of the universe and all living things, who is absolute and eternal and indestructible, and the guiding principle of the human spirit. To reject all false beliefs in superstition, spiritualism and prophecy.

2. To inflict no harm physical or spiritual, on oneself or on others; to reject revenge and to love one’s neighbour.

3. Not to desire the possessions of others.

4. To eschew lewdness.

5. To avoid falsehood.

6. To reflect constantly on thought, word and deed, that they may always accord with the dictates of conscience.

As methods of carrying out these principles:

1. To take deep breaths every morning, and thus compose the body and spirit.

2. By contemplation to strive to realize the state of samurai (samadhi, trance), and to practice a transcendentally religious life.

number. Government leaders, including the prime minister, have paid official visits to the shrine. This has sparked outrage in both North and South Korea and in the People’s Republic of China over what the populations in those countries feel is a show of respect for the dead of an unjust and aggressive war, and a sign that Japanese claims of remorse for the war are not genuine.

Contemporary Shinto

The leaders of the postwar Allied Occupation of Japan (1945–1952) insisted that the Japanese abolish State Shinto. Although the imperial institution was allowed to endure, Shinto itself settled into two major forms. The first, a successor to State Shinto, is a set of practices surrounding the emperor and the imperial court, but purged of prewar ideology. The other developed out of traditions not directly associated with the imperial court. These were the benign practices performed by many Japanese people as a way to mark important events, such as the milestone years of childhood, the coming of age for young adults, and especially weddings.

Shinto manifests itself in the lives of ordinary people in other ways as well. Purification rituals are a common occurrence in contemporary Japan. Metaphors of purity and defilement are central to Shinto. Many Japanese will hire Shinto priests to purify people, places, and objects by driving out evil spirits. A building site is normally cleansed after construction and before it is open to the public. In order to invoke the protection of the kami, many Japanese purchase talismans (omamori) from shrines for such things as academic success and successful conceptions. On the eve of their high school or university entrance exams, students compose notes inscribed with their wishes for academic success and tie them to tree branches at Shinto shrines. Throughout the year, in all parts of Japan, people participate in festivals that are usually organized around local Shinto shrines.

It is perhaps not inaccurate to characterize Shinto as a religion of practitioners but not believers. While there are some worshippers who observe Shinto exclusively, most Japanese people observe both Buddhist and Shinto practices, exhibiting what some Japanese scholars describe as a kind of psychological “cohabitation.” For example, it is not uncommon for families to make offerings in their home at both a Shinto “kami shelf” (kamidana) and at a Buddhist altar (butsudan). The latter is especially important for the veneration of ancestors and recently deceased family members.

Shinto and World History

Although Shinto is not generally considered to be one of the world’s great religions, it has had an impact on
world history. It has had its moments of infamy, serving as the pretext for war and invasion. During the 1570s, the war leader Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536–1598) rose to become the most powerful samurai in Japan, earning the title of imperial regent. In a letter to the Portuguese viceroy in Goa, he cited Japan’s special place in the world by invoking Shinto: “Ours is the land of the Gods [kami], and God is mind. This God is spoken of by Buddhism in India, Confucianism in China, and Shinto in Japan. To know Shinto is to know Buddhism as well as Confucianism” (Quoted in Tsunoda 1958, 317). Hideyoshi made it clear that his rule was with the consent of the kami and the emperor, who himself was viewed as a living kami. Empowered with the sanction of Shinto, Hideyoshi ordered the invasion of Korea in 1592, with the eventual goal of subjugating China.Hideyoshi’s death put an end to his plans for conquest, but not before Japanese forces had wreaked considerable havoc in Korea. In Japan, however, he was deified and subsequently worshipped as a Shinto kami.

As mentioned earlier, Shinto was also invoked in Japan’s rise to militarism and imperialism in the 1930s. The unique “Japanese soul” (Yamato damashii) bespoke innate Japanese superiority and fostered an attitude of contempt for other, lesser peoples.

But Shinto was also instrumental in the emergence of the modern state in a more positive sense, supporting a sense of place and a sense of community. Shinto’s deep connections to the Japanese imperial institution survive to this day, helping it to preserve its authority and majesty. Even without a coherent doctrinal tradition,

Two Shinto good luck charms.

Shinto has functioned as the foundation of Japan’s cultural identity for more than a millennium.

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Further Reading


