

Shinto

WHO IS GOD?

There are many kami (deities) in Shinto, although no one deity has been ascribed the designation of God, in terms of being chief, or creator. The most revered deity is Amaterasu, the sun goddess. She is the daughter of Izanagi and Izanami, who, according to legend, created the islands of Japan. Amaterasu is considered a direct ancestor to the Japanese imperial line. Shinto does accept the validity of gods from other religions as well, but does not view any particular deity as the ultimate deity. Though Amaterasu is the most highly revered in Japan, she is considered just one of numerous gods. Some of the reverence accorded to Amaterasu must be attributed to her connection with the Japanese imperial dynasties.

WHERE DID WE COME FROM?

Shinto's legends about creation are limited to the islands of Japan. Japan was created by Izanagi and Izanami, who then chose to dwell there. This gives Japan a pre-eminence in the eyes of its people, who feel that it is the best and only place to live. Shinto has been influenced by Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, and feels that all deities (kami), even those from other religions, are valid. Confucianism and Taoism state that the Tao is the cause of all that is, and Shinto would accept that as valid, even while retaining its own creation accounts.

WHY ARE WE HERE?

We are here to honor the kami, who can be deities, or familial ancestors. We are also here to purge ourselves from evil spirits. Humans are fundamentally good, but evil spirits do exist. The rituals performed in Shinto shrines, and in the home, are intended to both honor the kami, and to purify oneself from the influence of evil spirits. Talismans play an important role in this as well. Death is considered evil, and Shinto does not have rituals for dealing with death and funerals. Instead, all of these tend to be Buddhist rituals.

HOW DO WE KNOW?

There is little established scripture in Shinto. Many traditions and rituals were passed down through the family alone. They were not codified until the seventh century CE. The first attempt to codify the myths and traditions of the families and clans was the Kujiki, or the Chronicle of Old Events. It traced the history of the emperors from Jimmu Tenno onward, and was written in 620 CE (Common Era, formerly AD, Anno Domini, year of our Lord). In 712 CE, the Kojiki, or Chronicle of Ancient Events, was written. It aimed at presenting a history of Japan from the creation of the world until the middle of the seventh century CE. Around the same time, the Nihongi, or Chronicles of Japan, were released (720 CE) with slight variations and additions to the Kojiki. In 806 CE, the Kogoshui, or Gleanings from Ancient Sources, was published to defend the practices of one of the Shinto priestly guilds. In the beginning of the tenth century CE, the Engi-shiki, was written, a compendium of Shinto rites and ceremonies, particularly those related to the imperial cult. There are also several history books considered important in Shinto. They are:

- * Rokkokushi, or the Six National Histories
- * Shoku Nihongi and Nihon Shoki, the continuing Chronicles of Japan
- * Jinno Shotoki, a study of Shinto and Japanese politics and history.

WHAT DO WE HAVE TO DO?

The basis of Shinto is honoring one's family kami and ancestors. There are rituals to accomplish this, both at a shrine, or in the home. Shinto, as a national religion, also calls for obedience to and respect for Japan. Its patriotism is a natural extension of the love that Japanese people have for their homeland. Shinto leaders are also focusing on the necessity of international cooperation, and are working toward helping adherents to become global citizens, thus extending one's patriotic duties to the entire planet. Shinto also holds the environment in very high accord, and many adherents feel moved to be involved in various environmental protection programs.

Connected to shrines in Shinto, are numerous festivals and processions. The following are several of the major ones:

- * Sapporo Yukimatsuri (snow festival): Sapporo City. (Three days in the beginning of February)
- * Sanja Matsuri: Asakusa Shrine's festival. It is one of the three big festivals of Tokyo. (Middle of May)
- * Kyoto Gion Matsuri: Yasaka Shrine's festival with huge, 6 meters high kasahoko. It is one of three big festivals in Kyoto. (almost the whole month of July)
- * Hakata Gion Yamagasa: Each area of the city has its own car. They compete in a race against each other. Fukuoka city (July 15)
- * Nebuta Matsuri: Aomori City. (Aug. 1-7)
- * Kanto Matsuri (lantern festival): Akita City. (Aug. 4-7)
- * Tanabata Matsuri (star festival): Held in several cities; the most famous in Sendai City (August 6-8) and Hiratsuka City, Kanagawa Pref.
- * Awaodori: Dancing festival in Tokushima. (August 15-18)
- * Takayama Matsuri: Famous for its huge kasahoko. Held in spring (Apr. 14-15) and autumn (Oct. 9-10).
- * Nagasaki Kunchi: Festival of the Suwa Shrine with much Chinese influence. It features Chinese dragons, portable miniature ships. Nagasaki city (October 7-9)

WHAT'S GOING ON TODAY?

Shinto today is similar to its original form, but has incorporated ideas from several other traditions, including Confucianism and Buddhism. Today, many adherents of Shinto are also adherents of Buddhism. For this reason, it is difficult to determine just how many adherents there are. Some sources place the number at around three million. Others note, however, that anywhere from forty to eight percent of Japanese citizens still consider themselves part of Shinto. This would cause the number to rise to between fifty and one hundred million. Both of those higher figures would put Shinto in the top five religions, by number of adherents.

HOW DO WE RECOGNIZE IT?

Shinto is recognized by the torii, a distinctive arch or gate erected at the entrance to the sacred precincts of a shrine. The torii separates the inner area of the shrine from the profane world surrounding it.

The 411 on the founding of Shinto

Who: Shinto, as a religion, has no founder. It is said to date back to prehistoric times. Myths and legends surrounding the creation of the nation of Japan are thought to be the foundations for this socio-religious institution.

What: Shinto is an indigenous, national, socio-religious institution, which highly values the traditions and history of Japan. The word Shinto is derived from the Chinese word shen-tao, and means way of the gods (kami-no-michi in Japanese). The basis of Shinto is worship of the kami. Kami is roughly translated as deity, but it applies to deities and noble people from history, including the ancestors of the Japanese people and the Japanese imperial dynasties. Shrines are the center of Shinto, with each shrine being dedicated to a specific kami. To enter a shrine, one passes through a torii, a gateway that is the demarcation between the finite (profane) world and the infinite (sacred) world of the gods. Most homes have an altar (kami-dana, shelf of gods) dedicated to worshiping the family kami and ancestors.

When: Shinto is said to have always existed in Japan, in some form. At present, there are three types of Shinto in Japan. They are:

1. Shrine Shinto, with prehistoric origins. It included, until 1945, State Shinto, which is closely tied to the government and the Japanese imperial dynasties.
2. Sectarian Shinto. There are 13 sects in Sectarian Shinto, each with a founder or systematizer who organized it in the 19th century. Sectarian Shinto also includes sects which formed after World War II.
3. Folk Shinto. Folk Shinto does not have an organized religious body, nor does it have any doctrinal formulas. It is, instead, tied to the numerous practices of the individual families. All three types are interrelated. Folk Shinto is the substructure of Shinto faith, the foundation, of sorts. A member of Sectarian Shinto is likely to also worship at a shrine associated with Shrine Shinto.

Where: Shinto is the indigenous religion of Japan, and has not spread from Japan to a great extent (only about 60,000 adherents are thought to live outside of Japan). Japanese immigrants in other countries have brought Shinto with them, but they are few in number. Efforts have been made to increase the knowledge of and respect for Shinto in the international community.

WHAT IF I WANT TO KNOW MORE?

For more information about Shinto, check out these great links:

- * www.religioustolerance.org/shinto.htm
- * www.japan-guide.com/e/e2056.html

Sources:

Schauwecker's Guide to Japan -- Shintoism (<http://www.japan-guide.com/e/e2056.html>)
www.religioustolerance.org/shinto.htm

Hirai, Naofusa. Shinto: A Portrait. In Beversluis, Joel (Ed.). (1995). A Sourcebook for Earth's Community of Religions. Grand Rapids: CoNexus Press.

Shinto: The Religion of Japanese Patriotism. In Noss, John B. (1949)

Man's Religions. New York: The Macmillan Company