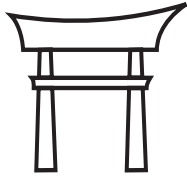


SHINTO: A PRIMER



The symbol of Shinto is the *torii*, an arch built of wood or stone. Once a perch for sacred birds, it now is a gateway of honor. To pass through a *torii* is to make the first step to purification.

ORIGINS

Shin-to as a term dates from the 6th century CE. It is the Japanese pronunciation of *Shen-dao*—the Chinese name that acts an umbrella for a plethora of indigenous

Japanese spiritual practices. The traditional Japanese name for it is *kami-no-michi*—the way of the “above” (the superiors or deities).

Shrine-centered Shinto is Shinto in its most ancient form. Also ancient is what might be called “folk Shinto”: worship of household and village deities, appeals to shamans for healing, and purification customs. Shinto had no need to define itself until Buddhism made its way into Japanese culture. On the one hand, Shinto accommodated itself to Buddhism, and Confucianism; on the other, Shinto provided a vehicle for preservation of a distinct Japanese identity in the face of Western and Chinese influences.

From the 14th century onward came calls for Shinto to cleanse itself of accretions of Chinese and Buddhist ritual and belief, culminating in the establishment of State Shinto in 1868. In the State Shinto worldview, the Emperor of Japan was a descendent of *Amaterasu* (the Sun Goddess). State Shinto was dismantled after World War II, but “Imperial Family Shinto” (its replacement), shrine Shinto, and folk Shinto still inform Japanese culture.

In addition to State Shinto, the 19th century CE gave birth to many forms of “sect Shinto”,

and some of them continue to thrive—Tenrikyo (Heavenly Reason Teaching) and Omotokyo (Great Origin Teaching), for example. Sect Shinto may involve charismatic or shamanic leaders, a formal congregational structure, and some unique focus such as devotion to Mt. Fuji or emphasis on healing (as with Tenrikyo).

Shinto is a fascinating topic for study in its own right, but also, an understanding of Shinto is an important adjunct for understanding Japanese Buddhism.

BELIEFS

The Shinto worldview features reverence for nature and emphasis on beauty. Beyond this, there is little emphasis on doctrine. In the Shinto worldview, Japan is a creature born to cosmic parents: *Izanami* (the female who invites) and *Izanagi* (the male who invites). As is typical of indigenous religions, elements of the natural order are regarded as deities. Interestingly, Shinto sees the sun as female and the moon as male. (For other indigenous religions, the reverse is more typical.) As the creature of cosmic parents,



“love your neighbor as yourself”



Japan is a “this-worldly heaven”—at once a creature and the home of divine spirits—and the human task is to main equilibrium with the heavenly. Thus much attention is paid to ritual purity: pollution (*tsumi*) comes from contact with death; purity is restored via washing and other ritual acts.

Shinto emphasizes sensitivity to the powers of the natural world. Humanity and bodily life are fundamentally good—as are sexuality and fertility. The focus is on life, and on counteracting anything that brings sickness and death. This means that, not only should physical pollutants be removed, but human relationships likewise should be kept healthy and pure. Thus Shinto emphasizes sincerity, fulfillment of obligations, and apology for errors.

Shinto teaches that *Kami* are everywhere. They are personified, named, and approached with reverence. *Kami* may be nature spirits, familial ancestors, or the spirits of deceased emperors, saints, or heroes.



PRACTICE

Some Shinto practices are home-centered. The family maintains a *kamidana* (a home shrine)—either inside the house or in the garden—where offerings of rice and water are made to the resident *kami*. Other Shinto practices require a visit to one of Japan’s 85,000 *jinja* (Shinto shrines). *Jinja* may mark a natural phenomenon, an historical event, or devotion to a particular person. Each shrine has a *kami*—which may be a natural object or a famous person. Two of the most famous are *Ise* (the Sun Goddess Shrine) and *Tsubaki* (the Earth God Shrine). Shrine worship has four components: purification, offering, prayer, and (occasionally) symbolic feasting by drinking rice wine. Some shrines house a sacred object, but these remain hidden. If there is a building, it is likely to have a small hall in which the *kami* resides (and which is off limits to visitors) and a larger hall where prayers may be said. Characteristically, one enters a Shinto shrine through a *torii* (a gate featuring two uprights and two crossbars); in fact, there may be a series of *torii* through which to pass. Near

the *torii* is a roofed water-trough for ritual cleansing. When one visits a Shinto shrine for worship, one enters the *jinja* by passing under the *torii*. One stops at the receptacle of water to wash one’s hands and mouth. One then bows, donates a coin, and claps one’s hands to get the *kami*’s attention. One bows again, then offers prayers (silently or aloud). One bows yet again, then leaves. Plaques or papers containing prayer requests may be tied to a sacred *sakaki* tree. The priest may wave a wand with streamers as an act of purification.

Priestly blessings may take place away from the shrine as well. For example, a priest may be called to bless a wedding, or a new home, a new baby, a new job, the purchase of a new automobile, the fact that a journey or an exam is to be taken. There are rituals to be performed at gravesites, but—given Shinto’s antipathy for death—Shinto funerals are reserved for the emperor. (Funerals for everyone else are left to Buddhist practice.)

One Shinto practice, called *misogi*, involves ritual purification by standing under a waterfall. Another involves scaling Mount Fuji.

The love of ceremony and emphasis on nature characteristic of Shinto is carried over into Japanese arts (painting, architecture, *Noh* theater, *gagaku* music), with their emphasis on symmetry and simplicity. Ritualized tea-drinking and arts reflect the notion that beauty and precision counteract pollution.



WRITINGS

Shinto has no official scriptures. The narratives of Shinto oral tradition began to take written form in the 8th century CE. *Kojiki* is the chronicle of ancient events. *Nihongi* is the chronicle of Japan.



HOLIDAYS

Shinto includes observances marking the arrival of New Year (December 31-January 3) with a thorough house-cleaning; the agricultural seasons are also marked with special rituals, and there are annual fertility rites. *Matsuri* are shrine-festival days.