

5 minute guide

to

SHINTO

Des McCabe

Contents

Introduction

Brief Overview, Beliefs and History

History and Founder

Traditions, Beliefs and Practices

Scripture, Texts and Holy Books

Worship, Prayer and Rituals

Festivals, Feast days, Holy days and Celebrations

Timeline of Significant Events in the Shinto Religion

Introduction

The word Shinto comes from two words *shin* meaning “spirit” and *tao* meaning “way”. Thus Shinto means “The Spirit Way”. The gods of Shinto are called Kami. “Kami” refers to nature spirits or Spirit of Nature.

Thus, “Kami” can refer to things in nature like the sun, boulders, mountains, trees, animals, natural springs, Japan’s earliest ancestors and the souls of the departed, etc. and the term can also refer to all of nature as one entity. Shinto beliefs and practices center on the worship of these supernatural beings or being.

Brief Overview, Beliefs and History

Shintoism is a prehistoric religious tradition indigenous to Japan and is influenced by Buddhism and Chinese religions. The Shinto religion is closely interwoven with Japanese society and culture and allows room for the simultaneous practice of beliefs from other religions prevalent in Japan. These religions include Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism and most recently that of Christianity.

Shinto acknowledges no supreme God and is comprised of a set of traditional rituals and ceremonies rather than beliefs and ethics. It is based on a sense of sacredness “in” and “of” nature. It is considered a religion of feeling and acting through being in touch with surrounding nature and ritual activity. It involves communal activity in residents and public shrines and national festivity in connection with others.

Features of the Shinto religion emerged in the 2nd or 3rd century. However, the name Shinto did not evolve until the 6th century to distinguish this religion from Buddhism. There are approximately 4 million followers of Shintoism throughout the world today. Almost all believers reside in the country of Japan.

History and Founder

There is no precise date nor is there a specific person attributed to the beginning of Shintoism. Yayoi culture which began in the northern part of the island of Kyushu in the 2nd-3rd century is related to Japanese culture and Shintoism. These people believed in the worship of nature and treating the spirits with shamans. The chieftain of the tribes carried out duties that led to the Shinto state and offerings at many shrines.

When Confucianism came to Japan in the 5th century, it influenced the ethical teachings of Shinto. Shinto became a national cult. Buddhism was introduced to Japan in the 6th century and Shinto Kami were thought to protect Buddhism. Shrines were built to look like Buddhist temples. Some people thought that the Kami were incarnations of Buddhas. In fact, Buddhist statues were placed inside Shinto shrines.

In the 17th century, scholars wanted to emphasize the merging of Shinto and Confucian teaching. Schools were organized based on these teachings. Later on, there was a movement to keep the Shinto religion separate from any other religion. Respect for the Japanese imperial

line and the teaching of absolute faith, which encouraged all human problems to be turned over to Kami, greatly influenced the Shinto beliefs.

In the latter part of the 19th century, Shinto religion was divided into Shrine Shinto and Sect Shinto. Shinto became the formal foundation of the state. The divinity of the emperor was acknowledged. It was mandatory to give monetary contributions to the shrine and also mandatory to worship with frequency at an assigned shrine.

During the last years of the 19th century, approximately thirteen new religious movements incorporated Shinto with various beliefs. These included healing diseases and devotion. The movements were divided among 5 distinct groups: Revival Shinto Sects, Confucian Sects, Purification Sects, Mountain Worship Sects, and Faith Healing Sects.

After World War II, Shinto was no longer Japan's official religion although 4 million Japanese practice it today. This comprises 3% of the Japanese population, whereby 49% are nonreligious and 34% are Buddhists.

Traditions, Beliefs and Practices

At the center of the Shinto belief is the way of the Kami who transcend human beings. Followers understand Kami through faith and see Kami in many forms. Quite often, Japanese folktales evolve around holy places in Japan and talk about animal possession of mostly foxes, badgers, dogs and cats. Ancient gods or spirits along with celestial bodies and nature play significant roles as well.

Today, Shintoists believe that each Kami has a divine personality which will respond to individual prayers. Believers are guided by Kami and live according to the Kami which produce a mystical power that gives the believer protection, help and acceptance.

Shintoists view life as sacred as if were given by Kami and that all lives of people are worthy of respect. They also see life as a long, continuous history stemming from their respective ancestors and continuing through their descendants. They view history as cyclical, and thus they see no end of history or the world. They believe in the afterlife. Life always continues.

They feel that the present moment is the most important and therefore each moment of their life is meant to be valued. Another general principle of Shinto life is peace and prosperity for all human beings.

Shintoists worship and give offerings to the Kami at their home shrines and at public shrines. These shrines are considered homes of the Kami. The inner sanctuary is the most important part of the shrine. Usually there is a symbol of a mirror or wooden image, a sword or other object encased. This symbol is forbidden to be seen except by the chief priest.

A gateway is entered to the shrine. A visitor must wash his/her hands and rinse the mouth in a basin located by the entrance. This act is called purification and symbolically removes the impurities of the inner mind. Often a small offering of fish, rice and vegetables that is later eaten is offered. Music and dancing are offered, too.

There is time for praise and prayer. Sometimes, a visitor may also ask the priest to say a special prayer or administer a rite of passage. Shinto priests bless the branch of the sacred sakaki tree (e.g., a flowering evergreen tree) by dipping it in holy water. In rural areas of Japan, women shamans speak for the Kami. They fall into a trance and then offer advice, direction, and comfort.

There is no weekly religious service as in many other religions. Some practicing Shintoists visit shrines on the 1st and 15th of each month. They may also visit shrines on various festival days and occasions of rites. Some pay daily visits to a shrine.

Unlike many religions, there is no need to publicly profess a belief in Shinto to become a believer. When a child is born in Japan, a local Shinto shrine adds the child's name to a list and he/she is declared a "family child". After death, he/she is known as a "family spirit" or family Kami. One may choose to have one's name added to another list when moving and then be listed at both places. This is seen as a sign of welcoming by the Kami.

Scripture, Texts and Holy Books

There is no philosophical literature or official scripture for the Shinto religion like the Bible for Christians or the Koran for Islamists. However, there is the *Kojiki* which are records of ancient matters that describe the myths of the gods and man. The *Nihongi* or *Nihon shoki* consists of the chronicles of Japan which trace the ancient history of Japan.

These are in a sense the sacred books of Shinto written down in the early eighth century, but passed down orally before then. They contain oral traditions, mythology and ceremonies of early Shinto. They also talk about the literature, topography and history of ancient Japan.

Also important is the collection of 50 books known as *Engishiki*, dating to 927. These books cover the laws which govern shrine ceremonies, explain how religious leadership is organized, and contain official prayers and liturgies.

The brother and sister divine pair Izanagi (male) and Izanami (female) brought forth Amaterasu who is the sun goddess. She is the ancestress of the Japanese emperor which led to the image of the sun on the Japanese flag and the view that Japan is at the center of the world. The great shrine at Ise is dedicated to her. This shrine has been rebuilt every 20 years over the past 1300 years of its existence. (There are an additional 80,000 sacred sites throughout Japan. Some 100 years ago, there were 2.5 times as many.)

Worship, Prayer and Rituals

The priest and priestess oversee the symbolic ceremonies through singing or dancing to please the Kami. They also conduct the ritual activities. The priest and priestess and their families participate in a festive meal with the Kami on behalf of the people present. Priests can marry and have families. The avocation of priesthood is often passed down to the next generation.

There are several rites of passage observed in the Shinto religion. The first is the newborn baby who visits the tutelary Kami. This visit takes place anywhere from 30-100 days after birth. The purpose is to introduce the baby to the Kami.

The Shichi-go-san Festival known as Seven-Five-Three festival on November 15th is a time for boys of five and seven years old to visit the shrine and give thanks for protection from the Kami. It is also a time to pray for their ongoing good health.

Adults Day is held on January 15th. Historically, it was a time for youth to join the local young men's association. Today, it is a celebration for Japanese who turn 20 years old that year.

Wedding ceremonies are usually conducted in Shinto style and vows are given to the Kami.

Shinto funerals are not common in Japan as there is concern over ritual purity. Most Japanese funerals are held in observance of the Buddhist style. Shinto tends to hold negative views on death and corpses as a source of pollution. However, death can also be viewed as a path towards apotheosis. This is evidenced by legendary individuals becoming enshrined after death. They feel that the soul of the deceased continues to influence the living before it merges with the ancestors from the family in which it was a part.

There are additional Shinto rites for various occupations and daily life. There is a ceremony to purify a building site or in constructing a new building. Another purification ceremony is conducted for the boiler in a new factory. There are dedication ceremonies for the completion of buildings and for the launching of new ships.

Festivals, Feast days, Holy days and Celebrations

Most Shinto festivals are observed starting with purification. Next, there is a time of adoration where the chief priest and worshippers bow to the altar. This is followed by opening the door to the inner sanctuary by the chief priest. Food offerings are presented. Animal meat is not offered as it is forbidden to shed blood in the sacred area. However, rice, sake wine, rice cakes, fish, seaweed, vegetables, sake and water are traditionally offered. In the past, cooked foods were offered, but today mostly uncooked foods are used. A prayer is recited by the chief priest. The prayer is modeled after ancient Shinto prayers.

Sacred music is played and there is traditional dancing. Participants make symbolic offerings. Branches of a sacred evergreen are offered. Strips of white paper are tied to the branches. The offerings are then taken away. The door of the inner sanctuary shut and there is time for more prayer and song. At the end there is a time for feasting known as "naorai". Before eating, it has become popular to have a brief sermon or speech before the feast.

Various special rites may be held at any festival. Often there is a special water purification ceremony and the placement of this water in shrines for devotional purposes. Clapping of hands attracts the Kami to attend. This practice also directs the worshipper to attend to the presence of the Kami and to recognize the inherent sacredness of the moment. Prayers are not offered as much as reverence to the kami, but more so for the acknowledgement of the kindred relationship between Kami, people and nature.

There is the procession of the sacred palanquin which is a portable shrine to carry the Kami to and from the shrine. Often there are miniature shrines known as mikoshi that are carried on people's shoulders and transported throughout the parish area. There may be a ceremony of boats or a ceremonial feast. Additional activities of sumo wrestling, horseback riding, archery, a lion dance and rice planting are common activities during festivals and celebrations.

Timeline of Significant Events in the Shinto Religion

2 nd century A.D.	Yayoi culture begins in the northern part of the island of Kyushu of Japan
4 th century A.D.	Believers pray to spirits for harvest, protection from diseases and good fortune; shrines are first built for worship
5 th century A.D.	Confucianism comes to Japan
6 th century A.D.	The name "Shinto" is attributed to the set of beliefs when Buddhism is introduced to Japan
712 A.D.	The <i>Kojiki</i> is written
720 A.D.	The <i>Nihongi</i> is written
8 th century A.D.	The sun deity Amaterasu becomes the most revered Kami
927 A.D.	The <i>Engishiki</i> is written
1542 A.D.	Christianity introduced to Japan
17 th century A.D.	Scholars emphasize the merging of Shinto and Confucian teaching
1871 A.D.	Shinto is established as the state religion; Shinto religion is divided into Shrine and Sect Shinto
19 th century A.D.	Approximately thirteen new religious movements incorporate Shinto and various beliefs.
1947 A.D.	Shinto is no longer a state religion
1990s A.D.	More than 10% of priests are women known as priestesses
21 st century A.D.	Approximately 4 million Japanese (3% of the population of Japan) practice Shintoism

Most popular titles from Diversiton

Best Practice Guides in Equality and Diversity

Respect at Work - Practical Guide for Building and Promoting Respect in the Workplace
What is Diversity at Work? 52 Perspectives on fairness, equality and inclusion
Other Faiths. Meeting people from different Religions and Beliefs including Hinduism, Islam, the Bahá'í Faith, Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, Sikhism and Paganism
Religious Questions - A 20 Minute Audit of Religion & Belief in the Workplace
Definitions of Religion - The complete A to Z of Religion and Belief
Older Workers - the Opportunities and Benefits of Age Diversity
Transgender People - Practical Advice, FAQs and Case Studies
Discrimination in the Workplace - includes Victimization and Harassment, Practical Case Studies, Organization Review and Guidance for Employees who may be affected.

The 5 minute Guides (Diversiton's Pocket Guides to World Faiths)

The 5 minute guide to Christianity.
The 5 minute guide to Islam.
The 5 minute guide to Buddhism.
The 5 minute guide to Sikhism.
The 5 minute guide to Judaism.
The 5 minute guide to Jainism.
The 5 minute guide to the Bahá'í faith.
The 5 minute guide to Hinduism.
The 5 minute guide to 18 more Religions and Beliefs.
The 5 minute guide to Mormonism.
The 5 minute guide to Jehovah's Witnesses.
The 5 minute guide to Atheism.
The 5 minute guide to Agnosticism.
The 5 minute guide to Secularism.
The 5 minute guide to Paganism.
The 5 minute guide to Quakers - The Religious Society of Friends.
The 5 minute guide to Scientology.
The 5 minute guide to Postmodernism.
The 5 minute guide to Satanism.
The 5 minute guide to Humanism.
The 5 minute guide to Taoism.
The 5 minute guide to Rastafarianism.
The 5 minute guide to Unitarianism.
The 5 minute guide to Freethinkers.
The 5 minute guide to Rationalism.
The 5 minute guide to Confucianism.
The 5 minute guide to Zoroastrianism.

Copyright

Copyright © Des McCabe 2013.

The moral rights of the author have been asserted.

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced by any mechanical, photographic or electronic process, or in the form of a phonographic recording; nor may it be stored in a retrieval system, transmitted or otherwise be copied for public or private use, other than for 'fair use' as brief quotations embodied in articles and reviews, without prior written permission of the publisher. You may however use the material / content provided that you acknowledge Diversiton and the author where relevant.

Produced by Diversiton

Diversiton is non profit making and all resources are used to support the development of new products and services to promote equality and inclusion. If you can suggest any way to improve further editions of this book we would welcome your comments and ideas.

Diversiton
8 Osborne Promenade
Warrenpoint
Co Down BT34 3NQ
Northern Ireland
Europe
Tel: 00 44 28417 54777
email: mail@diversiton.com
web: www.diversiton.com

Published by New Activity Publications.

ISBN-1904969-41-0

ISBN-978-1 904969-41-9

New Activity Publications contributes 25% of all net revenues received towards projects in Africa to help people who are starving and suffering from extreme poverty.

www.newactivitypublications.com



Disclaimer

Every care has been taken to ensure that the contents of this book are factual and accurate. However, we cannot accept responsibility for any errors or the accuracy of any particular content. If in doubt or if you need specific information, you should always take professional advice or refer to local specialists. If you are aware of any errors in this book please contact us and we will be happy to make any corrections. Thank you.

