Definition: **Shinto** from *Philip’s Encyclopedia*

(Jap. 'way to the gods') Indigenous religion of Japan. Originating as a primitive cult of nature worship, it was shaped by the influence of Confucius and, from the 5th century, Buddhism. A revival of the ancient Shinto rites began in the 17th century, and contributed to the rise of Japanese nationalism in the late 19th century. Shinto has many deities in the form of spirits, souls, and forces of nature.

Summary Article: **Shinto**

From *Encyclopedia of Global Religions*

Official numbers published by the Japanese statistics bureau rank Shinto as Japan's largest religion, with a following that constitutes more than 80% of the population. Yet at the same time, questionnaires asking people for their religious identity consistently reveal that only a few percent of Japanese consider themselves as “adherents” of Shinto. Depending on one’s point of view, Shinto may be regarded either as the largest religion of Japan or as a marginal phenomenon. To shed light on this confusing state of affairs, this entry will first distinguish between different layers within the broad category of Shinto and between different discourses on Shinto's meaning and essence and then present a brief overview of Shinto's historical development.

The term Shinto does not refer to a single, centralized religion but rather to a cluster of groups, organizations, and even popular practices that all, in their own ways, focus on shrines (jinja, jingū) and/or their deities (kami). Some 100,000 shrines are scattered throughout the Japanese islands. Most of them are very small and lack a permanent staff of priests, but many thousands have at least one dedicated priest, and several hundreds sustain tens or, in some rare cases, even hundreds of professional clergy and other personnel. There are around 20,000 registered Shinto priests; a considerable number of them take care of more than one shrine.

Since 1946, the majority of shrines (approximately 80,000) have been members of an umbrella organization called the Association of Shinto Shrines (in Japanese, Jinja Honchō). This association educates priests, defends the interests of shrines in the public arena, and allocates funds raised by member shrines and sponsors. Yet while the association takes the lead in giving meaning to Shinto in the public realm, it avoids defining a Shinto teaching, and it consciously makes space for many voices. It refrains from laying down a Shinto orthodoxy and only rarely meddles in the religious or ritual policies of its member shrines. The association stresses that shrines should function as stages for community rites open for people of all faiths—not as churches with an exclusive following of dedicated believers. It is hardly surprising, then, that the “users” of shrines rarely perceive Shinto as their religious identity. To them, shrines offer an evocative and nostalgic setting for a range of traditional rituals, such as New Year prayers for happiness in the coming year, life cycle rites for children, purification rites for building sites and cars, weddings, and neighborhood festivals, often focusing on a parade. Most shrine rites deal with issues of life and live in a functional symbiosis with Buddhist rites that take care of death and mourning.

A second layer is constituted by a number of independent religious groups that identify themselves with Shinto. The oldest among these groups have histories that stretch back to the 19th century. These so-called Shinto sects have a much more clearly defined religious profile than the member
shrines of the association. They can be divided into two types. The first type takes the form of a loose coalition of different groups of believers dedicated to a single shrine site, but with varying practices and backgrounds. The second typically focuses on a single deity who is believed to have revealed specific teachings to the world through the life and writings of the group's founder. Groups of this last type may in many respects be compared with Christian church movements: They feature explicit teachings that are actively promoted by preachers, and they have a clearly defined congregation, regular church meetings, and a hierarchically organized priesthood.

The third and last layer to be commonly included in the category of Shinto consists of folk practices relating to kami. Many communities have annual celebrations, ranging from large-scale festivals to intimate local traditions, in which shrines and shrine priests play only a marginal role or none at all. Those celebrations that are not recognizably Buddhist in nature tend to be labeled Shinto, even if some of these practices have clear Daoist or otherwise continental origins. This categorization is significant because it has in many cases led to a gradual adaptation of local traditions to a more standardized Shinto format. Examples of such practices are kōshin wakes (based on the notion—of Daoist origin—that three demons inhabiting the human body report one's sins to the Lord of Heaven in nights marked by the calendrical sign kōshin) and kagura dances, often featuring lions and dragons.

Within these three very different organizational frameworks, Shinto is defined in a great variety of ways. Yet a few themes are common enough to be called central in most understandings of Shinto. At the basis of all of these themes is the notion that Shinto is Japan's indigenous religion. From that starting line, Shinto is then related to imperial rule, agriculture, and nature.

The idea that Shinto represents the unchanging essence of Japanese culture has served to differentiate shrines from temples and to give direction to Shinto's development into an increasingly autonomous tradition. It has brought new meaning to a preexisting obsession with ancient beginnings. This idea is expressed through a clear preference for (reconstructed) ancient and classical forms in the architecture of shrine buildings, in the language of prayers, in the attire of priests, and in the format of shrine rituals. The focus on an ancient Japanese essence, rather than merely a nonlocalized antiquity, gives most variants of Shinto a nationalist or at least clearly a Japan-centered flavor. Ancient Japan is held in high regard as an ideal society where the people led simple but harmonious lives, at peace with each other and with their natural environment. By consciously adopting archaicizing formats, Shinto sites and rites play out the religious ideal of a direct continuity between that golden age and the present. At times, this has taken the form of a rejection of external corrupting forces (e.g., Buddhism and Christianity) or of the dehumanizing forces of modernity.

The emperor plays a central role in most understandings of Shinto as an extension of this ideal. The emperor personifies the era of archaic harmony in the here and now. This move is made possible by the fact that the origins of Japan's imperial dynasty are hidden in the mists of prehistory. Moreover, the oldest texts of Japanese tradition (Kojiki, 712, and Nihon shoki, 720) claim that this dynasty derives its right to rule from a divine mandate, bestowed on the imperial forebears in the Age of the Gods by their ancestress, the sun goddess Amaterasu. The imperial line, then, represents a physical link with a sacred time beyond the historical past. The prominence of the emperor in ancient kami worship gained renewed importance in the 19th century, when efforts were made to establish a direct connection between imperial rites and local practice at shrines throughout the land. In 1875, a number of days on which the emperor performed central Shinto rites were declared national holidays, and priests were ordered to perform the same rites at their local shrines, acting in the emperor's name. In this way,
shrines became stages for the performance of imperial rites, with the function of broadcasting the
importance (or even sanctity) of the emperor among the general populace. After World War II, the
Association of Shinto Shrines has continued this practice, and a range of imperial rites is still performed
simultaneously at the imperial palace and at member shrines.

Another prominent theme in Shinto is agriculture, and in particular the cultivation of rice. The *kami*
are commonly depicted as benevolent beings that bestow blessings of fertility and growth on the
community, often in the form of life-giving water running down from the mountains. Again, behind this
image is the ideal of ancient society, pictured as a harmonious community of rice-growing farmers. Rice
is at the core of the main imperial rituals, which are all performed in the seasons of planting or
harvesting. Both in Shinto publications and other media, the emperor is often depicted tending his own
rice field, and a ritual of thanksgiving for the harvest forms the centerpiece of the imperial
enthronement ceremonies.

Finally, and most recently, Shinto has become associated with ecological themes. In the course of the
1980s and 1990s, interpretations of Shinto as an ancient tradition of nature worship began to challenge
the earlier emphasis on emperor-centered nationalism. In this context, Shinto is described as a form of
animism and the *kami* as spirits who inhabit natural objects such as stones, trees, or waterfalls or who
manifest themselves through the forces of nature—wind, rain, and thunder. The association itself
argues on its website that “Shinto sees that nature is the divinity itself” and that “the Japanese
spirituality inherited from the ancient ancestors” is grounded in a profound respect and gratitude for
the gifts of nature. In its “message from Shinto,” the association stresses the importance of a spirit of
“reverence and appreciation to nature” as a prerequisite for solving the environmental and social
problems that the modern world is facing today.

**History**

Both Shinto’s organizational structure and its self-understanding as Japan’s indigenous religion are
products of a long history. Tracing this history is an intrinsically controversial project because it
challenges Shinto’s central notion of unbroken continuity with an ancient past.

To get a grip on the developments that produced modern Shinto, it is first necessary to distinguish
between shrines, on the one hand, and the concept of Shinto, on the other. The origins of many shrines
can be traced to prehistoric times, although most are much more recent. Many of the larger shrines
occupy cultic sites that were dedicated to the worship of *kami* centuries before the first datable
writings appeared in the early eighth century. However, the notion that the worship of *kami* at shrines
constitutes an autonomous “Way” did not begin to gain ground until the 15th century—and even then
only as an abstract idea. The final institutionalization of Shinto was a product of the late 19th century.

While shrines and *kami* were important to the court already in the ancient period, it was only in the 13th
and 14th centuries that the first seeds of the later Shinto discourse emerge. Before this time, almost all
larger shrines had been incorporated in temple-led complexes, where the *kami* were soothed by
means of sutra readings and other Buddhist procedures. Within this Buddhist framework, the *kami*
were typically treated as nonenlightened beings who, when angered, were ready to unleash their wrath on the
community in the form of natural disasters, diseases, and killings. In a typical Tantric reversal, however,
these dangerous beings gained a radically new significance in medieval times: as the essence of
delusion and, therefore, as the epitome of the Buddhist truth that “delusion equals enlightenment.” In
some medieval texts, the violent *kami* were chosen to represent the “original enlightenment” that

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It was argued that one can realize instantaneously the ultimate truth that the essence of enlightenment is delusion and that the realm of afflictions in which we live is in fact the Dharma realm in its purest form. In this scheme, the kami were seen as direct, unadorned, and upright, in contrast to the Buddhas, who are sophisticated, bejeweled, and given to playing with relative levels of truth.

The idea that the ignorant kami constitute the very foundation of the enlightened Buddha realm also gave rise to a nativistic vision of Japan. Japan was a land created by the kami and also the land where the kami were born. It was ruled by an emperor who personified the powers of the sun—identified simultaneously both as the ancient kami Amaterasu and as the cosmic Buddha Mahāvairocana, from whom all Buddhas arise. The emperor, then, embodied the pre-Buddhist state of enlightened delusion that was associated with the violent kami. In this early form of Buddhist Shinto (which was the first context in which the word Shinto was singled out as a term for the “Japanese Way”), the kami, the Japanese islands, and the emperor were all combined as emblems of a sacred Japanese essence, transmitted as a self-contained body of knowledge and ritual.

In subsequent centuries, these transmissions about the kami went through a series of profound changes, but the fundamental elements that constituted this early Buddhist Shinto lived on: the idea that the kami are primitive beings but profoundly sacred for that very reason and the definition of Japan as a sacred land where the kami and their blessings originated and of the emperor as the born keeper of the secrets of the kami. From the 17th century onward, the same ideas were rephrased in Confucian, anti-Buddhist terms. A century later, nativist scholars turned to Shinto to foster a new pride in Japan’s own ancient traditions, in an age when common sense dictated that China was the center of the world and the source of the Way. In the 19th century, when Western pressure on Japan came to a head, a radically nativistic Shinto that rejected all foreign influences as impure gained broad support. This prepared the way for the Shinto policies of the Meiji period (1868-1912).

The Buddhist, Confucian, and even nativist discourses on Shinto had very little impact on shrine cults as these functioned in urban and rural communities around the country. From 1665 onward, there had been a licensing system for priests, but even in the early 19th century, most shrines were managed by local people, monks, or mountain practitioners. All this changed in the course of a few years after the Meiji coup of 1868, when a small band of insurgents arranged for the emperor to issue an edict announcing the abolishment of the shogunate. This edict called for a restoration of direct imperial rule, as in the ancient days of the first mythical emperor. The new regime was to be based on the principle that “rites and government are one,” and the rites referred to were Shinto. These events, which drew on a wave of utopian nativism, had a large impact on shrines. In the same year, all shrines were methodically separated from Buddhism. In what was arguably one of the most radical breaks in Japanese religious history, Buddhist priests, deities, buildings, and rituals were banned from shrines. In 1871, shrines were arranged on a hierarchical scale, from imperial and national shrines at the top to prefectural shrines, district shrines, and finally nonranked shrines at the bottom. At the same time, hereditary lineages of priests were abolished, and a unified system of state-appointed priests was put in its place. In this way, shrines were appropriated by the state and designated as sites for the performance of state rituals. It was at this time that Shinto became physically and institutionally distinct from Buddhism.

As fears of Western (Christian) expansionism waned and the need for national development along Western lines became apparent, the initial enthusiasm for Shinto cooled considerably. By 1882, Shinto had been reduced to a body of national rites that were regarded as nonreligious; in fact, shrine priests...
were banned from engaging in activities that were defined as religious. The Shinto sects mentioned above were established at this time to make place for “religious” Shinto groups outside the shrines.

In the aftermath of wars with China (1894-1895) and Russia (1904-1905), Japan experienced a wave of patriotic enthusiasm, which on many occasions was expressed in a ritual format that put shrines center stage. The fallen from these wars were honored in newly founded military shrines, and shrine visits by the military, as well as school classes, became a new social ritual, even in the occupied territories. Soon after, a growing socialist and communist movement swept over Japan, inspiring fear that national unity was under threat. Under these circumstances, Shinto once more became a focus of attention. Until 1945, Shinto was to serve as Japan's official state cult, propagated with increasing zeal especially after 1931 as the country headed into war.

After the war, the American-led occupation issued a so-called Shinto Directive (December 1945) to put an end to “the perversion of Shinto theory and beliefs into militaristic and ultranationalistic propaganda, designed to delude the Japanese people and lead them into wars of aggression” (Breen & Teeuwen, 2010, p. 13). This directive prohibited all forms of official support for Shinto rites or ideas. At the same time, shrines were offered a new lease on life as private religious organizations: “Shrine Shinto, after having been divorced from the state and divested of its militaristic and ultra-nationalistic elements, will be recognized as a religion if its adherents so desire” (Breen & Teeuwen, 2010, p. 13). In February 1946, shrines were registered under a new law as religious organizations, and the Association of Shinto Shrines was founded as a new coordinating body.

This history set the stage for the postwar development of Shinto in its various guises. Once they were freed from direct government administration, Shinto organizations developed in different directions. Some lament the separation of Shinto from the state and call for a restoration of the prewar function of Shinto rites as communal ceremonies that unite the nation under the aegis of the emperor. Others have broken with the past and seek to redefine Shinto in ways that bear little relationship with imperial nationalism—in terms of healing through contact with kami deities, spiritual union with nature, or community values. Yet even the new Shinto sects that have sprung up in the postwar period live within the context of the Shinto discourse that crystallized in the 19th century. This explains their failure to spread abroad, other than in places where there is a significant Japanese minority. In postwar Japan, many prewar Shinto institutions have retained a prominent presence in the public eye; obvious examples are the continued practice of Shinto rites by the emperor and the controversy around the Yasukuni shrine (where Japan's war dead are celebrated by means of Shinto rites). This makes it difficult, if not impossible, to reinvent Shinto as drastically as in the 19th century or, indeed, as in medieval times.

See also
God, Japan, New Religions in Japan, Sacred Places, Tokyo

Further Readings

• Teeuwen, M. Comparative perspectives on the emergence of jindō and Shinto. Bulletin of SOAS, 70 (2).:

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