

SHOGATSU:

Shinto celebration of the New Year

Shinto arose in ancient Japan. It was not founded, per se, but emerged gradually out of the myths, beliefs, and rituals of prehistoric Japan. Local traditions were unified into a central account of creation of the Japanese islands and descent of the emperor (considered a kami) from the sun goddess (Amaterasu). Although these writings record the “age of the gods,” they are not considered scriptures.

According to Shinto belief all humans are born innocent and free of evil. “Kami” is the guiding spirit which guides people’s conscience and makes them intuitively know what is right or wrong. Actions are regarded as honorable or lacking honor. Dishonorable actions are against the ‘way’ (minchi) of kami and therefore against the flow of nature and the well-being of the community. Shinto is totally tolerant of all other religions and individual beliefs.

Kami

The most distinctive feature of the prehistoric heritage that continued within Shinto is the belief in and worship of kami. The term kami means divinities, divine presences and refers to the sacred, pure, or powerful and can be expressed in a number of different forms. There are mythological kami as well as local forces of creation and nature (such as sacred mountains, waterfalls, rivers, trees, and boulders), and even powerful human beings.

In the earliest times kami were apparently worshiped at ritual sites in natural surroundings. Later, wooden shrines (**jinja**) were built to house such ceremonies. Kami were not considered to permanently reside in the jinja; rather, they were temporarily invoked for ceremonies of prayer and offerings. Rituals have been closely associated with seasons and growth, such as spring planting and fall thanksgiving, the New Year, and periodic purification rites.

From the time Buddhism and Chinese culture entered Japan, Shinto was directly influenced by these traditions and was practiced in close connection with them. Shinto became intertwined with Buddhism (and Taoism); Buddhist priests served Shinto shrines, Buddhist scriptures were recited, and Buddhist rituals were performed at Shinto shrines.

Though it is said that there are 80,000 jinja, their exact number is unknown.



Many smaller shrines can only be approached with some effort. One must climb a steep series of steps along a mountainside, moving farther and farther away from a local town or village. One finally passes beneath the torii and comes upon a quiet grove of trees in which there is a small wooden structure. One usually tugs on a rope to ring a bell, tosses a coin into a collection box, claps three times, and bows one's head in silent prayer. The shrine itself seems more like a road marker; it is the place it indicates—the grove, the stones—whose presence one feels.

At festival times the silence gives way to the noise of the crowds and chanting of young men carrying the mikoshi (portable shrine). On these occasions the jinja serves as a traditional focus of Japanese social life. Here it is the center of ancient agricultural festivals or pageants commemorating important mythological or historical events. Others center mainly around fertility rites. Ultimately jinja and the Shinto practices that surround them are viewed by most Japanese not as a religion at all but as a fundamental part of being Japanese.



Shogatsu (New Year's Day)

In Japan the New Year's holidays have a special significance. They are by far the most important and the longest holidays in the Japanese calendar. From **December 30**, when the holiday actually begins for most people, huge cities like Tokyo, Osaka, and Nagoya take on an eerie quietness until the great rush back home and a return to the office starts on January 4 or 5.



The holiday is especially a time for family and friends. A walk down any quiet street during the holidays reveals a fascinating blend of the old and the new: kadomatus decorations, made of bamboo stalks and pine boughs, standing beside the shuttered entrances of skyscrapers; Shinto shimekazari, straw ropes strung with little angular strips of white paper, hanging across the front of parking lots and supermarkets. Traditionally, New Year's preparations have included ritual housecleaning, the clearing up of all debts, new kimono for each child in the family, and the hanging of special decorations. These ancient customs are still carefully preserved by many Japanese families to this day.