

# Shintoism and ecology

## Nature as Divine



Shinto tradition acknowledges a deep debt to the blessing of nature and the spiritual power which brings about life, fertility, and prosperity. This life-giving power was called Musubi (divine power of growth), and perceived in all the workings of nature. Since the Japanese people felt the divine within nature, they came to hold the ideal of a life that was in harmony with and united with nature. Mountains peaks, deep valleys, and the wide ocean were viewed as dwellings for the divine, and other natural objects such as evergreen trees and huge rocks were considered to be symbols of divine spirits.

## Shinto and Agriculture

The Japanese way of life depends heavily on rice cultivation, the form of agriculture best suited to the Japanese climate. Rice is treated as a sacred and indispensable food. Matsuri festivals are traditionally held seasonally in each region to invoke the success of the rice harvest. Over thousands of years, the rituals and festivals associated with rice agriculture gave form to the religion of Shinto. Shinto is therefore both the indigenous folk religion of Japan, and the history of the Japanese people's way of life.

## Shrines as forest sanctuaries

Along city avenues and in the valleys formed by busy urban streets, wherever the Japanese people make their lives, one will always find a luxuriant green of trees. The grove is a ritual space for the worship of the deities, and as such is a part of nature which has been preserved by the Japanese people since ancient times. And it is within such groves that one finds the kami deities are enshrined.

## Long term plan

In November 2009 the Shinto launched their [long term plan](#) to protect the living planet. Amongst more than 30 faith plans they celebrated the launch at Windsor Castle in the presence of HRH The Prince Philip, founder of ARC, and UN Secretary General Mr Ban Ki-moon who, during his speech, reminded the faith representatives that "You can, and do, inspire people to change".

## Summary of Shinto Long Term Plan

This indigenous Japanese faith has approximately 90 million members with 81,000 Shinto shrines throughout the country. These shrines are built largely of wood and form the heart of the villages and local communities of Japan. Often the only extensive areas where trees and greenery flourish in Japanese cities and towns are around holy shrines. Shintos see themselves as protected by creation. It is the forests and not the buildings that mark the true shrines of Shintoism. The deities are invited to these forests, where they and their environment are protected by the local community, which in turn is protected by the deities. The Shinto plan reflects this theology.

The Shinto plan focuses on forestry and comes out of a commitment to pioneer the drawing up of a new Religious Forestry Standard for religious owned and managed forests by 2014. The plan is for Religious Forests to be managed in ways which are religiously compatible, environmentally appropriate, socially beneficial and economically viable:

Religiously compatible – based on the faith values, beliefs, heritage and traditions.  
Environmentally appropriate – ensures that the harvest of timber and non-timber products, as well as care of sacred areas, maintains the forest's biodiversity, productivity and ecological processes. Also, that those who manage the forest pay attention to environmental concerns, including recycling and non-use of pollutants.

Socially beneficial – helps both local people and society at large to enjoy long-term benefits and also provides strong incentives to local people to sustain the forest resources and adhere to long-term management plans.

Economically viable – means that forest operations are structured and managed so as to be

sufficiently profitable, without generating financial profit at the expense of the forest resources, the ecosystem or affected communities. The tension between the need to generate adequate financial returns and the principles of responsible forest operations can be reduced through efforts to market forest products for their best value.

A meeting held in Visby, Gotland in Sweden, in August 2007 and attended by leading representatives of eight different faith traditions with major forestry assets and by leading forestry specialists from the United Nations, World Bank, WWF, Conservation International and various other secular agencies such as FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) agreed on the need to create Religious Forestry Standards (RFS). A key task set for each forest-owning faith was to draw up their own theology of land and forestry.

### **Timetable of action to achieve this between 2010 and 2014:**

- a) Between Windsor in November 2009 and Ise in May 2014 when the programme ends, a series of RFSs will be developed which are rooted in the specific theologies of each major tradition but which agree on certain key environmental, social and economic frameworks for the protection of forests, of whatever kind, over which faiths have some degree of control.
- b) To reach that goal, an Executive Group will meet every six months over the next four and a half years to ensure that this target is met and to manage the overall programme.
- c) The first meeting of the Executive Group will be at Windsor in November 2009. The next meeting will be in Japan in the spring of 2010. In the autumn of 2010, there will be a meeting of theologians who have developed the Theologies of Land and Forests. This will be held in China at the sacred mountain of Hua Shan, near Xian. From this meeting, the core theological framework of each RFS will be agreed and finalised.
- d) In spring 2011, an Asian RFS meeting will be held in Cambodia, hosted by the Association of Buddhists for the Environment in Cambodia, with involvement from Jinja Honcho, International Buddhists groups and Cambodian Buddhists. In spring 2012, a meeting of African RFSs will be held, to be followed by a meeting of the European and North American RFS in autumn 2012.

In 2014, the Executive Group will meet in Japan for the Ise Event where an agreed International Religious Forestry Standard will be launched at the most sacred event in Japanese religious and social life: the rebuilding of the Grand Shrines at Ise. The Jinja Honcho will host all the major forest owning religions at the grand ceremony for the rebuilding of the Great Shrines of Ise.

The Ise Grand Shrines are unique because, in addition to some 5,500 hectares of sacred forest, they are also surrounded by a vast area of forest covering the nearby mountains. These were created to meet the needs of the shrines for timber – with most shrines being replaced every 20-25 years – and a farm to provide food to feed staff and provide offerings to the kami.

Together, they comprise a total ecosystem, linking the forests with the river-system, all the way to the sea. It therefore represents the most explicit and advanced example of the Shinto

approach to Nature in general, and forest management in particular.

## Shinto origins

### □ Way of the gods

Shinto means 'Way of the Gods'. It is the traditional and ancient religion of Japan, without a founder or sacred scriptures, which regards all natural things as having their own spirituality. Traditional Shinto was not organized into a religion. It reveres kami, the indigenous folk deities of Japan – spirits present in animals, plants, and even stones and waterfalls.

## Formal beginnings

Shinto became a distinct religion in response to the arrival of Buddhism in Japan around 550 AD. But not until the late 12th century was the word Shinto used to define a distinct body of religious teachings. Since then Shinto and Buddhism have co-existed in Japan, sometimes closer, sometimes further apart.

## State Shinto

The 19th century was a turning point. In 1868 Shinto was divided into State Shinto, obligatory for all Japanese, and Shrine Shinto, which included an enormous number of popular cults, a few of which were persecuted by the then Japanese government.

## Popular movements

After Japan's defeat in World War II, State Shinto was disestablished and replaced by Jinja Shinto, or Shrine Shinto, which now represents the majority of Shinto shrines. Tens of Shrine Shinto organizations revitalized their movements and hundreds of new religious denominations sprung up from the fundamental teachings and practices of Shinto and Buddhism.

## Shinto history

The traditional belief system of Japan has no fundamental creeds or written teachings, and is not particularly evangelical. However it resonates with a veneration for Japanese tradition and the invisible presence of innumerable spiritual powers, or *kami*. Thus the spiritual insights attributed to Japan's ancient inhabitants are regarded as just as valid now as throughout all the vicissitudes of history. Shinto is essentially a body of ritual to relate with *kami*

in a way that is respectful, warm, open, positive and vibrant. Local festivals (*matsuri*) have become so much part of social life and enshrine so much traditional Japanese morality and social behaviour that participation seems natural common-sense, good neighbourliness and part of being Japanese. Shinto has thus become a vehicle for many themes, and need not operate merely on the basis of conscious 'belief'.

### THE NAME

'Shinto' combines the Chinese characters for *kami*, the way, (implying the way to/from and of the *kami*.) It was originally chosen by government in the seventh century to distinguish 'traditional' worship from Buddhism. Shinto, however, is clearly not simply an indigenous native cult but reflects much of the ancient shamanic traditions common to its Asian neighbours. Historians can also pinpoint how Buddhist, Taoist, Confucian and, more recently, Christian philosophy and customs have been adopted because of the attractions and challenges of Chinese, Korean and Western civilization. At times Shinto has also been used by the Japanese State to unify the nation under the Emperor, as a national religion, against foreign enemies.

This background of political and academic debate has usually been alien to most Japanese people, who have always spoken simply of 'the *kami*', (never 'Shinto') and practise a mixture of Buddhism and Shinto without any sense of contradiction. Furthermore, few Japanese would refer to either Buddhism or Shinto as 'religion', or *shukyou*, which is usually equated with pushy evangelism and quibbling over dogma.

### THE KAMI

Japan's earliest histories, the *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki*, were compiled on the orders of the imperial family in AD 712 and AD 720 respectively, for the purpose of justifying the royal lineage, and describe many of the most important *kami*

. Although there was an obvious political aim to unite all the regional and clan deities under the authority of the imperial, Yamato, clan-deity Amaterasu Omikami, the *kami* of the sun, these legends provide an explanation for most Shinto rituals and the starting point for any official, Shinto 'theology'.

Some basic concepts that emerge are:

1. *Kami* are not necessarily the same as 'gods'. They can die, and decompose like mortals. Some are human. There is no easy divide between what is animate and inanimate, cultural and natural, human and divine. Rather, all creation is an expression of spiritual powers. All things are bound together in a kind of spiritual family, and it is natural therefore to try and relate with

the world emotionally, as well and materially and scientifically. Spiritual power is not spread equally, but can be recognised as especially powerful in particular phenomena and these are the *kami*.

2. The *kami* are invisible and countless. Shinto focuses upon those that reveal their importance to people. Particular *kami* are identified with the kitchen, safety on the roads and education etc. Others are identified with places, especially forests, mountains or waterfalls, that seem especially numinous, or natural phenomena that are especially awesome, such as wind and thunder. Individuals too, who seem possessed of a special charisma or just very successful, might be called *kami*

. Other, less important spiritual forces are recognised, such as mischievous elements like fox-spirits, *kitsune*, or tree-spirits, *tengu*

. These maybe called on to communicate with us through mediums, to explain their behaviour. On special occasions, the *kami* may also possess a medium to send an important message.

3. Individuals should venerate and entertain the *kami* most important to them. Not only because their good will is required but also because they appreciate that individual's concern. They are not all-knowing, and want to be informed about significant events. They love most to see individuals enjoying themselves in a happy community.

4. There is no teaching about the original creation of the universe, nor about any future end or final judgement. Likewise, there is no clear description of any after-life. After a person dies, they simply merge with their ancestral *kami* and have no individual soul such as is taught in Christianity or Buddhism. Primary identity thus reflects membership in a community and social roles.

5. Purity is essential to a right relationship with the *kami* and the avoidance of failure or disease. Many rituals feature the exorcism of sins in order to be restored to original purity. Cleanliness, sincerity (*makoto*) and politeness in particular signify freedom from bad external influences, and reliability. The *kami* are especially repelled by blood and by death. Traditionally, women were banned from shine events during menstruation; those who worked with dead bodies, such as tanners, were not tolerated and soldiers required special purification after battle.

## Shinto Shrines (*jinja*)

Shinto shrines and rituals very carefully mark entry into a special world. Even in a bustling city, shrines offer a different atmosphere. Surrounded by evergreen trees, and approached on a noisy gravel path, they still everyday conversation. There is a special silence, broken only by ritual hand-claps, or the sound of cows and seasonal insects. Shinto ritual, including music (*gaku*) and dance (*kagura*), is characterized by slow, measured pace, appropriate to the timeless *kami* and quite different from daily life outside. On special occasions (*matsuri*) a mass of local people will be crowded together in noisy festivity, letting themselves go in front of the *kami* in ways they would never dream of doing outside the shrine.

It is important that the shrines blend in with the environment chosen by the *kami*. Traditionally built from wood and generally left untreated, they need regular repair or rebuilding, and the work of the local community is thus bound to the life of the local shrine. This is still the tradition of Japan's most celebrated shrine, the Grand Shrine of Ise, dedicated to Amaterasu, and reconstructed in ancient style every generation. Worship is done primarily in the open air, and the key buildings enshrine the tokens that are the focus of veneration.

### THE KAMI AROUND SHINTO SHRINES

The *kami* do not 'live' in the shrines, and must be summoned politely. The approach to each shrine is marked by one of several great gateways, or *torii*, and there will be a basin to rinse hands and mouth. A shrine is usually dedicated to one particular *kami*, but may host any number of smaller shrines, representing other *kami* that local people should also venerate. Sacred points, such as entrances or particular trees and rocks, will be marked off by ropes of elaborately plaited straw, or streamers of plain paper.

The *kami* are usually summoned by pulling a bell-rope outside the shrine, making a small money offering followed by two hand-claps, a short silent prayer, and two bows, but variation is tolerated and this procedure is longer at the most important shrines. The primary audience is always the *kami*.

*Matsuri*, for example, seem great fun but always begin with an invitation by priests facing away from the people, towards the *kami*, and inviting them to attend, and end with priestly farewells on their departure. Traditionally, the professional priesthood was limited to the great

shrines, and local people took it in turns to be the priest. But recently the professional priesthood has grown to about 20,000, including 2,000 women priests. All except the smallest shrines will be the responsibility of a team of priests (*g*  
*uji*  
) of various ranks, assisted by a team of local (unmarried) girls (*miko*  
) who perform ceremonial dances (*kagura*  
) and other services.

### THE PRIESTS

Most new priests are now university graduates, usually from Shinto universities, and are often from priestly families. There is no equivalent to a Pope or leader of Shinto, and each shrine is independent. But most shrines are linked together through the national shrine organisation (*jinja honcho*  
) which provides information and administrative services, and helps represent Shinto overseas.

---

## Shinto Today

There are four major seasonal events: New Year, Rice- Planting (spring), O-Bon (a visit by the ancestors in mid- July or August) and Harvest Thanksgiving (autumn). In addition there will be the festival days of the local *kami*. There will also be special events to mark rites of passage, such as presenting a new- born baby to be recognised and protected by the local *kami*

, followed by further presentations during childhood (boys aged five, girls aged three and seven), then a coming-of –age ceremony when 20. Within the last 100 years, marriage has also begun to be celebrated at the local shrine. Funerals are left to Buddhist priests, since shrines must avoid pollution.

Most traditional family homes feature a *kamidana* or shelf on which amulets and tokens of the *kami* are displayed. Particular rooms associated with pollution or danger, such as the toilet and kitchen, may also feature amulets.

### THE ROLE OF THE EMPEROR

The failure of Japan's brutal adventure into mainland Asia from 1894 to 1945, in the name of the emperor, has complicated his place in Shinto. The emperor has been promoted as Shinto's high priest, Japan's primary link with the most important *kami* – notably Amaterasu O-mikami – since the very foundation of the Japanese state by the Yamato clan around the early sixth century.



Between 1868 and 1945, this tradition was interpreted to make him head of state, and State Shinto was promulgated as the chief arm of government, but the emperor was not given any clear mandate to rule.

Since 1945, the Japanese constitution forbids any formal link between its members of government and religious activism. When the crown prince formally becomes an emperor the Shinto ceremony in theory makes his body the host of a *kami*. But in Japanese law the Emperor is now merely the symbol of the Japanese nation and not a religious figure. He still has a busy schedule of rituals to perform, such as offering the first fruits after harvest to (other) *kami*

The myth that all Japanese are 'children of the *kami*', especially Amaterasu and O-mikami, through the emperor, has made it easy to generate a proud nation unified on the basis of a common ethnic origin. It fails, however, to respect the rights of those whose roots do not lie in the Yamato tradition, such as the Ainu or Okinawans, or immigrants, and claim the right to be different.

### NEW SHINTO SECTS

Since around the middle of the nineteenth century, as Japan faced up to all sorts of crises due to foreign imperialism and internal change, a variety of local Shinto cults appeared. Typically, they introduced new, hitherto unknown *kami*, who could help the people and meet the new challenges. Often they assumed an international character, unlike traditional Shinto, and sought to compete with Christianity as evangelical, saviour religions. Insofar as they played down the significance of the emperor, they were suppressed until 1945. Since then, some such as Tenrikyo, Sekai Kyusei Kyo and Mahikari have enjoyed spectacular success for example in Southeast Asia or South America, where similar spirit-based cults are indigenous.

**This section is adapted from an article written by Michael Shackleton, director of the International Centre at Osaka Gakuin University in Japan, and published in *World Religions***

ed.

**Martin Palmer, London, Times Books, 2002.**

## Shinto forestry

It is the forests, and not the buildings, that mark the true shrines of Shintoism. The deities are invited to these forests, where they and their environment are protected by the local community, which in turn is protected by the deities.

So although the *chinju no mori* or sacred groves around Shinto shrines are revered as the dwelling place of the *kami* spirits, it is the *kami* which are worshipped, not the trees.

## Background to forests in Japan

Traditionally Japanese villages were traditionally surrounded by rice-paddy, vegetable fields and woodland/grassy areas used for firewood, grazing etc. (*satoyama*). In this way, Japan (although at one time 80% covered by forest) lost almost all its primeval forest cover many centuries ago. All forests have long been managed by local communities. At times the demands for lumber or charcoal have been severe. Oil, electricity, concrete and plastics only replaced firewood/charcoal as the main energy/building resource after 1945. The

*chinju-no-mori*

thus developed as part of a comprehensive approach to land management, in which the combination of paddy and mixed woodland still represent the only known, recognized model of a sustainable natural environment in Japan.

This makes it difficult for government to plan future environmental management as more and more farming villages face depopulation and the abandonment of farming altogether, and the *sa toyama*

areas are left untended. The most ancient maps indicate the

*chinju no mori*,

and there is no reason to doubt their traditional significance. They provided oases for the *kami*

(and local flora & fauna) whilst the surrounding forests and woodland were exploited as part of the local or national economy. Because even the smallest and most urban shrines must have at least a few trees, to constitute a

*chinju no mori*,

the shrines have retained their function as natural sanctuaries.

In 2005 ARC sent a team, included Per Rosenberg, then Director of Forestry Issues for WWF International, and Goeran Allard, Head of Forestry for the Visby Diocese of the Swedish Lutheran Church. Everyone had assumed that the Japanese thirst for imported timber was due to the destruction of forests in Japan, but realized the situation was more complicated.

In fact, Japan has a higher percentage of forest (67%) than any other 'modern' nation. Forest management has been a key part of traditional culture and wisdom, but this knowledge and the communities that nourished it are breaking down. The much cheaper cost of imported timber means that forests in Japan are no longer managed properly, or even managed at all. Whole mountain-sides are left to go wild, or are felled without re-planting. In recent years this has led to extensive landslides and other problems, adding to the plight of Japan's rural economy. The ARC report concluded, however, that used in the right way, forest resources were sustainable.

### “Kami are everywhere”

Perhaps Shinto wisdom that 'kami are everywhere' might possibly foster concern not only for *chinju no mori*

but also for all the forests within Japan, and overseas too.

Shinto does not have teachings on such issues, mostly because traditionally Shinto has not offered 'teachings' at all. This makes it very different from Buddhism, Christianity and similar doctrinal religions. Shinto arose from a community base, and aims to inspire collaboration and harmony. Moreover, it is not evangelical, and its rituals and practice are meant only for Japan, not other countries. Shinto wisdom aims not to order or cajole, but to enable individuals to recognise what is right, by themselves, 'from within'.

Thus the *chinju no mori* over the centuries have evoked the mutual relationship between *kami* and the human community: the

*kami*

protecting the community, and the community protecting the

*kami*

by preserving the forest habitat: wisdom rooted in traditional practice, rather than doctrine from a sacred text.

<http://www.arcworld.org/faiths.asp?pageID=117>