SOUL of JAPAN

An Introduction to Shinto and Ise Jingu
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What is Shinto?

SHINTO is the indigenous faith of the Japanese. It is a way of life and a way of thinking that has been an integral part of Japanese culture since ancient times. It is the foundation for the yearly life-cycles, beginning with the New Year’s Day visit Japanese pay to a Shinto shrine to wish for good luck.

Observing the Shinto faith means worshipping ancestors as guardians of the family. It also means showing respect for the myriad kami—a word that corresponds to ‘deity’ in English—residing in the natural world. There are kami of the mountains, and kami of the sea. Kami are all around us, in every thing and every person. They may be worshipped anywhere, but many people visit Shinto shrines, called jinja, to pray, cleansing their hands and mouth at the entrance to purify the body and mind.
Shinto places great value in the virtues of purity and honesty, yet as a faith, Shinto has no dogma, doctrine, or founder. Its origins can be seen in the relationship between the ancient Japanese and the power they found in the natural world. It is a relationship that continues to this day, defined by a great reverence for nature’s strength, and gratitude for nature’s bounty. Only by both receiving the blessings of nature and accepting its rage can we maintain a harmonious connection to the world around us.

Shinto has shaped the past as an integral part of Japan’s cultural heritage. It will continue to shape the future through the deep influence it exerts on Japanese thought. Yet, as a fundamental aspect of daily life in Japan, the focus of Shinto is on the present. For honoring the kami, and receiving their blessings, there is no time but now.
SINCE ancient times, Japanese have expressed the divine energy or life-force of the natural world as kami.

Kami derived from nature, such as the kami of rain, the kami of wind, the kami of the mountains, the kami of the sea, and the kami of thunder have a deep relationship with our lives and a profound influence over our activities. Individuals who have made a great contribution to the state or society may also be enshrined and revered as kami.
Nature's severity, does not take human comfort and convenience into consideration. The sun, which gives life to all living things, sometimes parches the earth, causing drought and famine. The oceans, where life first appeared, may suddenly rise, sending violent tidal waves onto the land, causing much destruction and grief. The blossom scented wind, a harbinger of spring, can become a wild storm. Even the smallest animals can bring harm—the mouse that eats our grain and carries disease, and the locust that devasters our crops. It is to the *kami* that the Japanese turn to pacify this sometimes calm but at times raging aspect of nature. Through ceremonics, called ‘*matsuri*’, they appease the *kami* and wish for further blessings.

![Traditional Japanese view of nature](image)

Shinto observes no one single, omnipotent Creator. Each *kami* plays its own role in the ordering of the world, and when faced with a problem, the *kami* gather to discuss the issue in order to solve it. This is mentioned in records from the 8th Century which tell the story of the Divine Age before written history began, and is the basis for Japanese society's emphasis on harmony, and the cooperative utilization of individual strengths.
Matsuri

Since ancient times, Japanese have gathered at sacred places—a great boulder, or ancient tree—in order to commune with the kami. There, they made offerings and prayed for the safety and prosperity of their communities. This is the origin of the festivals, ceremonies, and rituals collectively known as matsuri. Many matsuri are tied to the yearly calendrical cycle of events and are held in spring to offer prayers for a bountiful harvest, and in autumn to give thanks for providing the season’s crops.
Matsuri are symbolic of ancient Japanese traditions and customs, sacred rituals that come in two aspects: One is ‘matsuri as religious service’, and the other is ‘matsuri as entertainment for the kami’. The former refers to the solemn rituals conducted in front of the kami by Shinto priests as representatives of local communities, while the latter are lively, festive events sometimes involving mikoshi, or portable shrines, where an often-raucous procession ritually transfers the kami to a new resting place. Many traditional performing arts, such as sumo and Noh, are also dedicated to the kami—another example of matsuri as entertainment. Although these two aspects of matsuri may seem quite different, the blessings received from the kami remain the same.

Through matsuri, the Japanese celebrate and pray for the kami, and together both kami and participants are rejuvenated. Matsuri are rituals to both strengthen the bonds and solidarity within a community and connect that community to the kami.
JAPANESE regard the sea, the mountains, the forest, and natural landmarks as places where the *kami* reside. In ancient times, these were regarded as sacred areas, without the need for special buildings, as the *kami* were believed to exist everywhere.

A practice also arose of decorating evergreen trees in sacred courtyards to which the *kami* could be summoned in order to perform rituals. Later, dwellings were built for the *kami* in the forests, structures to be renewed in perpetuity where rituals could be conducted. This is the origin of the shrines known as ‘jinja’. There are more than 80,000 jinja in Japan today where various *kami* are enshrined, particularly those who appear in the story of the Divine Age or historical figures known for their great achievements.
Rituals to pray for the peace, security, and prosperity of the nation and community are conducted at jinja throughout the year. Prayers may also be dedicated at a jinja for the well-being of the local parishioners and the guardian kami of the community. While these observances are typically handled by members of the Shinto priesthood, individuals will often visit a jinja to participate in the yearly cycle of matsuri, and on commemorative occasions throughout one’s life, in order to make wishes and offer prayers of appreciation to the kami.

Jinja are sacred places and are always kept clean, and pure. Often surrounded by trees, jinja are infused with the divine energy of nature. They are places to worship, but also places to relax. Visiting a jinja, we feel physically and spiritually rejuvenated. Jinja are special spaces for us to reflect on ourselves and express our gratitude to the kami.
The Divine Age

Although Shinto lacks a doctrine, two early 8th century historical records, the Kojiki and Nihonshoki, name certain individual kami of great personality, and relate the tales of their various doings and achievements. These records are regarded as an essential part of the Shinto faith.

Another important text compiled in the early 10th century, the Engishiki, is in part a collection of codes concerning the proper form of Shinto rituals. Kami named in these codes are enshrined in jinja throughout Japan today.

The following is a brief summary of two stories first appearing in the Kojiki and Nihonshoki.
六  Amano-Iwato, The Celestial Cave

The story of Ama-no-Iwato begins with the tale of the divine couple, Izanagi-no-kami and Izanami-no-kami, who give birth to the Japanese islands and various other kami in the time after heaven and earth become separated.

Among their descendants were three venerable kami. The first, Amaterasu-Omikami, whose name is a title literally meaning “great kami who lights the heavens”, is associated with Takamanohara, the Celestial Plain. The second, Tsukiyomi-no-kami, is associated with the moon and the night and the third, Susano’o-no-kami, is associated with the sea.
Of these three, Susano’o-no-kami did not properly tend to his duties and abandoned the sea, despite being admonished. He then ascends to Takamanohara where he causes much mischief.

Amaterasu-Omikami cannot bear his troublemaking, and takes refuge, hiding herself in a celestial cave. Bereft of Amaterasu-Omikami’s natural brilliance, the celestial and terrestrial world become dark and gloomy, and there is much confusion in the land.

The *kami* gather to discuss how they might work together to solve this grave problem. To coax Amaterasu-Omikami out of the cave, they fashion a jewel, the Yasakani-no-magatama, and a mirror, the Yata-no-kagami and decorate a tree with these sacred objects. Then they hold a *matsuri*, and performed a sacred dance in front of Amaterasu-Omikami’s cave. Intrigued by the merriment, she peeks outside and eventually agrees to return to the world, bringing back her peaceful light that harmony and order might be restored.

Susano’o-no-kami, regretting his mischief, descends to earth and slays the Yamata-no-o-rochi, a monstrous, eight-headed serpent, freeing many from its devastation. After the serpent’s death, Susano’o-no-kami dedicates a special sword he discovers in the serpent’s tail, the Amenomurakumo-no-tsurugi, to Amaterasu-Omikami.
Ninigi-no-Mikoto

Amaterasu-Omikami is considered the most revered ancestor of the Tenno—the Emperor of Japan—and symbolizes the unity of all kami. The tale of her grandson, Ninigi-no-mikoto, begins with her sending him to pacify the terrestrial world. For this task, she endowed him with the mirror, the jewel, and the sword that appeared in the Ama-no-Iwato story. These are the Three Sacred Treasures, which comprise the Imperial Regalia of Japan and have been inherited to this day by the Imperial Household. Of these, she instructed him to place the sacred mirror in the Imperial Palace and worship it as he would her.

Amaterasu-Omikami also granted Ninigi-no-mikoto an ear of rice to give sustenance to the people. Ensuring that Japan would forever be looked after by her descendants and that her lineage might last in perpetuity, she sent Ninigi-no-mikoto to the terrestrial world with several distinguished kami to assist him. Landing on the island of Kyushu, Ninigi-no-mikoto built his palace and there began the establishment of the nation of Japan.
In later years, the great-grandson of Ninigi-no-mikoto chose present-day Nara as the new site for the nation’s capital. There he was enthroned as the first Tenno and proclaimed Japan a nation. The modern Tenno is the 125th in an Imperial lineage which can be traced directly back to Amaterasu-Omikami. Today, the Tenno exists as a symbol of the national character and traditions of Japan.
Ise-Jingu

ISE JINGU, officially ‘Jingu’, includes 125 jinja, centered around Kotaijingu (Naiku), dedicated to Amaterasu-Omikami, and Toyo’uke-daijingu (Geku), dedicated to Toyo’uke-no-Omikami. In land area, Jingu is roughly the same size as Paris. More than 1,500 rituals are conducted here yearly to pray for the prosperity of the Imperial family and the peace of the nation.
The Enshrinement of Amaterasu-Omikami at Jingu

A MATERASU-OMIKAMI was formerly worshiped in the Imperial Palace, but following an epidemic, the 10th Tenno decided to move her symbol, the sacred mirror, that she might be worshiped more respectfully and thus end the disaster. It was the 11th Tenno who ordered his princess, Yamatohime-no-mikoto, to seek the most appropriate place to permanently enshrine and worship Amaterasu-Omikami.
It is said the princess traveled the land searching for this special place until she received a revelation by the banks of Isuzugawa River. This is the origin of Naiku.

In the era of the 21st Tenno, some 1,500 years ago, Toyo’uke-no-Omikami was, in accordance with another revelation from Amaterasu-Omikami, summoned from the north of Kyoto prefecture and enshrined in her present resting ground. This is the origin of Geku. Toyo’uke-no-Omikami joins Amaterasu-Omikami in Jingu as her provider of companionship and sacred foods. She blesses us with abundant harvests and is the guardian of well-being, providing cloth, food and shelter.
EVER since the enshrinement of Amaterasu-Omikami in Ise 2,000 years ago, the priesthood of Jingu have conducted rituals and prayed for a peaceful world. These rituals and ceremonies are performed under the direction of Amaterasu-Omikami’s direct descendent, the Tenno himself. Thus the rituals conducted at Jingu can be referred to as the Imperial rituals.
Matsuri at Jingu can be divided into three groups. The first includes regularly conducted daily and annual rituals, such as Kanname-sai in October and Tsukinami-sai in June and December. The second are exceptional rituals, which are conducted on special occasions for the benefit of the Imperial Family, the nation, or Jingu. The third are rituals for Sengu conducted every twenty years.

Tenno sends the Imperial Envoy to Jingu to dedicate textiles called heibaku for certain important rituals. Some rituals feature the sacred dance and music called kagura.

Annual rituals are based on the cycle of rice cultivation, the staple food of the Japanese. The most important ceremony of the year is Kanname-sai, during which Jingu priests offer the first rice of the year harvested in Jingu and dedicate a prayer of gratitude to Amaterasu-Omikami for presenting the first rice to the terrestrial world through her grandson.

At Kanname-sai, an ear of new rice grown by the Tenno is also dedicated to the kami. Furthermore, ears of new rice collected from rice farmers throughout the country are hung along the fence of the main sanctuary.
Shikinen Sengu

Adjacent to the main sanctuary where the sacred palace of Amaterasu-Omikami stands, is a site of exactly the same size. A new building with the same dimensions as the current one is constructed at this alternate site every twenty years. The divine treasures to be placed inside the sacred palace are also remade. Once they are prepared, the sacred mirror, symbol of Amaterasu-Omikami, is moved to the new sanctuary by the Jingu priests. This ritual is called Shikinen Sengu. It is carried out at Geku and other jinja as well.

The first Shikinen Sengu was conducted 1,300 years ago. Although the Shikinen Sengu tradition has been temporarily suspended at times due to warfare in the 15th and 16th centuries, it has continued to be an important part of Jingu to the present day.

Shikinen Sengu involves thirty-two rituals and ceremonies beginning with the ritual cutting of the first trees for the new buildings, and continuing until the transfer of the sacred mirror eight years later.
Wood is central to Japanese civilization. The concepts of sustainability and reutilization, and the maintenance of know-how and skills are considered more important than the actual physical existence of a structure or building. This is the essence of ‘eternity’ as it is expressed at Jingū, and the reason for choosing to build and rebuild dwellings for the kami, instead of permanent structures of stone.

To this day, we are able to participate in the same matsuri as performed by our ancestors and share a common spirituality with them through the cyclical re-enshrinement of Amaterasu-Omikami. Shikinen Sengu is a temporal and spatial return to origins that spans generations. It resonates in the souls of our ancestors, and is a gift to the future.

Shikinen Sengu plays one other very important role by enabling the transfer of our technical skill and spirit to the next generation. This transfer maintains both our architectural heritage, and over 1,000 years of artistic tradition involving the making of the divine treasures—including 714 different kinds of sacred objects. After Shikinen Sengu, the previous sanctuary building is disassembled and most of the timber is granted to other jinja across Japan to be reused. The main pillars that support the roof of the main sanctuary are traditionally reused for the sacred torii gate on Ujibashi Bridge at the entrance of Naiku.
Visiting a Jinja

Temizu (How to purify your hands and mouth)

When visiting a jinja, pass under the Torii (sacred gate) and proceed to the Temizuya (purification font usually consisting of a stone water basin) to cleanse your hands and rinse your mouth. This is a simple act of purification before approaching the main sanctuary.

1. Take the dipper with your right hand and fill it with water. Pour some water over your left hand to rinse it.
2. Shift the dipper to your left hand and rinse your right hand.
3. Take the dipper with your right hand again, and pour water into your left cupped hand and rinse your mouth. Please do not touch the dipper directly to your mouth.
4. Finally, rinse your left hand once more.
Praying Etiquette to *Kami*

1. Bow twice deeply.
2. Clap your hands twice.
3. And bow once more deeply.
Glossary

**RETSUGU**
別宮
Supreme priest of Ise Jingu.

**DAI-GUJI**
大宮司
Supreme priest of Ise Jingu.

**EMA**
絵馬
Small wooden plaques at jinja on which worshipers write their prayers or wishes.

**ENGLISHKI**
延喜式
Japanese book of laws and regulations from the early 9th century which regulates Shinto rituals and has a list of important jinja.

**GOSHINTAI**
ご神体
A sacred object that is worshiped at or near shrines and represents the spirit of the kami.
It may be a natural object such as a stone, mountain or waterfall or a man-made object, commonly, a mirror, sword or jewel.

**GÜJI**
宮司
Chief priest of jinja.

**GOSHINPÔ**
ご神社
Sacred treasures. Related to the enshrined kami or dedicated to the kami.

**HARAI**
祓い
General term for Shinto purification rituals of the mind and body.
Often performed at the beginning of ceremonies to cleanse the participants before presenting offerings to the kami. Referred to as Shubatsu at Ise Jingu.

**HEIHAKE**
祓衣
Ritual offerings of textiles.

**HIMOROGI**
祓囲
A temporarily erected branch or tree which summons the kami and defines a sacred space.

**JINJIA**
神社
This word is often translated as 'Shinto shrine' or 'Shinto temple'. However, both words do not express its exact nature and using 'jinja' instead is recommended in order to express its unique characteristics.

**JINGU-TAIMA**
神宮大廈
Special talisman of Ise Jingu.

**KAGURA**
舞楽
Ancient dance and music dedicated to kami.

**KAMI**
神
Shinto deity. Also defined as sacred spirits found in the natural world. Refer to page 14-17 for detail.

**KAMIDANA**
神鏡
A miniature altar that houses the protective kami of a house or shop. An ofuda as well as offerings such as rice, fruit and water are placed on the altar.

**KANNUSHI**
神主
Standard term for a Shinto priest. Alternatively called shinshoku and shihan.

**KOJIKI**
古事記
Text written in the 8th century outlining the mythical origins of Japan and the role of kami in its foundation.

**KOMAINU**
狛犬
Stone lion-dogs that stand guard outside the entrance gates to jinja to ward off evil spirits.

**MIKO**
巫女
Jinja maiden or attendant who supports Shinto priests and performs rituals at jinja such as kagura.

**MIKOSHI**
内祠
A portable jinja where kami are carried in a procession during festivals.

**MIKOTO**
御所
A suffix to indicate divinity.

**MISOGI**
禊
Ritual purification through bathing or ablation.

**NIHON-SHOKI**
日本書紀
The second oldest book of classical Japanese history after the Kojiki with a focus on the lineages of the Japan's Imperial rulers and their deeds. Contains stories from the divine age.

**NORITO**
叙禮
Shinto liturgy recited during a ritual.

**OFUDA**
符
Talisman issued by a jinja symbolising the presence of a kami to protect a household.

**OMAMORI**
守り
Protective amulet or charm to ward off evil or danger and bring good luck.

**OMIKUJI**
おみくじ
Fortune sold at jinja written on strips of paper. Bad fortunes are often seen tied to tree branches at many jinja where the belief is that the kami will exercise the bad luck.

**SAISEN**
善願
Monetary offering when people pray at jinja.

**SAISEN-BAKO**
善願箱
Monetary box where offerings are tossed prior to worship.

**SAISHU**
社主
Sacred priestess unique to Ise Jingu. Saishu is appointed according to the will of the Tenno.

**SAKAKI**
槇
Sacred evergreen tree whose branches are often used in rituals and ceremonies.

**SHIMENAWA**
神門
A length of braided rice straw rope placed around objects/trees to indicate the presence of kami, often attached with zigzag paper called shide.

**SHIINSEN**
神泉
Food offerings to the kami, including staples such as rice, fish, sake, salt, water etc.

**SHÔGÛ**
大宮
Main sanctuary of Naiku or Geku. A prefix 'go' is usually added for politeness and respect.

**SHÔ-GÜJI**
少宮司
Assistant to the Supreme Priest.

**TAMAGUSHI**
玉槌
A sacred sprig of evergreen sakaki offered to the kami during rituals by a priest or worshiper.

**TEMIZUYA**
手水舍
Fountain at the entrance to jinja where worshippers can purify themselves by washing their hands and mouth.

**TORII**
鳥居
Shinto gate which indicates the entrance and border to the jinja sanctuary.

**UJIGAMI**
宇迦神
Community or clan deities who are venerated ancestors of the clan. In present day, they are commonly the local guardian kami of villages and communities.

**UJIKO**
氏子
Parishioners of a local jinja.
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