**Shinto at a glance**

The essence of Shinto is the Japanese devotion to invisible spiritual beings and powers called [***kami***](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/shinto/beliefs/kami_1.shtml), to [**shrines**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/shinto/places/shrines_1.shtml), and to various rituals. Shinto is not a way of explaining [**the world**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/shinto/beliefs/universe.shtml). What matters are rituals that enable human beings to communicate with kami. Kami are not God or gods. They are spirits that are concerned with human beings - they appreciate our interest in them and want us to be happy - and if they are treated properly they will intervene in our lives to bring benefits like health, business success, and good exam results. Shinto is a very local [**religion**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/shinto/beliefs/religion.shtml), in which devotees are likely to be concerned with their local shrine rather than the religion as a whole. Many Japanese will have a tiny shrine-altar in their homes. However, it is also an unofficial national religion with shrines that draw visitors from across the country. Because [**ritual**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/shinto/ritesrituals/ritual.shtml) rather than belief is at the heart of Shinto, Japanese people don't usually think of Shinto specifically as a religion - it's simply an aspect of Japanese life. This has enabled Shinto to [**coexist happily with Buddhism**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/shinto/history/history_3.shtml) for centuries.

* The name Shinto comes from Chinese characters for *Shen* ('divine being'), and *Tao* ('way') and means 'Way of the Spirits'.
* Shrine visiting and taking part in festivals play a great part in binding local communities together.
* Shrine visiting at [**New Year**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/shinto/holydays/oshogatsu.shtml) is the most popular shared national event in Japan.
* Because Shinto is focussed on the [**land of Japan**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/shinto/history/nationalism_1.shtml) it is clearly an ethnic religion. Therefore Shinto is little interested in missionary work, and rarely practised outside its country of origin.
* Shinto sees human beings as basically good and has no concept of original sin, or of humanity as 'fallen'.
* Everything, including the spiritual, is experienced as part of [**this world**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/shinto/beliefs/universe.shtml). Shinto has no place for any transcendental other world.
* Shinto has no canonical scriptures.
* Shinto teaches important [**ethical principles**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/shinto/shintoethics/ethics.shtml) but has no commandments.
* Shinto has no founder.
* Shinto has no God.
* Shinto does not require adherents to follow it as their only religion.

Shinto is based on belief in, and worship of, kami. The best English translation of kami is 'spirits', but this is an over-simplification of a complex concept - kami can be elements of the landscape or forces of nature.

Kami are close to human beings and respond to human prayers. They can influence the course of natural forces, and human events.

Shinto tradition says that there are eight million million kami in Japan.

**Concepts of kami**

Shinto belief includes several ideas of kami: while these are closely related, they are not completely interchangeable and reflect not only different ideas but different interpretations of the same idea.

Kami can refer to beings or to a quality which beings possess.

So the word is used to refer to both the essence of existence or beingness which is found in everything, and to particular things which display the essence of existence in an awe-inspiring way.

But while everything contains kami, only those things which show their kami-nature in a particularly striking way are referred to as kami.

Kami as a property is the sacred or mystical element in almost anything. It is in everything and is found everywhere, and is what makes an object itself rather than something else. The word means *that which is hidden*.

Kami have a specific life-giving, harmonising power, called *musubi*, and a truthful will, called *makoto* (also translated as *sincerity*).

Not all kami are good - some are thoroughly evil.

**Kami as 'God'**

The idea that kami are the same as God stems in part from the use of the word kami to translate the word 'God' in some 19th century translations of the Bible into Japanese.

This caused a great deal of confusion even among Japanese: the Shinto theologian Ueda Kenji estimated in 1990 that nearly 65% of entering students now associate the Japanese term kami with some version of the Western concept of a supreme being.

The next section shows that kami are actually very different from the Western concept of God.

**Kami as beings**

The concept of kami is hard to explain.

Shintoists would say that this is because human beings are simply incapable of forming a true understanding of the nature of kami.

To make understanding easier kami are often described as divine beings, as spirits or gods. But kami are not much like the gods of other faiths:

* Kami are not divine like the transcendent and omnipotent deities found in many religions.
* Kami are not omnipotent.
* Kami are not perfect - they sometimes make mistakes and behave badly.
* Kami are not inherently different in kind from human beings or nature - they are just a higher manifestation of the life energy... an extraordinary or awesome version.
* Kami don't exist in a supernatural universe - they live in the same world as human beings and the world of nature

Kami include the gods that created the universe, but can also include:

* The spirits that inhabit many living beings
* Some beings themselves
* Elements of the landscape, like mountains and lakes
* Powerful forces of nature, like storms and earthquakes
* human beings who became kami after their deaths

The term kami is sometimes applied to spirits that *live in* things, but it is also applied directly to the things themselves - so the kami of a mountain or a waterfall may be the actual mountain or waterfall, rather than the spirit of the mountain or waterfall.

Not all kami are sufficiently personalised to have names - some are just referred to as the kami of such-and-such a place.

Three types of kami are particularly important:

* Ujigami, the ancestors of the clans: in tribal times, each group believed that a particular kami was both their ancestor and their protector, and dedicated their worship to that spirit
* Kami of natural objects and creatures, and of the forces of nature
* The souls of dead human beings of outstanding achievement

**Is Shinto a religion?**

The nature of Shinto as a faith should not be misunderstood. Shinto is often called the 'Japanese religion', and has been a big influence on Japanese culture and values [**for over 2000 years**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/shinto/history/history_1.shtml). But some writers think that Shinto is more than just a religion - it's no more or less than the Japanese way of looking at the world.

Because [**ritual**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/shinto/ritesrituals/ritual.shtml) rather than belief is at the heart of Shinto, Japanese people don't usually think of Shinto specifically as a religion - it's simply an aspect of Japanese life. This has enabled Shinto to coexist happily with [**Buddhism**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/) for centuries.

Shinto is involved in every aspect of Japanese culture: It touches [**ethics**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/shinto/shintoethics/ethics.shtml), politics, family life and social structures, artistic life (particularly drama and poetry) and sporting life (Sumo wrestling), as well as spiritual life. Today many Japanese mix Buddhism and Shinto in their lives; something that can't be done with more exclusive religions like [**Christianity**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/) or [**Islam**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/). About 83% of Japanese follow Shinto, and 76% follow Buddhism (1999 figures).

Although early Christian missionaries were hostile to Shinto, in more recent times it was seen by some Christians as so different from their own faith that they were willing to allow Japanese Christians to practice Shinto as well as Christianity. (For example, a Vatican proclamation in 1936 allowed Japanese Catholics to participate in Shinto ceremonies, on the grounds that these were merely civil rites of "filial reverence toward the [**Imperial Family**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/shinto/history/emperor_1.shtml) and to the heroes of the country".

**Periods of Shinto history**

One of the standard classifications of Shinto history reduces it to four major periods:

* [**Before the arrival of Buddhism in Japan**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/shinto/history/history_2.shtml)
* [**Shinto and Buddhism together in Japan**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/shinto/history/history_3.shtml)
* [**The Meiji reinterpretation of Shinto in the 19th century**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/shinto/history/history_4.shtml)
* [**Shinto after World War II**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/shinto/history/history_5.shtml)

Historians encounter some [**problems**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/shinto/history/history_6.shtml) when trying to understand Shinto history as a discrete narrative.

Like many prehistoric people, the first inhabitants of Japan were probably animists; devoted to the spirits of nature. In their case these were the [**Kami**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/shinto/beliefs/kami_1.shtml) that were found in plants and animals, mountains and seas, storms and earthquakes, sand and all significant natural phenomena. Other cults that are grouped together into Shinto probably arrived in Japan from Korea with the Korean tribes which invaded Japan in late prehistoric times. From the 6th century CE the beliefs that are now known as Shinto were greatly altered by the addition of other ingredients. Shintoisms were the only religions in Japan until the arrival of [**Buddhism**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/) in the 6th century CE. From then on Shinto faiths and traditions took on Buddhist elements, and later, Confucian ones. Some Shinto shrines became Buddhist temples, existed within Buddhist temples, or had Buddhist priests in charge. Buddhist temples were built, and Buddhist ideas were explored. Religion became something of a hot potato when missionaries arrived in Japan during this period and started converting people from Shinto and Buddhism. Christianity was seen as a political threat and was ruthlessly stamped out. The Meiji Restoration in 1868 brought a sudden change in the religious climate of Japan. The aim was to provide a sacred foundation and a religious rationale for the new Japan and its national ethos, and to support the system of central administration. Shinto became the official state religion of Japan, and many shrines were supported by state funding. However, this financial aid was short-lived, and by the 1890s most Shinto shrines were once again supported by those who worshipped at them. Shinto was disestablished in 1946, when the Emperor lost his divine status as part of the Allied reformation of Japan. Despite the loss of official status Shinto still remains a very significant player in Japanese spirituality and everyday life. And despite the non-divine status of the Emperor, considerable religious ritual and mysticism still surrounds many Imperial ceremonies

**Shinto shrines**

A shrine (*jinja*) is a sacred place where kami live, and which show the power and nature of the kami. It's conventional in Japan to refer to Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples - but Shinto shrines actually are temples, despite not using that name. Every village and town or district in Japan will have its own Shinto shrine, dedicated to the local kami. The Japanese see shrines as both restful places filled with a sense of the sacred, and as the source of their spiritual vitality - they regard them as their spiritual home, and often attend the same shrine regularly throughout their lives. Shrines need not be buildings - rocks, trees, and mountains can all act as shrines, if they are special to kami. Japanese people don't visit shrines on a particular day each week. People go to the shrine at festival times, and at other times when they feel like doing so. Japanese often visit the local shrine when they want the local kami to do them a favour such as good exam results, a good outcome to a surgical operation for a relative, and so on.

Shrines are made of natural materials (cypress wood is very common) and are designed to provide a home for the particular kami to whom they are dedicated. The entrances to shrines are marked by torii gates, made of wood and painted orange or black. The gates are actually arches with two uprights and two crossbars, and symbolise the boundary between the secular everyday world and the infinite world of the kami. Because there are no actual gates within the torii arch a shrine is always open.

These entrances may be guarded by paired statues of dogs or lions, called komainu. Their job is to keep away evil spirits. Japanese believe that it is wrong to go near the kami in a state of impurity, so every shrine includes a temizuya or chōzuya (a place for purification with a water trough and ladles for washing hands and face), near the entrance. The route (sando) that leads to the shrine buildings is a visual and aural journey that prepares visitors for worship. It may also involve a bridge across water, which provides a further step of purification. The shrine will contain a main hall (honden), a worship hall (haiden) and an offering hall (heiden), which may be separate buildings or separate rooms in the same building. The honden is the kami sanctuary - the place where the kami are thought to live. Only priests are allowed to enter the honden. Most shrines are managed by committees made up of priests (*kannushi*), parishioners and parishioner representatives.

Major Shrines: 

The main building of **Itsukushima shrine**, in the town of Miyajima on Itsukushima Island, Hiroshima Prefecture, is believed to have been built in the 6th century. The most controversial Shinto shrine is at **Yasukuni** and honours 2.5 million Japanese soldiers, including convicted war criminals such as former Prime Minister Hideki Tojo, who was executed after World War II. Yasukuni - which means 'peaceful country' - was founded in 1869 under the orders of Emperor Meiji and is dedicated to the souls of all those who have fallen in battle for Japan since that time. Within the shrine the souls of the dead are worshipped rather than just remembered. They are referred to as *deities* who have sacrificed their lives for the making of modern Japan.



