



STUDYDADDY

**Get Homework Help
From Expert Tutor**

Get Help



Unit 7 Japanese Traditions

INTRODUCTION

Shinto refers to traditional Japanese beliefs that are still practised in the present day. Although the practices may have existed before this time, the name itself was coined around the sixth century, with the introduction of Buddhism from China. The term **kami** refers to supernatural forces or gods that can be found in all aspects of nature. While used largely to refer to a sense of awe that is invoked in viewing the world around us, recently kami has also been used to refer to human beings that also instill this sense of awe.

Shinto is considered a national religion that is almost exclusively practised by Japanese people, yet it has no founder representing its core ideals. It also has no official doctrine, only that which has emerged out of sub-sects of the tradition.

It is also important to keep in mind that Japanese religious traditions represent a syncretistic blending of folk religion, Shinto, Buddhism, and Chinese influences from Confucianism and Daoism. The course notes for this unit focus primarily on the nature of Shinto but the textbook includes further detail on other religious traditions that played a key role in shaping the religious landscape of Japanese culture.

THEMES

In order to draw attention to the complexities and seeming contradictions found within Hinduism, this unit highlights the following:

Key historical developments

- ➔ Early Shinto tradition (7th–8th centuries)
- ➔ Influences of Buddhism on Shinto (approx. 8th century)
- ➔ Influences of Confucianism on Shinto (1600s)

Basic concepts and terms relevant to Shinto

- ➔ Kami
- ➔ The nature of humanity

Gender and Shinto

- ➔ Women and shrines
- ➔ Shinto and ritual practice

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this unit you should be able to:

1. the early Shinto tradition as well as Buddhist and Confucian influences on the tradition;
2. key concepts such as kami, as well as the Shinto view of humanity;
3. the role of gender in early kami depictions and how these early ideas about gender are reflected in modern, Shinto culture;
4. identify the major political shifts in the history of Japan that influenced the development of religious worldviews and ritual practices.

READINGS

World Religions: Eastern Traditions 5th Edition, Ed. by Amore, Hussain and Oxtoby – Chapter 7:
Japanese Traditions by John K. Nelson

HOW TO PROCEED

Proceed through this unit by following the steps outlined below:

1. Read Chapter 7 in the textbook paying special attention to the highlighted terms (definitions are in the glossary at the end of the chapter). It may be useful to keep a list of terms and definitions as you read through the chapter to use as a quick reference later when you are preparing for the final exam.
2. Read the Unit 7 course notes and complete the exercises.
3. Review the list of terms to know at the end of the course notes. These are the only terms from the textbook that you will be responsible for on the final exam.
4. Answer the study questions provided at the end of the course notes.
5. Complete the interactive assignment.

Course Notes

KEY HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENTS

Shinto as a religious tradition is diverse and flexible in its ability to absorb other traditions into its fold. In particular, its ability to adapt to the introduction of Buddhism and Confucianism into Japan denotes the tradition's ability to assimilate other cultures and traditions. This section first outlines the historical context of Shinto as it occurred prior to its encounter with Buddhism and Confucianism; second, it discusses the amalgamation of Buddhism with Shinto; and third it addresses Shinto as it was influenced by Confucianism, as noted under the following sub-headings:

- ➡ Early Shinto tradition (7th–8th centuries)
- ➡ Influences of Buddhism on Shinto (approx. 8th century)
- ➡ Influences of Confucianism on Shinto (1600s)

Early Shinto tradition (approximately 7th– 8th centuries)

While Shinto likely existed prior to the seventh century, we do not have any writings about the tradition until that time. Central to this tradition was kami, already mentioned, and as part of the early tradition, kami could be put into one of three categories:

- ➡ **natural deities:** kami who animated or controlled natural objects;
- ➡ **anthropomorphic deities:** renowned persons or heroes, charismatic individuals, and deified ancestors; and
- ➡ **conceptual deities:** kami who serve an idea (i.e., love or harmony) or symbolize a power (i.e., wealth or fertility).

As this classification indicates, the kami pervade and influence every significant aspect of human existence: the natural world, individual lives, and human thoughts, sentiments and ideals. The mythological tradition speaks of the eight million kamis, another indication of the abundance and pervasiveness of the divine power through the whole of the universe.

Early Shinto, with its emphasis on the interconnectedness with nature, meant that it was also inseparably linked with agriculture. While there was not the formation of shrines at this time, there were places of worship, as situated within beautiful scenery such as mountains or trees, as well as festivals related to harvest times. However, there is a transition of the situation and function of the kami. Where initially the kami could be found in all aspects of nature, once altars became permanent sites, the kami then become rooted in those sites. Basically, kami became stationary, like their shrines.

Initial early Shinto practice was led by familial clans and, therefore, did not necessarily represent a systematized body of thought or organization. This also meant that there was no priesthood to speak of; instead, the head of each family functioned as the head priest (Kato, 1971). However, with the

introduction of Chinese culture in Japan at approximately the fifth century, clan myths were compiled and language systematized in ways that pointed to and supported imperial rule. This transition in Shinto practice happened to coincide with the reign of Emperor Temmu (672–687), and represented a more unified systematized structure of Shinto. With this development, likely as a result of Chinese political systems brought to Japan, came the emergence, at least in its infancy, of Shinto as a national religion.

INFLUENCES OF BUDDHISM ON SHINTO (8TH CENTURY)

Exercise #1 – Compile a short list of characteristics of both the kami and the bodhisattva (from the unit on Buddhism). How are they similar and how are they different? Can you detect any other influences from the Chinese traditions in unit 6? For example, how are the concept of the kami similar to the Dao?

Buddhism entered Japan from China in 538. However, it would be several hundred years before it became evident as to how much Buddhism had been incorporated into Shinto traditions and how much the Shinto traditions had been incorporated into Buddhism. In part, it seems that this was because the traditions were not necessarily contradictory, and that both were able to adapt and incorporate aspects of each tradition into their own without conflict. This enabled Buddhism to become an aspect of Shinto state ritual, and has also allowed both traditions to continue to flourish in Japan.

Green (1987) outlines three distinctive transitions in the incorporation of Shinto into Buddhism. First, by the mid-eighth century, the kami were made protectors of the Buddha. This meant that not only were the kami incorporated into the Buddhist pantheon of deities, but also that they were overtly present in Buddhist temples. As a result, sometimes kami shrines would be built near Buddhist temples.

The second transition, which occurred during the same time as the first, was that the kami became examples of Buddhist deities that were caught in samsara. Recall that in Buddhism, all beings, including animals, humans, gods and goddesses, are stuck in the cycle of rebirth (samsara.) The only way to become released from this rebirth is by way of the Four Noble Truths and Eight-fold path. In addition, only a being in human form can achieve liberation, and thus gods and goddesses, who are viewed as having too much good karma, must await rebirth into human form in hopes of becoming liberated. In the case of Buddhist encounters with the Shinto tradition, the kami were viewed as gods and goddesses who needed to be ‘awakened’ from their ignorance in order to become liberated. Thus, the Buddhist communities in Japan sought to assist the kami into a human rebirth by reciting sutras to them in Buddhist temples or at kami (i.e., Shinto) altars.

The third transition, which occurred at the end of the eighth century, also had to do with Buddhist interpretations of kami. During this time period, the kami were interpreted as bodhisattvas, and in some instances, emanations of the Buddha. This meant further depictions of various kami within Buddhist

temples, as well as rituals conducted in their honour. Green (1987) notes, however, that not all Shinto shrines were simply absorbed by Buddhist groups, as “there were also shrines in which assimilation with Buddhism was resisted, and the Shinto side remained strong.”

Influences of Confucianism on Shinto (1600s)

The developments that incorporated Confucianism and Shinto occurred around the seventeenth century, much later than with Buddhism. Arguably, the mix of Confucian and Shinto ideals was more politicized than the encounters with Buddhism, as Shinto was reinterpreted into neo-Confucianism, where it was claimed that Shinto and Confucianism were one. However, such notions of the blend of Shinto and Confucianism were not necessarily met with resistance, but instead as a means to operate in harmony with each other.

This transition also led to the philosophizing of the tradition. By reconceptualizing kami, it became viewed as divine wisdom rather than a deity, and this wisdom could only be accessed by detachment in a world full of ego-filled desires. By working on curbing such desires, the practitioner could ideally become one with this wisdom. Reminiscent of the discussion on Confucianism, the path to this wisdom requires purifying actions such as benevolence.

Tied to this emphasis on proper action was the emphasis on filial piety. Recall that filial piety is the loyalty and benevolence of children for their parents. This model of piety was further transferred to loyalty in government and a ruler’s compassion for his subjects. In terms of Shinto, filial piety was accepted in Japan, where there was also veneration for ancestors as well as a hierarchy that marked the father as the head of the family. In this sense, Shinto transferred well to Confucian ideals. For example, according to Yoshikawa Koretaru (1616-1694), who helped formulate the combination of Confucian and Shinto ideals, ideas such as the kami, as rooted in wisdom and filial piety, translated into benevolence for government. As Green (1987) states, “In government, the ‘three sacred treasures’ symbolize the way of the emperor: benevolence, loyalty, and service. Benevolence is the ruler’s chief virtue while loyalty and service to the imperial house is held up as a subject’s highest ethical ideal” (p. 285). This idea of reciprocity, seen in early Shinto worship of kami by way of sacrificial offerings, and in Confucianism as a mode of benevolence, worked well for both traditions in terms of adapting and assimilating traditions.

KEY CONCEPTS

This section addresses key concepts and beliefs central to Shinto. In particular, it will identify in more detail the concept of the kami, and outline Shinto views on the nature of humanity.

Kami

Kami has already been discussed in this unit in a variety of contexts, from early Shinto ideas to Buddhist interpretations of kami. The idea of kami is central to the understanding of Shinto in that it is indicative of Shinto worldviews and informs Shinto religious practices. As also mentioned, the kami are all-pervasive,

both embodying nature, human form and more abstract ideals. This is further supported by the multitudes of myths on the kami.

In *Kojiki*, a classical text written in 712 CE, the Shinto tradition is described, and myths about the kami are extensively outlined, including their creation. The kami are described as spontaneously emerging out of primordial chaos, representing different types of kami as they are created. They are not created with help, but instead come into being independently, apart from anything else. The following is an excerpt from the *Kojiki*, (Ludwig, 2006) describing this instance of creation:

In the time of the beginning of heaven and earth, on the Plain of High Heaven there came into existence first Lord of the Heavenly Center Kami, then High Generative Force Kami, and then Divine Generative Force Kami. These three kami came into existence as single kami, and their forms were invisible. When the world was young, resembling floating oil and drifting like jellyfish, something like red-shoots sprouted forth, and from this Excellent Reed Shoots Male Kami and Heavenly Eternal Standing Kami emerged. These two kami also came into existence as single kami, and their forms were invisible. These are the Separate Heavenly Kami. Then there came into existence Earth Eternal Standing Kami and Abundant Clouds Field Kami. These two kami came into existence as single kami, and their forms were invisible. Next there came into existence the Clay Male and Female Kami, Post Male and Female Kami, Great Door Male and Female Kami, Complete Surface Kami and his spouse, Awesomeness Kami; and Izanagi and his spouse, Izanami. These are the Seven Generations of the Kami Age. (p. 259)

The last pair of kami, Izanagi and Izanami, ended up, according to myth, becoming the creators of the rest of the world and the universe. From them, more kami were created as rivers, trees, sun, rain, fish, et cetera. This meant that kami were everywhere and in everything.

The nature of kami, that is, the fact that they are found in everything, also indicates that people were in constant interaction with them, including both the kami that resided in the Heavens such as Izanagi and Izanami, as well as the kami that resided on Earth, such as those representing nature. This does not mean that the kami are always personified deities. In some cases, the nature of the kami remains unknown, yet ever-present. Essentially, “anything that seems imbued with kami quality is thought of as kami” (Ludwig, 2006, p. 260). As noted earlier, this refers to any quality, situation, or figure that invokes a sense of awe.

This sense of awe, however, does not solely represent positive forces. The kami can also represent negative and/or destructive forces in nature. These destructive forces are viewed as having the ability to actively wreak havoc on people, should proper worship not be accorded them. This means that respect is shown by way of proper worship and reverence to all kinds of kami, whether they are minimal or powerful, positive or negative (Ludwig, 2006).

The nature of humanity

Human beings are viewed as the children of the kami, and as such, human life is considered sacred. This idea of humanity's connection to the kami also means that they continually influence the daily workings of life. Just as all kami should be respected regardless of their relative scale of importance, so too should human beings be respected. Ideally, this emphasis on respect for others means putting aside various forms of discrimination against others and being conscious of human rights. As humans are conceived of by kami, there is also no concept of original sin that would also put the nature of humanity within a necessarily negative scope.

Ideally, this lack of negative views toward humanity and its origins are closely related to overall Shinto attitudes toward how life should be lived. In theory, one should have the best attitude possible toward life, meaning that one should live a life of sincerity and purity. This sense of sincerity or living as truth is rooted in prayer rather than in specific qualities of an individual. Through the practice of prayer (i.e., the visitation of shrines or altar offerings to kami) the mind is thought to be put into the positive framework needed to live.

SHINTO AND GENDER

This section outlines the ways in which kami worship is reflective of and influences the role of women within the Shinto tradition. Until now, discussions of Shinto views on humanity, as well as the information outlined on the kami, have been quite general in that they have not differentiated between genders. As with other units, however, certain themes arise that do suggest a differentiation between the male and female. In terms of Shinto, these attitudes are in part influenced by the import of Chinese ideology—in this case, **yin** and **yang**.

Women and shrines

John K. Nelson (2000) notes that on upon initial observance of shrines dedicated to kami within the Shinto tradition, images seemingly provide general representations of humanity, nature and kami. Upon closer inspection, however, kami are differentiated according to gender. For Nelson, this is not surprising, given early mythology of kami that denote the pairing of male and female representations. As noted previously in this unit, for example, Izanagi and Izanami is a male/female pairing who operate in conjunction with one another. Given that writings on Shinto did not emerge until its encounter with Chinese culture, and that Japanese script is rooted in Chinese forms, it is possible that early kami mythology was written with the concept of yin and yang already in mind. As a reminder, yin and yang represent the male and female principles that denote balance and harmony when both are present. This was discussed both in the context of early Chinese religions, and particularly in Daoism.

However, Nelson (2000) argues that there are greater practical implications of this emphasis on male and female. He states:

Social architects, whether in the fifth century or today, know quite well the long-range demographic, economic, and strategic implications of a low birth rate. One need only listen to the ongoing cry from contemporary Japanese politicians and media commentators, imploring women

to have more than the average 1.5 children to understand the anxieties elites feel when sex among their constituents does not necessarily lead to the birth of future workers, taxpayers, or soldiers. (p. 76)

The implication of such a statement is threefold. First, women, in both early and present-day societies are associated with birth and motherhood. As discussed in previous units, certain groups within the Japanese culture rank the role of motherhood as primary. What is interesting in this case is that the indigenous tradition, Shinto, reinforces these ideas through its representation of male and female kami. Early differentiation between male and female are reiterated through images within shrines, and confirmed through religious practices. Ideally, and at least on paper, Shinto represents all of humanity without distinction or prejudice, yet the reality of gender comes through by way of myth and religious ritual.

Second, Nelson makes a direct connection between ideology presented in shrines and ideology held by the government. Though the importance of identifying religious traditions within a particular historical context has been emphasized again and again in this unit, Nelson ties early notions of gender with present-day expectations for women in Japan. In this case, government wants to emphasize traditional values that differentiate between male and female because they benefit from tax money, as well as gain greater nationalist strength as a country. Implicit to this connection is the fact that government ideals are representative of Shinto ideals, or, at the very least, are representative of depictions of women in Shinto.

The third implication is that there is a difference between the everyday Japanese citizen and the elite. The elite propagate these vested interests that emphasize fertility and motherhood, possibly even to the resistance by women who are not elite. While there may be ties between government and religion, those that practise the religion may have significantly different expectations, aims, or thoughts toward the nature of Shinto and the rituals and images associated with it.

SHINTO AND RITUAL PRACTICE

This section outlines in further detail ritual related to shrines, but the discussion is specifically within a contemporary context. It predominantly draws from John K. Nelson's (2000) work, *A Year in the Life of a Shinto Shrine*, and his argument that there is a difference between ritual and ceremony. Nelson argues, for example, that ritual does not necessarily represent only actions related to the sacred or even to religion, but can be viewed as repeated actions or sequences that occur in every day life. Getting that morning cup of coffee is an example of ritual action. Nelson prefers to address Shinto religious practice in terms of ceremony, in which certain actions, spoken or otherwise, are acted out on marked occasions. With this in mind, this section addresses specific ceremonies within the Shinto tradition.

In general, ceremonies can be understood within the context of specific festivals or holidays, or in terms of everyday living or life stages. For example, there are New Year Festivals that take place all across Japan and inevitably include shrine ceremonies. But such rituals are not restricted to only special occasions. Stuart Picken (1980) also notes the ways in which shrine ritual is incorporated in one's life stages. That is, depending on where one is at in life, one will go to a shrine and conduct prayer or

worship to the kami in a shrine. The emphasis on everyday concerns usually entails requests by the practitioner to the kami. For example, if a family wants a young man to find a wife, family members will visit a shrine to make that request. Such instances also occur in requests for fertility and good health once a child is born.

Terms to Know

Kami	Lotus Sutra	Zazen
Shinto	Pure Land	Obon
Amulet	Nichiren	Ikebana
Kojiki	Zen	Haiku
Todaiji	Nembutsu	Meiji
Kannon	Namu Amida Butsu	

Study Questions

1. What is a kami in Japanese religion? Describe their various natures or dispositions.
2. What is the goal of human existence in early forms of Japanese religious worldview?
3. What is the Japanese term for "religion"?
4. Explain the nature of religious toleration in Japan.
5. What is the main purpose if conducting ritual practice in traditional Japanese religion?
6. What types of things to people request in their prayers to the kami or ancestor spirits?
7. Explain how Japanese religion can be considered a "marketplace" according to the textbook.
8. How is traditional Japanese religion similar to Chinese Daoism?
9. Why was it important to bury Japanese rulers with objects that they had/needed while they were alive?
10. What is the significance of the Todaiji Temple in relation to religious syncretism?
11. Where does the Bodhisattva figure of Kannon originate?
12. What impact does the Lotus Sutra have on Japanese Buddhism in the 8th century CE? How does this affect the non-monastic Buddhist community in Japan?
13. Describe the main tenets of Pure Land Buddhism. What socio-historical events led to the emergence of this sect?
14. What is zazen? Why is this important in the Zen school of Buddhism?
15. What conflict arises regarding the nature of enlightenment in Japanese Zen during the medieval period?

16. Who was Nichiren? What did he teach?
17. What are some of the main benefits of conducting religious ritual in Japan?
18. List the five ways in ritual is carried out in order to secure the benefits of the kami or other spirits.
19. Describe the Obon festival and the Ikebana ritual practice.
20. What was Japan's reception to Christianity when European missionaries came in the 1500's?
21. When and why did Shinto become the 'state religion' in Japan?
22. Explain the following statement: Shinto became a matter of civic duty and less about religious commitment.
23. How is the element of respect integral to Japanese religious traditions?

Suggested readings

Genchi, K. (1971). *A study of Shinto: The religion of the Japanese nation*. London and Dublin: Curzon Press.

Green, A. (1987). Shinto. In M. Eliade (Ed.), *The encyclopedia of religion*. New York: Macmillan Publishing.

Ludwig, T. M. (2006). *The sacred paths of the East*. New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall.

Nelson, J. K. (2000). *Enduring identities, the guise of Shinto in contemporary Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Nelson, J. K. (1996). *A year in the life of a Shinto shrine*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Picken, S. D. B. (1980). *Shinto, Japan's spiritual roots*. New York: Kodansha International.

[Go to top](#)

Copyright © (2016). Minor revisions (2016) All rights reserved. No part of the material protected by this copyright may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or otherwise without the prior written permission from the copyright owner.

University of Manitoba, Distance and Online Education



STUDYDADDY

**Get Homework Help
From Expert Tutor**

Get Help