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What Is Shinto?

By Colleen Messina

Caption: A Japanese torii at Itsukushima Shrine appears to float in the water.

In the ancient Shinto religion, the universe is populated with many gods and goddesses who take care of the world. Shinto is an ancient religion of Japan, and its name means "the way of the gods." The Shinto religion focuses on nature and beings called *kami*. Eight million *kami* take care of everything!



Anyone who has brothers or sisters might enjoy a story about the most important Shinto goddess. Apparently, even big-time gods and goddesses had sibling spats! Amaterasu Omikami is the sun goddess. Her brother, the storm god, made her mad. He had been sent out to rule the sea. On his way there, he destroyed his sister's home. He also ruined rice fields. Basically, the storm god was a bad boy.

Amaterasu was upset with her brother. She ran off and hid in a cave. She shut the rock door and locked it tight. This made the whole Earth dark! This affected the rest of the gods and goddesses in the world. No one wanted darkness forever. They needed a plan to literally "save the daylight." Eight hundred gods fervently hoped that the goddess would come out. Then, the world would have night and day again.

The gods had an unusual plan to make the goddess come out. They dug up a sakaki tree from a heavenly mountain. This type of tree has lovely white flowers in spring, and later, deep red berries. The gods hung a string of 500 jewels on the middle branches of the tree. They also hung a large mirror on its lower branches. One celestial goddess did a beautiful dance that made the gods laugh with delight. They told Amaterasu that there was a goddess even lovelier

than she outside the cave.

The sun goddess heard the gods laughing. She wondered why everyone was laughing when it was so dark, and she was curious about the other goddess that was supposedly so pretty. She peeked out from the cave and came face to face with the hanging mirror. She saw her glorious reflection there and decided to leave the cave. Light came back to Earth. After that, dawn always came after night.

Amaterasu is one of many gods and goddesses in Shinto. The millions of *kami*, or supernatural spirits, include oceans, mountains, birds, plants, and animals. Deceased relatives also are *kami*, as well as the force of nature itself. Nature is thought of as divine in Shinto. This is why beautiful places in nature are often where shrines are located.

Long ago, villages held council meetings in quiet spots in forests or in mountains. Later, Shinto shrines were also placed in special spots. Their purpose is to house a *kami*. There are around 100,000 such shrines in Japan, and they are often set in peaceful places. They have a simple, elegant design. The gate of the shrine is called a *torii*. These gates often are placed in between trees or rocks. One *torii* known as "the famous floating *torii*" stands in the waters of the Inland Sea. It is the entrance to the famous island shrine of Itsukushima.

There is a close connection between Shinto and Buddhism in Japan. About 84% of Japanese people follow both religions. Buddhism came to Japan in the sixth century A.D. and blended well with the ancient Shinto religion. The seven gods of fortune, or good luck, were originally Buddhist deities. Buddhist monks still participate in the major Shinto festivals.

One of the best-loved gods is the god of wealth. He is also the patron of farmers. Daikoku is often shown sitting on fat sacks of rice. He has a disk on his chest that looks like a golden sun. He has a friendly rat that nibbles at grains of rice from his sacks. Since he is rich, he doesn't mind that the little rat has a snack at his expense. He often holds a mallet in his right hand high above his head and a bag of jewels on his shoulder. He grants wishes with his mallet and bestows blessings. This cheerful god has a wide smile and a brightly-decorated robe. No wonder people pray to him for good luck!

Shinto is an ancient religion, but it still has a definite place in the hearts and lives of the Japanese people. Modern Shinto can be



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roughly divided into three kinds. Shrine Shinto is the oldest type and goes back to prehistoric times. The second type of Shinto is called Sectarian Shinto. It started in the 19th century and has approximately thirteen major sects. The third type of Shinto is called Folk Shinto. This type of Shinto does not have an organized base, but is evident in roadside images in Japan. Agricultural families have rites associated with it, too. These three types of Shinto are intertwined harmoniously in Japanese culture today.

Followers of Shinto today want to help make the world a better place. *The General Principles of Shinto Life* published by the Association of Shinto Shrines says, "Let us work for people and the world, and serve as representatives of the *kami* to make the society firm and sound." Shinto followers try to bring harmony to the world by serving others and honoring nature.

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Questions

- _____ 1. Who was Amaterasu?
 - A. goddess of the caves
 - B. goddess of the sun
 - C. goddess of storms
 - D. goddess of the sea

- _____ 2. Who did Amaterasu fight with in the ancient myth?
 - A. her father
 - B. her sister
 - C. her brother
 - D. her mother

- _____ 3. Who or what are the *kami* in the Shinto religion?
 - A. supernatural spirits
 - B. prophets
 - C. saints
 - D. none of the above

- _____ 4. There is a close connection between Buddhism and Shinto in Japan.
 - A. True
 - B. False

- _____ 5. When did Buddhism come to Japan?
 - A. the sixth century B.C.
 - B. the sixteenth century
 - C. the sixth century A.D.
 - D. Buddhism did not come to Japan.

- _____ 6. How many types of modern Shinto exist today?
 - A. two
 - B. three
 - C. four
 - D. one

- _____ 7. What does the Shinto god of wealth sit upon?
 - A. a pile of mallets
 - B. golden discs
 - C. fat bags of rice
 - D. rats

- _____ 8. What is the term for a sacred gate in a Shinto shrine?
 - A. trestles
 - B. golden gates
 - C. torries
 - D. *torii*

If you followed the Shinto religion, where would you set up a shrine in nature, and why would you choose that location?
