Shinto

神道
Shinto: The Way of the Gods

Shinto is sometimes called the national religion of Japan. Until Buddhism was introduced in the sixth century AD it was the only religion. Now Shinto and Buddhism are both popular. Most people will have a Shinto ceremony to celebrate their birth of a child, a Shinto or Christian-style wedding and a Buddhist funeral.

Wedding ceremony
Any village or town that you visit in Japan, no matter how small, will have its own Shinto shrine. Housed in the shrine are the local deities, or kami, who are believed to protect the village and its inhabitants. People visit the shrine whenever they have a special request to put to the kami. For example if they have just bought a new car, they can ask for protection from accidents. Or if they are expecting a baby, they can ask for a safe birth. Or if they are about to take university entrance exams, they can ask to do well.

They also go on special occasions - like New Year or the summer festival: each shrine will have at least one day a year when it holds its own festival. They may also go if they have visitors to show round, or maybe even just because they feel like it. Some shrines have slides and swings for children - visiting the shrine can be a social thing. So although people do not usually visit the shrine regularly (e.g. once a week) many people go quite often.

Think about:

- Is it possible to follow two religions at the same time? Why? Why not?
- In Shinto, there is no special day set aside each week for worship.
  Think of:
  a) two other religions which DO have a special day
  b) two other religions which do not have one.
- What do you think are the benefits (if any) of regular weekly worship?
Finding your way round a Shinto shrine

Torii - the gateway to the shrine

Every shrine in Japan, large or small, in the middle of a city or on the top of a mountain, has a torii. Passing through the torii is a sign that you have passed from the everyday world into a spiritual world. Torii are usually painted bright orange (vermilion), but may also be plain wood or concrete.

Washing

Once you are in the world of the kami, you can purify yourself. This means you 'wash off' the dirt of your everyday world to make yourself ready for contact with the gods. Usually there is a wooden or stone basin with a wooden scoop. Rather than actually washing their hands, though, most people just scoop some water over their hands and shake them dry. Sometimes they rinse out their mouths, too.
Think about:

**Purification**: below are two ways of being purified according to Shinto tradition.

1. Pouring water over your hands on entering the shrine
2. Having a priest shake a bamboo branch over you

How do followers of other religions purify themselves? Compare this with Shinto purification.

Why do you think water is used to purify people?

A priest waving a wooden stick with paper streamers for purification
The honden and haiden

The **honden**, or main hall, is where the **kami** are thought to live. No one other than the priest enters this room. The **haiden**, or worship hall, is in front of the **honden**. It is entered only occasionally, by people who are attending a special ceremony. At the front of the **haiden** there is a wooden trough to throw money in and a rope to ring a bell. There may also be a thick piece of rope decorated with slips of white paper. This is a sign to show this is where the **kami** live. This is as far as people usually go. Here they ring the bell or clap their hands to let the **kami** know they are there. Then they silently make a wish/prayer and throw money as an offering to the **kami**.
**Things to buy**

In the grounds of the shrine you will find stalls where you can buy a variety of souvenirs. Some you can take away, some you leave behind.

Ema (pictured) are small wooden boards on which you write a wish. Then you hang them up with many others. Once a year all the ema are burnt to ensure the wishes come true. It is said they travel up to the kami with the smoke.

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**Think about:**

- Making a wish. There are several ways of making a wish at a Shinto shrine: what other ways do you know of making a wish?
- Is there a difference between making a wish and saying prayer?
- Try writing your own ema wish board. Think carefully about what you wish for before writing it down. Are you making the wish for yourself, or someone else? Why?
**Omikuji** are fortunes, predicting your future. Printed on a long thin white sheet of paper, it will predict either very good luck, good luck, average luck, bad luck or very bad luck. After you have read it, you tie it to a tree or a fence. This way, if it is an unlucky fortune, your bad luck will be blown away. Or if it is a good fortune, the wind will share your good luck with others (so they say).

![Omikuji tied to a fence](image)

**Omamori** are special souvenirs to buy at shrines and temples. Usually it is a piece of wood with an inscription, presented in a small drawstring bag. The name of the shrine will be written on the bag. This is the traditional form of **omamori**. Now you can buy a credit card omamori or phone card omamori. It doesn't really matter what it looks like, but it is important that it is easy to carry around. The name **omamori** means ‘to protect’. Usually you buy an **omamori** to protect you from different kinds of everyday dangers. For example, road accidents, fire, childbirth, failing exams, not getting promoted at work. But you can also buy them to bring you good luck.

![Omamori for good luck with one's studies](image)
Think about:

- **Omamori.** As mentioned above, you can buy these for very specific purposes. If they were available in the UK,
  
a) do you think people would buy them?
  
b) what do you think would be the five most popular reasons for buying them?
- Can you think of anything similar, used by another religion?

**Special ceremonies**

On some special occasions, ceremonies take place inside the **haiden**. For example, babies are brought to the shrine about a month after birth for a blessing. A priest says prayers and makes offerings to the **kami**. There is usually also a **purification ritual**. This often involves a branch of bamboo decorated with strips of white paper: this is waved over the heads of those to be purified. It may also be dipped in water which has been offered to the **kami**.

A woman visiting a shrine with her baby

Think about:

- **Symbolic colours**: white is an important colour in Shinto, signifying purity and sacredness. Think of another religion where a colour means something special. What colour is it? What does it mean?
At New Year, people visit the shrine either at midnight on New Year's Eve, or some time during the next three days. People go and make their wishes for good luck in the coming year, buy souvenirs and maybe have their fortunes told. People often buy new omamori each year and take back the old one to be burnt, like the ema. Inside the honden the priest recites prayers.

Each shrine has its own annual festival when the local kami, or at least images of them, come out of the shrine. They are carried around the town in a mikoshi, or portable shrine. The procession is lively and festive, accompanied by flutes and drums. Dancers will line the procession and onlookers may join in. At the shrine, there will be kiosks selling food and drink as well as various souvenirs. These festivities may last two or three days. At some point during this time, there will be a more solemn ceremony at the shrine, attended by shrine officials and local representatives. There will be prayers and offerings made to the kami and purification rituals like those described above may be performed.
Glossary

Ema  a small wooden board to write a wish/prayer on
Haiden  worship hall, in front of the honden
Honden  main hall of worship, where the kami are thought to live
Kami  gods, or deities
Mikoshi  portable shrine for carrying the kami at festivals
Omamori  a small charm worn either to protect you from danger or to bring good luck
Omikuji  strip of paper with your fortune printed on it
Purification  symbolic ‘washing off’ of everyday dirt to prepare you for contact with the kami
Ritual  a series of actions performed in a set order, according to set rules
Torii  gateway to a Shinto shrine

Further reading


