

Religion in Japan

Background Notes for Teachers

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These notes are intended as a general guide for educators using the *Let's Visit a Shrine and a Temple Video* in the classroom, or studying religion in Japan with their students.

A note on the pronunciations: For Japanese words, we have included the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) and also a non-standard guide, which is intended only as an approximate pronunciation for teachers unfamiliar with the IPA and sounds of Japanese.

What religion do people in Japan follow?

Although most people in Japan would not define themselves as a devout follower of a particular religion, generally people will take part in both Shinto traditions as well as Buddhist rituals as a part of everyday life. The two religions co-exist in Japan and it's common to visit both shrines (Shinto) and temples (Buddhist), depending on the occasion. It's also estimated around 1% of the population are Christians.

What is Shinto?

Shinto ('jinto / *shin-toe*) is Japan's own religion which has no founder, no sacred scripture, and no set day of worship or doctrine. It is based on animism and ancient beliefs that all elements of nature possessed divine power. Shinto myths describe the creation of these elements and origin of the universe.

'Shinto' literally means 'the way of the gods' and is based on a belief in kami (*kami* / *kammy*), often described as gods or spirits, which have the power to intervene in human lives. Kami are thought to be all around and innumerable. They can be particular objects or phenomena such as mountains, rocks, or wind, but do not have to be. When visiting shrines, people pray to the kami that live there; there are shrines dedicated to famous deities, such as the sun goddess Amaterasu, as well as many small shrines in towns and villages across Japan which are home to local kami.

How was Buddhism introduced to Japan?

Buddhism spread from India and made its way to Japan via China and Korea in the 6th century. Throughout Japan there are thousands of Buddhist temples and many different sects of Buddhism exist. Buddhism's arrival in Japan didn't replace Shinto, but complemented it.

Why do people in Japan participate in activities linked to both Buddhism and Shinto?

Simply put, many of the activities are ingrained in daily Japanese life and there is a long history of these two religions being inter-connected in Japan.

When do people visit shrines and temples?

During the New Year period, many Japanese people will visit a shrine or a temple. The first visit of the year is called hatsumode (*hætsʊmɔːde / hat-sue-moh-day*) and is a way to give thanks for the previous year and pray for a good year ahead. Large or famous temples and shrines can be very busy, with a festival-like atmosphere.

Other common reasons for visiting a shrine are to attend festivals or celebrations (traditional wedding ceremonies are Shinto for example) or to pray for something in particular, for instance to pass an upcoming exam. Funerals in Japan tend to be Buddhist and some temples have cemeteries, which people visit at certain points of the year to tend to the graves of their ancestors or hold Buddhist memorial services for them. Sightseeing is also a popular reason to visit both shrines and temples.

How can I tell the difference between a shrine and a temple?

Shrines and temples can be easily mixed up, especially because both are a part of daily life in Japan and share architectural styles. In addition, some things found at shrines can also be seen at some temples and vice versa (purification troughs and komainu being two examples). However, one of the easiest ways to tell them apart is by the entrances: shrines have torii gates whilst temples have sanmon. Also, temples will have statues or images of Buddha whereas shrines will not; they are home to gods or kami.

Rather than emphasising differences or on distinguishing between them, focus on familiarising students with both shrines and temples and the general purpose they serve.

Useful Links

What religion do Japanese people practice?:

<https://web-japan.org/kidsweb/explore/culture/q6.html>

Comprehensive summaries of Shintoism:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/shinto/>

<https://www.worldhistory.org/Shinto/>

Buddhism's arrival in Japan and co-existence with Shintoism:

<https://www.worldhistory.org/article/1080/buddhism-in-ancient-japan/>

Video FAQs

If you would like to add a question to this guide, please contact education@japansociety.org.uk.

What is a torii?

Torii (*tōrii/tory*) is the name for entrance gates to a shrine. They are also a symbol of Shinto.

Why are there straw ropes hanging on the shrine and tied around trees?

The ropes are called shimenawa (*ʃi:mend:wʌ/she-may-nah-wah*) and show that something is sacred or special. The white zig zags of paper are called shide (*ʃaid/she-day*) and are also often seen on Shinto objects.

What is a komainu (lion dog)?

Komainu (*kōmainuʃ/com-ah-in-oo*) statues guard the entrance or inner shrine and keep away evil spirits. They come in pairs, usually one male and one female.

Why does one komainu statue have its mouth open and one has its mouth closed?

The statue with its mouth open is the 'A' (*a/ah*) and the one with its mouth closed is the 'Un' (*η/ng*). (Students might notice the shape of their own mouths mimic this when making the sounds). They symbolise the beginning and end of everything. This characteristic can also be seen in statues at Buddhist temples.

Why do visitors need to wash their mouth and hands?

This is a symbolic gesture in to purify oneself before praying. This is a Shinto custom.

Why is there a picture of a train on the ema board?

Ema (*ema/emma*) literally means 'picture horse'. Originally people would donate horses to shrines as offerings for good luck. Over time this practice changed into writing wishes on a board with a picture of a horse. These days, many different images are used.

What statues are there at a temple?

There is always a statue of Buddha at a temple. Other common statues include Nio, Bodhisattva, Jizo, Myo-o, and pagodas (or an actual pagoda).

How is praying different at a shrine and a temple?

At both shrines and temples visitors will put a coin into the offering box before praying. If there is a bell, visitors can ring it to let the gods know they are there. The main difference is that at a shrine visitors will bow twice and clap their hands twice. There is no clapping when praying at a temple.

Why do visitors put money in a box before praying and how much do they put in?

It's an offering to the gods. Visitors don't need to give a large amount of money; the woman in the video puts in a 50 yen coin (worth approx. 30p) and even a 5 yen coin (worth less than a 1p) is fine.

Who do visitors pray to?

There are statues of Buddha in the main hall to pray to at temples. At the shrine, visitors face the rooms inside the shrine to pray; this is where the gods live.

Why do visitors buy an omikuji fortune?

Buying an omikuji (omikudzi/*oh-me-koo-jee*) is a custom when visiting both shrines and temples. They are chosen at random and the small piece of paper provides a general fortune to predict how lucky the visitor will be as well as a brief prediction of future love, health, trips or business ventures, etc.