



## Folk Shinto

To understand Folk Shinto it is necessary to consider the nature of Shinto itself, which, alongside Buddhism, is one of the predominate religions in Japan. Shinto's origins are hard to trace, elements appearing to predate the introduction of Buddhism in the Asuka Period 592-645. The term 'Shinto' is derived from the Chinese '神道 (*shen dao*)', meaning 'The Way of the Gods (*Kami*)', originally used to distinguish Shinto from Buddhism ('The Way of the Buddha'). Shinto's subsequent development as a religion was influenced by contact with mainland Asian religions, which was often in the form of syncretism. Such syncretism was created from the combination of Buddhist and Shinto practice (*shinbutsu shūgō*, 神仏習合), and had become the dominant form of religion from the Asuka Period until the Meiji restoration in 1868.

Although Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines were officially separated during the Meiji restoration, the two religions continue to be practised together. This syncretism is consistent with the nature of Shinto which is not based on a fixed exclusive set of beliefs. In contrast, other movements, including the School of National Learning (*kokugaku*, 國學), have emphasised the distinctiveness of Shinto, illustrated in Motoori Norinaga's criticism of Confucianism that sought to recover what he sees as the naturalness of Shinto from the moralising rituals and rationality of Confucianism.<sup>1</sup>

Given the diverse influences (insular Japanese, mainland Asian and Western, particularly after the Meiji Restoration), Shinto has developed into a broad family of traditions encompassing a variety of approaches. The following practices are distinguishable from Folk Shinto:

1. Sect Shinto includes various traditions focused on esoteric doctrines often based on syncretism. In some cases, particularly under the influence of Christianity, this brought the development of new religious movements regarded as distinct from Shinto, such as *Tenrikyo* (天理教) which incorporates the notion of a supreme God.
2. State Shinto was the official religion between the Meiji restoration and Japan's defeat in World War Two. The important distinction between this system of State Shinto and the older tradition of Folk Shinto is extensively dealt with by Kasulis in *Shinto: The Way Home*. He interprets State Shinto as a system based around 'a centralized organization coordinated nationally' with an 'attempt at systematic, coherent and comprehensive doctrinal system.'<sup>2</sup> Such centralisation and systematisation contrasts sharply with the loose-knit, practice-based approach of Folk Shinto.

Folk Shinto is associated with localised practices attached to different shrines rather than doctrine or sacred text. The *Kojiki* (古事記) and the *Nihon Shoki* (日本書紀) (or *Nihongi*) are often named as the sacred texts of Shinto, but they do not occupy a

position in Folk Shinto that is remotely comparable with the Koran or the Bible. Primarily, the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* represent collections of myths and purported dynastic records tied to the court of the early Yamato dynasty, but generally detached from the practice of Folk Shinto. Kasulis notes, ‘most shrines in Japan, especially the small ones found in neighbourhoods and villages, have little relation to the major *kami* upon which the two chronicles focus’ (Ibid., p. 73).

Folk Shinto focuses on eight myriads of *Kami*, which might be understood as a limitless number. *Kami* is usually translated as god(s); however, the *Kami* presented in Folk Shinto are radically different from how God, or gods, might normally be understood in the English language. Nelson states, ‘the practitioners of Shinto hold that anything we can see or sense that is full of power, mysterious, marvellous, uncontrolled, strange, or simply beyond our abilities of comprehension is what constitutes a *kami*.’<sup>3</sup> Thus, unlike other forms of polytheism, exemplified by Ancient Greece with twelve Olympians and other minor deities, the focus of Folk Shinto is less on devotion directed around a fixed pantheon, but rather offers an acknowledgement of an unlimited number of manifestations of divine presence in the world. Such manifestation can be wrathful or benevolent as there is no predetermined moral code to which *Kami* are expected to conform.

The presence of *Kami* is affiliated with nature and associated with shrines that form the locus of the sacred in Shinto. Kasulis notes that such sites differ from ‘many holy sites from other religions – Jerusalem, Mecca, or the Buddha’s *bodhi* tree,’ because ‘Mount Fuji was not sacralized by a historical event,’ but ‘is and always has been, intrinsically awe-inspiring, a site filled with marvellous power.’<sup>4</sup> This is true for all Shinto shrines including minor shrines which still represent unique points at which the sacred presence of particular *Kami* is manifest.

In contrast to religions such as Zen Buddhism, Folk Shinto has received relatively little attention in comparative thought and the availability of English language literature remains limited. Works including Shaw’s “Shinto and a Twenty First Century Japanese Ecological Attitude” have considered Folk Shinto as a potential response to contemporary environmental concerns, but there is scope for further research. The present author’s forthcoming work will link Folk Shinto practice with the four-fold in the later Heidegger’s thought.

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### **Further reading**

*Classical texts:*

*The Nihongi: Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest Times to A.D. 697* by Yasumaro no O, trans. William George Aston. London: Japan Society of London, 1896.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Matsumoto 1970, pp. 30-68

<sup>2</sup> Table 1 in Kasulis 2004, p. 150.

<sup>3</sup> Nelson 1997, p. 27.

<sup>4</sup> Kasulis 2004, p. 23.