

# Shintō: A Short Introduction

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**Abstract:** *Shintō is the indigenous folk belief of Japan. Shintō does not have any religious text but it is based on thoughts, morality, tradition, culture et al. The religious belief of Japanese people is very difficult to understand because it is said that, a Japanese is born Shintō, wedding is Christian and funeral happens in the Buddhist way. Shintō is not like monotheistic religion like Christianity, but polytheistic religion like Sanatana Dharma. A survey has been conducted by the Japanese Government in the year 2014, which revealed that the Shintō followers in Japan is approximately 91.3 million (48.0%) of total population.*

**Key Words:** *Japanese folk belief, Shintō, Tradition, Shrine, Kami.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION :

Japan is an extended island nation that is encircled by the Pacific and Japan seas and is located in the eastern region of Asia. Japanese people enjoy the beauty of nature while leading hectic lives, due to the country's geographic location providing some of the world's most beautiful natural beauties. The four seasons (Spring, Autumn, Winter, and Summer) as well as the rainy season may be plainly seen in Japan, despite the fact that in modern times it is difficult to distinguish the seasons by the weather due to global warming. With the seasonal flowers, fruits, and vegetables, people may enjoy every season.



Koishikawa Botanical Garden  
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Along with the local folk religion *Shintō*, Buddhism is the religion that the majority of the people in Japan practise. Since the *Shintō* grew gradually, it is challenging to pinpoint the exact moment when it first appeared, although it can be argued that the *Shintō* has existed for more than 10,000 years. Prior to the introduction of Buddhism to Japan in the sixth century, people in Japan did not practise *Shintō* as a religion. From the very beginning, *Shintō* and Buddhism were inspired by one another. The Obon festival, which is celebrated in the summer, is thought to be a Buddhist custom, although it is actually a *Shintō* habit.<sup>1</sup> *Shintō* deities are known as '*kami*'. These *Shintō* deities are basically sacred spirits which were also essential for life, for example fire, wind, water, tree et. al. Human beings also became *kami* after demise and became the family deity.



*Shintō Shrine @ Tōdai-ji*  
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According to *Shintō* myths, a specific number of *kami* spontaneously appeared in the beginning, and Izanagi and Izanami, a couple of *kami*, gave birth to the Japanese islands as well as the *kami* who would later become the progenitors of the numerous clans. The sun goddess Amaterasu, a descendant of Izanagi, is claimed by the Japanese imperial family. It is thought that living in line with the will of the *kami* results in a mystical power that earns their protection, cooperation, and acceptance. All *kami* are said to collaborate with one another. (Littleton, 2002).

Sanatana Dharma is a monotheistic religion, as is *Shintō*. *Shintō* adherents appropriated beneficial elements from other religions including Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Similar to Sanatana Dharma, *Shintō* is an optimistic religion in which followers have the freedom to choose between the good and the bad. There are ways to purify the bad karma or spirit through prayers, offerings, or other means, as well as ways to purify oneself. In modern society, one can choose to follow the *Shintō* path, albeit doing so is exceedingly challenging because there is no sacred book for comprehending the doctrine. When a child born in Japan, the local shrine keeps the record by adding the name as 'Ujiko' (氏子) and similarly with a demise of a 'Ujiko' he or she becomes 'Ujigami' (氏神). Most of the Japanese people follow the both religious beliefs *Shintō* and Buddhism, because both the religious beliefs does not have any conflicts between them. People also believe in Confucianism as well.

<sup>1</sup>Yamaguchi., Satoshi. A Visual Guide to *Shintō*, Shinano Publishing Press Co., Ltd. 2016, Japan, p. 104

Rituals, customs, and cultures can be seen evolving over time as it is handed from one person to another and from one group to another. The fundamental tenet of *Shintō* belief is that peace of mind can be attained if people can establish a connection with the kami of nature. As a person travels from one town to another, the names of two nearby shrines may occasionally be added to the person's record. Besides 'Ujiko', the babies who die before they become 'Ujiko' are called 'Mizuko' (水子).



Girl Stone and Boy Stone praying for love @ Kuzuhara Oka Shrine  
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## 2. Jinja and some *Shintō* symbols

As *Shintō* is a Dharma practised by those who revere nature, Japan has more than 80,000 Jinja and 20,000 priests. Kami is believed to reside at the shrines where worshippers congregate and carry out rites. It is said that there are deities or kami everywhere, including in mountains, oceans, woods, stones, and rivers. In the Shrines, a variety of rituals, practises, and festivals are held throughout the year in order to promote wealth, protection, and other positive outcomes for both individuals and society.

Shrines are widely divided into three categories, Taisha (大社, Izumo Taisha, Fushimi Inari Taisha), Jingu (神宮, Ise Jingu, Meiji Jingu) and Jinja (Nezu Jinja, Hie Jinja). Jingu is official name for Ise Jingu, Jingu is closely associated with the Imperial Family. The term Taisha is used by Izumo Taisha before the pre-war time but after World War II (1939~1945), big shrines are referred to as Taisha, like Kasuga Taisha, Fushimi Inari Taisha etc.

In a shrine *Torī* (鳥居), *Temizuya* or *Chōzuya* (手水舎), *Honden* (本殿), *Haiden* (拝殿), *Komainu* (狛犬), *Shimenawa* (縄, zig-zag paper streamer used for show sacred place) etc. can be observed in the shrine premises. A unique style of the roof of shrine is *Chigi* (千木) and *Katsuogi* (鰹木). The main building (*Honden*) never opens for the visitors. The Fushimi Inari Taisha is famous for 10,000 *Torī* gates, which lead up to the mountain (稻荷山, Inariyama) top. People donate these *Torī* gates for their prayers to be protected from evil spirit, misfortune etc. There are also a large number of small *Torī* gates donated by people.



*Chigi and Katsuogi @ Tōkyō Daijingu*  
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*Torii Gates @ Fushimi Inari Taisha*  
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### *Torii* (鳥居)

The torii is a religious emblem that separates the sacred from the human world. There are various structures of *Torii* gates, such as *Shinmei Torii* (神明鳥居), *Myōjin Torii* (明神鳥居), *Miwa Torii* (三輪鳥居) etc. *Torii* is also considered as a spiritual gateway, through this gate people can clean their impurity and become a pure soul. Numerous Torii gates are present in Nezu Shrine, making one feel cleaned before encountering the Kami. Torii gates are typically composed of wood, stone, metal, or even concrete today. The vermilion Torii may be seen at Inari Shrine.



*Torii Gate standing in water @ Hakone Jinja*  
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*Small Torii Gates @ Fushimi Inari Taisha*  
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### *Temizuya* or *Chōzuya* (手水舎)

*Temizuya* or *Chōzuya* is a purifying location with running water close to the main hall. Before offering homage to the kami, people must wash their hands and mouths. Essentially, it is constructed of stone or concrete. The *Temizuya* or *Chōzuya's* architecture is fairly straightforward, with four pillars supporting a simple roof. This way of purification is just the simplification of *misogi* (禊) or the full-body purification. In Ise Jingu, the worshippers clean themselves with the Isuzu rivers water, which makes the purification unique and special.



*Temizuya or Chōzuya @ Hakone Jinja*  
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## Haiden (拝殿) and Honden (本殿)

The Haiden is a place of worship and ritual practise for priests. Most shrines, with the exception of large ones like Ise Jingu, only have one place of worship, while large ones often have two: an outer and an interior worship space. An offertory box or *Saisen* (賽銭) is placed in the worship space as well as at the main gate of the worship place. In ancient times, people used to offer rice to the shrine instead of money.

*Go-shintai* (御神体) and *Mitamashiro* (御霊代), the sacred object is located in the main hall of *Shintō* shrine. The sacred object itself not the Kami but it is which, where the spirit of Kami inhabits. Most of the time it is a mirror, in *Ise jingū* the sacred object is *Yata no Kagami* (八咫鏡) or the Sacred Mirror, in *Atsuta jingū* (熱田神宮) the sacred object is *Kusanagi no Tsurugi* (草薙劍) or the Sacred Sword.



Haiden @ Fushimi Inari Taisha  
Clicked by Subhajit Chatterjee on 21/04/2022



Honden @ Fushimi Inari Taisha  
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## Koma-inu (狛犬) and Ema (絵馬)

Statues of the lion dog, also known as the koma-inu, is revered as a sacred and noble animal that protects temples and shrines. Koma-inu pairs are frequently spotted close to temples and shrines. Statues of foxes replaced the pair in the Inari Shrine, while frog, deer, monkey, and other animal statues can be found in certain other shrines serving the same purpose. During the Edo period (江戸時代, 1603-1868), two types of Koma-inu can be observed, Sando Koma-inu (参道狛犬: Koma-inu on the way to shrine) and Jinnai Koma-inu (陣内狛犬: Koma-inu inside the shrine premises). The pair of Koma-inu are identical, while the right one has an open mouth (阿形: *a-gyō*) and the left one has a closed mouth (吽形: *un-gyō*). These two also represents the beginning and end of everything. The origin of the Koma-inu is from India.

Ema, also known as wooden wish plaques, are offerings made by individuals to kami in exchange for the fulfilling of their wishes. People decorate wooden plaques with their wishes and hang them in a location specifically designated for that purpose. The word Ema is consisting of two kanji 'E' (絵) and 'ma' (馬), which means picture and horse. The horse is regarded as the kami's chariot, and throughout the Nara era (710–794), donors gave horses to the shrine in exchange for the realisation of their wishes. Later, as time went on and people became increasingly unable to contribute horses due to the hefty cost, the Ema came into being. Ema costs between 500 and 1000 Japanese yen and is readily available at shrine shops. Ema nowadays includes images of dragons, cows, monkeys, rabbits, and many more creatures. Some shrines even sell ema of anime characters.



Koma-inu @ Kanda Myōjin  
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Ema @ Kanda Myōjin  
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A pair of Frogs @ SuehiroOgami Jinja  
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Cow Ema @ Ushi tenjin Kitano Jinja  
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### Goshuin (御朱印)

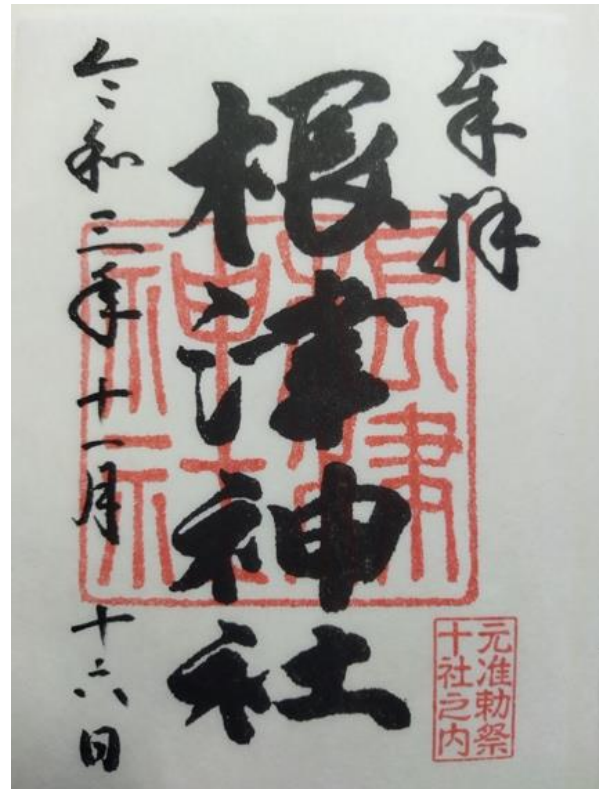
The red stamp known as *Goshuin* is only available from temples and shrines. The custom of gathering *Goshuin* dates back to the Edo era, when travellers would compose Buddhist sutras and offer them to the temple in exchange for a stamp serving as a symbol of proof for the visit and the offering. Today, pilgrims or tourists pay between 300 and 1000 Japanese yen to receive a certificate attesting to their visit to the shrine or temple. The book in which people collect these stamps is called *Goshuin chō* (御朱印帳). Some pilgrimages like *Tōkyo Jissha Meguri* (東京十社巡り), have its own wooden *Goshuin chō* for 10 shrines and temples with a brief history of the pilgrimage and shrines and temples.

At the shrine or temple reception store, *Kannushi* (神主) at *Shintō* shrine and monks in Buddhist temples help the visitors with *Omamori* (御守り), *omikuji* (御神籤), *Goshuin* etc. One has to pay the required amount in cash before handing over the *Goshuin Cho* and waiting until their number is called to obtain the stamp. There are also unique and special *Goshuin* for certain occasions, such as New Year's Day, *Hamamatsu* (雛祭) etc. Buddhist monk or *Kannushi* at a shrine will first use a red stamp before using a blank piece of paper to write the name of the temple or shrine, the date, etc. One needs to usually submit the *Goshuin chō* at the larger shrines and collect it later when their visit is completed before going back.



Goshuin @ Meiji jingū

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Goshuin @ Nezu Jinja

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### 3. Conclusion :

Japan's native religion or belief system is founded on morals, cultural tradition, and thinking. *Shintō* is a religion of multiple gods similar to Hinduism rather than a monotheistic religion like Christianity. This religion is quite tolerant because it occasionally combines with other religions like Buddhism and Confucianism. The faith, kami, and other deities are described in Japanese mythology. In Japan, celebrations take place from the time rice is planted in the spring until it is harvested in the autumn. There are also several ceremonies for *Shintō* deities throughout the year, such as festivals for rain in the summer and typhoons in the fall. All around Japan, Taisha, Jingu, and Jinja were constructed, and the locations now serve as hallowed shrines to kami. The core of Japanese society can be recognised there.



Torii Gate @ Hakone Jinja

Clicked by Subhajit Chatterjee on 22/05/2022

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