

# SHINTO

Professor Russell Kirkland  
Department of Religion  
University of Georgia

**Shint\_** - "**the way of the kami** (spirits)": to some degree a religious tradition, to some degree just the traditions and sentiments of the Japanese people. First named in the 6th century, when Buddhism first arrived from Korea and China. Never organized. No fundamental teachings or required practices. Subjected to government control in Meiji period (1868); de-established by U.S. fiat after World War II.

## Important elements:

1. intimacy with the land (partly aesthetic naturalism, partly nationalism)
2. spirits (**kami**): not highly anthropomorphic; they embody purity, not authority
3. "**shrines**" (*jinja*): sites for communion with *kami*; many have *torii* (symbolic sacred gates)
4. rituals, for purity and harmony
5. myths, recorded mainly in the 8th-century "mytho-histories" (the **Nihongi** and the **Kojiki**)
6. sporadic links with the imperial government (cf. Kitabatake Chikafusa's Jinn\_sh\_t\_ki)

## **Kami:**

1. "The word *kami* signifies the deities of heaven and earth that appear in the ancient records, and also the spirits of the shrines where they are worshipped. In ancient usage, anything that was outside the ordinary, possessed superior power, or was awe-inspiring was called *kami*. Eminence here does not refer merely to the superiority of nobility, goodness, or meritorious deeds: evil and mysterious things, if they are extraordinary and dreadful, are also called *kami*." — Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801)

2. "...*kami* is fundamentally a term that distinguishes between a world of superior beings and things which are thought of as filled with mysterious power, and a world of common experiences that lie within the control of ordinary human technique." — D. C. Holtom (20th century)

## Rituals:

1. Ordinary worship: individuals approach the *kami* at a shrine, as they feel moved to do so
2. Home worship: observances to order the home, the family, and the individual
3. Formal worship: liturgical ceremonies (offerings and prayers) to order the cosmos; performed by a priest on behalf of all; the *kami* are summoned to accept the offerings and bless the people
4. Imperial worship: political ceremonies that express and reinforce the traditional association of the imperial house with the *kami* (especially Amaterasu); some ceremonies are secret

**Ethics:** Shint\_ ethics are grounded in the concern with **purity**. They are designed: (1) to purify the heart; and (2) to preserve harmony with others and harmony with the *kami*.

## **Kami in Ancient Myths:**

1. The Procreators of the Isles (the Earth): **Izanami** (♀) and **Izanagi** (♂)
2. The Ruler in Heaven: at first, Takami-musubi (♂); later, the sun-deity **Amaterasu** (♀). Amaterasu, partly a creation of the 7th-century emperor Temmu, is worshipped at **the Ise shrine** and regarded as the ancestress of the emperors.

3. Another great deity: Susa-no-o (Susanowo), worshipped at **the Izumo shrine**  
The ancient myths, from diverse local cultures of Yamato times, were organized and politicized by the Yamato rulers in 5th-7th centuries. In that process, great deities like Susa-no-o (merely the high god of the people of Izumo) came to be represented as violent and dangerous, because the Yamato rulers wished to undermine the subjugated rulers of such lands. The ancient myths were never systematized, and the **Nihongi** and the **Kojiki** preserve many variant and conflicting versions.