Shinto: The Way of the Gods

Shinto began around about 500 BCE. While some claim that it has always existed in Japan, others believe it was the product of immigrants from China and Korea. Its name was derived from the Chinese words "shin tao" ("The Way of the Gods").

Unlike most other religions, Shinto has no real founder, no written scriptures, no body of religious law, and only a very loosely-organized priesthood.

Followers of Shinto worship a combination of the spirits, nature and their ancestors. The spirits (or "Kami") live in nature. They dwell in nature, but can protect people. Therefore, people pray to them and make offerings, such as wine, food, or incense. The Kami are seen as good and kind; they help and protect people.

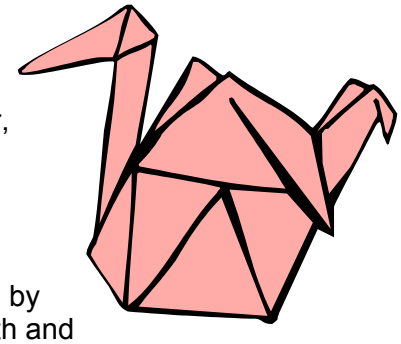
The Kami are consulted before important events, such as weddings, the opening of a business, making a major decision, etc. Even today before a new office building is built, there are offerings to the god by a high official of the Shinto religion to bring good luck to the building and to the new business.

The Japanese people have always had a love for nature. Nature is sacred. To be in contact with nature is to be close to the gods. Natural objects are worshipped as sacred spirits. All of humanity is regarded as "Kami's child." Thus all human life and human nature is sacred. Shinto recognizes many sacred places: mountains, springs, waterfalls, etc.

Ancestors are deeply revered and worshipped. Tradition and the family are still important. The family is seen as the main way by which traditions are preserved. The main celebrations in Shinto relate to birth and marriage, through which the family traditions are preserved.

When a child is born in Japan a local Shinto shrine adds their name to a list kept at the shrine and declares them a “family child.” After death they become a “family Kami” or spirit.

Names can be added to the list without consent and regardless of a person’s personal belief. This is not seen as forcing people to practice the Shinto religion, but rather a sign of being welcomed by the local kami.



Origami: ("Paper of the spirits"): This is a Japanese folk art in which paper is folded into beautiful shapes. They are often seen around Shinto shrines. Out of respect for the tree spirit that gave its life to make the paper, origami paper is <u>never</u> cut.

The "Four Affirmations” or beliefs of Shinto

1. *Tradition and the family*: The family is seen as the main mechanism by which traditions are preserved. Their main celebrations relate to birth and marriage.
2. *Love of nature*: Nature is sacred; to be in contact with nature is to be close to the Gods. Natural objects are worshipped as sacred spirits.
3. *Physical cleanliness*: Followers of Shinto take baths, wash their hands, and rinse out their mouth often.
4. *"Matsuri"*: The worship and honor given to the Kami and ancestral spirits.