

How has Shinto impacted modern day Japan?

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Rationale and Preliminary Research

“What religion do you believe in?” is a question I have never been able to properly answer. I’ve grown up in a Japanese household with my parents coming from both Buddhist and Shinto roots, but I didn’t necessarily believe in their teachings. I realized that many people in Japan are in similar positions as me when it comes to what religion they believe in. Out of the two most common religions in Japan which are Buddhism and Shinto, I became curious about Shinto since I never recognized what the religion believed in. To briefly explain, Shinto believes in the way of the god and values living along with nature. There is no founder, no dogma, nor any official sacred texts. Shinto is perfectly blended into the daily lives of Japanese people, and its philosophies can be easily encountered when interacting with Japanese culture. Thinking back on my conversations with my friends in Japan, people would often refer to nontheistic things as gods, which I now recognize as one impact of Shinto. One core memory of this is from when I was a child when my parents would lecture me that “The toy gods will be very angry at me” whenever I would slack on cleaning after playing time. I never questioned this idea until recently when I started learning about other religions around the world that are monotheistic or limit the number of gods. Ultimately in Shinto, referring to objects, people, nature, and animals as gods conveys its main philosophy that god is everywhere. I was fascinated by how intimate Shinto and my home culture were, which led me to my research question: How has Shinto impacted modern day Japan?

To conduct my research, I read several books and articles, and watched many videos. The information I gathered from these sources allowed me to understand the fundamentals of Shinto and its origins. In addition to that, I conducted interviews with family members and acquaintances who associate with Shinto, and Ms. B, a Shinto priestess from Portland, USA. The interviews consisted of questions that revealed the person’s relevance to Shinto and their experiences with Shinto rituals or practices.

Plan for Study

To investigate the impact of Shinto on modern day Japan, I plan to focus on understanding the fundamentals of Shinto and identifying the impact of Shinto on Japanese people’s behaviors, the impact of Shinto on Japanese agriculture and how people interact with nature, and the impact of Shinto on Japanese modern culture. On top of that, I wanted to understand how Shinto impacts my own Japanese identity. My initial research will include basic research from books, articles, and videos which will help with the first focus of my research, the fundamentals of Shinto. My next steps will focus on using this fundamental information to identify them in modern day Japan. The interviews I conducted with my grandparents, mother, aunt, and a Shinto priestess will allow me to dive into this part of the research. By asking these people about their experiences with Shinto, it will enable me to compare their answers and my research to further my answer to the research question.

Summary of significant findings

It is difficult to define Shinto as a religion since it leans more on being the way of life and a way of thinking in Japan.¹ In the 1980s, Kuroda Toshio argued that Shinto is “an outcome of historical

¹ Aike P. Rots, *Shinto, Nature, and Ideology in Contemporary Japan: Making Sacred Forests* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=shib&db=cat01918a&AN=tas.217657&site=eds-live&scope=site>, 25.

construction and negotiation process”.² From my knowledge, Shinto (神道) can be directly translated to “the way of kami/god”. There are over “Yaoyorozu (八百万)”, which means 8 million kami in Shinto and it could be a person, mountain, dog, tree, or anything that is usually not considered sacred.³ The significance of this is that since Shinto doesn’t have any dogma or official teachings, anyone can practice Shinto by finding “kami” in their lives. Out of the interviews I conducted with several Japanese relatives, Mr. T, a Japanese acquaintance, and Ms. B, a Shinto priestess, Mr. T and Ms. B were the only ones to actually identify themselves as Shintoists.⁴ However, even Ms. B explained that she is a Shintoist not in a way to follow dogmas or theologies like most other religions, but to follow the way of kami. The rest of my interviewees barely identified themselves as Shintoists, but rather saw Shinto as something that is engraved into their lives as Japanese people.

Many Shinto rituals are engraved into Japanese culture throughout history so that many Shinto “followers” don’t realize they are following a religious ritual.⁵ One significant influence of Shinto I found from my interview with my grandparents was the Shinto “Ofuda/(お札)” they keep in their home. Ofuda is a paper that is kept in Shintoist Japanese households to show gratitude towards the gods that look after the everyday lives of people. It is replaced every year with a new Ofuda from the shrine in the New Year.⁶

² Aike P. Rots, *Shinto, Nature, and Ideology in Contemporary Japan: Making Sacred Forests* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=shib&db=cat01918a&AN=tas.217657&site=eds-live&scope=site>, 27.

Kuroda Toshio studies Japanese religions.

³ *What Is Shinto?*, YouTube (YouTube, 2021), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mX8cz1LEeXw>.

Yaoyozu means 8 million in Japanese

⁴ Names of interviewees are not shown for confidentiality. Ms.B, a Shinto priestess in Portland particularly believes in Konko faith, which is one branch of Shinto.

⁵ These rituals include Shichigosan, a celebration of kids turning 3, 4, and 7 in Japan to celebrate surviving these years of live, Setsubun, a celebration to fight the evil, Hinamatsuri, a celebration of girls, Hatsumode, practice of visiting the shrine on new years, etc.

⁶ “お神札ふだのまつり方,” 神社本庁, accessed April 1, 2022,

<https://www.jinjahoncho.or.jp/omatsuri/katei/ofuda>.



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When I asked about the influence Shinto has made on my interviewee’s perspectives, the most common answer I received was that Shinto shapes their understanding of identity as a Japanese person since the religion is dominantly associated with Japan. Another common answer was that Shinto influenced my interviewees to be more conscious about their surroundings, have better patience, and interact with others with better manners. This comes from the idea of kami being anything on this earth, which means that God is always watching one’s actions, enforcing Japanese people to always behave well. “Mottainai” is one idea that correlates with Shinto, which in simple terms is the idea of wastefulness.⁸ There isn’t an English word that “Mottainai” can translate to, but it is a beautiful philosophy that values the importance of “not wasting”, or showing great regret for whatever is wasted, especially to something/someone that went to waste without showing its full potential.⁹ Since Shinto believes that “all beings have spirits” because anything can be a kami, the idea of “Mottainai” is highly valued. Furthermore, Shinto has been around since the Jomon era, and it was an era where fishing, farming, hunting, and gathering flourished in

⁷ Photo of Ofuda at my grandparent’s house, taken by my grandfather. The two white papers in the middle are Shinto Ofudas that I mentioned in the paragraph. The reason why there are two Ofudas is because they went to two different shrines in the new year.

⁸ Yuriko Sato, “Mottainai: A Japanese Sense of Anima Mundi,” *Journal of Analytical Psychology* 62, no. 1 (2017): pp. 147, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5922.12282>.

⁹ For example, if someone is cutting a carrot and cuts away too much from the end, one might say “Mottainai”, showing regret towards the part of carrot that has been cut off which could’ve been eaten.

Japan.¹⁰ This led the people to show gratitude towards nature, and worship the spirits of animals and plants; moreover, it shows the origins of why Shinto is a religion that highly values nature.¹¹

Shinto can be contradicting because although there are no dogmas, Shinto practices have specific rules, which as a Japanese individual myself, I consider most of these “rules” as common sense that people follow without realizing the Shinto origins. According to Ms.B, having a sincere heart, gratitude, honoring and respecting the vertical relationships, having harmony, and taking care of others are some of these “rules” that are engraved into Japanese culture.¹² At the end of my interviews, I asked my interviewees if they have ever read “Nihonshoki” or “Kojiki”, which are books that tell the story of Japan’s origins, as well as the origin of Shinto. Kojiki especially explains the social and natural phenomena of Japan, which highly correlates with the ideas of Shinto, and the it is presented in a way similar to the Bible, or the Greek Myth.¹³ However, both Nihonshoki nor Kojiki are official sacred text of Shinto.

One unexpected category I found an influence of Shinto on modern day Japan was on science. One article talked about the influence of Shinto on bioethics.¹⁴ Some examples of these influences include the way Japanese people view brain death and organ transplantation.¹⁵

Critical Reflection & Evaluation

At the end of my research process, my findings on the influence of Shinto on modern day Japan was as I expected. The overall conclusion that Shinto is engraved deeply in Japanese culture comes back to what made me choose this research question, which rose from the wonders of what makes my Japanese identity and how I am influenced by Shinto.

As I continued my research, I realized that the books and articles I was reading only gave me repetitive answers to my question that Shinto is a way of life, and it is difficult to draw a line on what makes a Shinto believer. In an article by Toji Kamata, Kamata suggests that “presence is enhanced by nonexistence” in Shinto.¹⁶ The nonexistence of a creator, teachings, dogmas, and rules are what makes Shinto present in modern day Japan. I was fascinated by this idea since it relates to the big question in IB: reason vs experience. There are no reasonings in Shinto that can be supported by an official evidence. However, the behaviors and rituals that come from Shinto can be supported through the experience of Japanese people over the course of history. For example, the evidence to why people developed the idea

¹⁰ Jomon era in Japan was about 15,000 to 23,000 years ago

¹¹ Yuriko Sato, “*Mottainai: A Japanese Sense of Anima Mundi*,” *Journal of Analytical Psychology* 62, no. 1 (2017): pp. 149, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5922.12282>.

¹² There are rules people have to follow when visiting shrines, such as washing their hands before entering the shrine.

¹³ Gustav Heldt et al., *The Kojiki an Account of Ancient Matters* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

¹⁴ Toshinari Mizuno and Brian Taylor Slingsby, “Eye on Religion: Considering the Influence of Buddhist and Shinto Thought on Contemporary Japanese Bioethics,” *Southern Medical Journal* 100, no. 1 (2007): pp. 115-117, <https://doi.org/10.1097/smj.0b013e31802e65a6>.

¹⁵ Shinto ideologies can lead people to value people living naturally, which can make some people oppose the idea of organ transplantation.

¹⁶ Kamata Toji, “Shinto Research and the Humanities in Japan,” *Zygon* 51, no. 1 (2016): pp. 43-62, <https://doi.org/10.1111/zygo.12233>.

of “Mottainai” is through people’s experience with nature. In another article by Klien Susanne, she mentions the impact the great earthquake in 2011 had on Shinto rituals. In Miyagi prefecture where there was harsh damage on the community from the disaster, Kaguya, which is one Shinto ritual went through change where the sacred ritual lost its sacred location and its purpose shifted to bringing together the people in the community.¹⁷ I found this as an interesting connection between modern day Japan and Shinto that is constantly changing through experience.

To reflect on my interviews, I think the wide range of interviewees that I was able to conduct my research on allowed me to have a good overview of the general influence of Shinto in Japan. Throughout my interview process, I decided to cut down on some of the answers that Mr.T and Ms.B has given me since I observed that their answers were coming from deeply Shintoist perspectives, which did not represent the overall influence of Shinto in Japan.¹⁸ In addition to that, since Ms. B is a priestess in Portland, I felt that her answers could be biased when it comes to talking about the influence Shinto has on people residing in Japan. Therefore if I were to conduct a similar research in the future, I would try and find a priest residing in Japan for a more local perspective.

One finding was that the academic sources gave me a better understanding of than interviews was the effects Shinto had on science. Since religion often resonates more with humanities, I did not expect this correlation. I think this would be a topic that can be further explored, since it relates to the contrary of science vs religion that IB often covers.

Overall, my academic sources and interviews shared similar results that supported each other, which allows me to conclude that Shinto impacts modern day Japan by engraving into Japanese culture throughout history which influences the behaviors and perspectives of Japanese people.

¹⁷ KLIEN, SUSANNE. 2016. “Shinto Ritual Practice in Miyagi Prefecture after the Great East Japan Earthquake.” *Asian Ethnology* 75 (2): 359–76.
<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=shib&db=a9h&AN=120759578&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

¹⁸ Some answers I cut down on included informations such as the specific Shrines Mr.T is a member of, and the process of setting up Kamidana, which is a practice done by Shintoists by setting up little shrines in their homes.

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Appendix

Interview Questions in English:

- To what extent do you identify as a Shinto believer?
- How did you become a Shinto believer?
- To what extent do you think Shinto has influenced your life?
- What are some Shinto practices and rituals that you have participated in?
- To what extent do you know about the main ideas of Shinto? What are some examples?
- Are there any rules/ dogmas you follow specifically because of Shinto?
- How has Shinto influenced the way you think?
- Has Shinto had any influence on the way you view nature? If so, how?
- Have you ever read Kojiki or Nihonshoki?