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CHAPTER

SHINTO



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Shinto is Japan's native religious tradition. With roots that date back to prehistoric times, Shinto has probably existed for as long as the Japanese have inhabited their islands. But Shinto has also been shaped through the ages by foreign influences. In fact, the term *shinto*, which means "way of the *kami* (kah-mee)," is from the Chinese words *shen* (divinities) and *tao* (way). It was first used by the Japanese in about the sixth century AD to distinguish their native religion from new traditions coming from China, especially Buddhism (which the Japanese call Butsudo [boo-tsoo-doh], "way of the Buddha").

Japanese religion, like East Asian religion in general, is a fabric of interwoven traditions. Shinto and Japanese folk tradition have provided native threads, and Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism have contributed foreign strands. The religion of most Japanese is drawn from all those traditions. For example, Japanese marriages are commonly held in Shinto shrines, and Japanese funerals are usually conducted in Buddhist temples.

kami (kah-mee)

Anything that the Japanese hold as sacred, including deities, certain human beings, natural entities, and animals; the term *kami* can be either singular or plural.

It would be a mistake to think of Shinto as existing independently of other traditions.

Shinto contributes to Japanese religion in a variety of ways. In one of its aspects, it is a vehicle for patriotism, conveying a long-standing respect for Japan as a nation. In another aspect, Shinto attends to everyday concerns of communities and individuals, helping to secure such necessities as good crops and safe homes. Most of all, Shinto is veneration of nature. A profound love of nature, which has always been a hallmark of the Japanese, is embodied in the concept that lies at the heart of Shinto, the *kami*.

"WAY OF THE KAMI"

Shinto emphasizes the ritual dimension over the doctrinal. Participation in rituals means far more than holding the correct "belief" (a notion quite foreign to Shinto). Shinto therefore has not concerned itself much with theological explanations of the *kami*. Even the great scholar Motoori Norinaga (1730 to 1801), one of Shinto's most admired and influential figures, admitted, "I do not yet understand the meaning of the term, *kami*" (quoted in Earhart, *Religion in the Japanese Experience*, page 10).

Basically the *kami* are any people or things that have evoked the wonder of the Japanese. They include deities and certain human beings, such as emperors, as well as a large variety of natural entities like mountains and animals. The *kami* are numerous, and can appear anywhere. Many are also ancient, existing long before the Japanese, and even before their island home. Indeed, the *kami* are Japan's divine ancestors.

Divine Ancestors:

The Shinto Myth of Japan's Origins

Shinto has no sacred scripture, no bible. But it does have authoritative histories that were compiled in the eighth century AD by order of the imperial court. The histories contain a mythological account of the origins of Japan.

Known at least in outline form by virtually all Japanese, the Shinto myth tells about the divine ancestry of Japan and its people, and illustrates that the *kami* are always present and always close to Japan's land and people. It is thus a creation myth, setting forth both a cosmology and an account of human origins. Though most Japanese today would not assert its historical truth, the myth is highly significant, celebrating the greatness of Japan. It can be summarized as follows:

At the beginning of heaven and earth, seven generations of deities (*kami*) came into existence, including Izanagi and Izanami, the primal male and female. Other deities commanded these two to create land. And so, churning the sea with Izanagi's spear, they created an island from the brine that dripped from the spear.

The pair descended from heaven to earth, and Izanami gave birth to the eight islands of Japan. Izanami then gave birth to many deities, the last one being the heat god, who burned her to death as she was giving birth to him. Overcome by despair, Izanagi killed the heat god and then pursued Izanami to the underworld. Here, in spite of his wife's warnings, Izanagi beheld her decaying body. Embarrassed and outraged, Izanami pursued Izanagi, who barely managed to escape before blocking the entrance to the underworld with a huge boulder.

Izanagi, polluted from this encounter with death, waded into the ocean to



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Two examples of *kami*: Mount Fuji and a statue of a Shinto goddess.

purify himself. From filth in his left eye, he produced Amaterasu, the sun goddess; from filth in his right eye and his nostrils, he produced the moon god and storm god.

Eventually Amaterasu, who reigned as the chief deity, sent her grandson, Ni-ni-gi, to rule the earth as its emperor, and Ni-ni-gi's grandson became the first human emperor. The imperial line was thereby established, descended directly from Amaterasu.

In the meantime, elsewhere on the islands, the Japanese were descending from other deities.

It is easy to understand why the Japanese have revered the Shinto myth over the centuries. After all, because of the myth, they can claim divine ancestry and can take pride in the divine origins of their homeland.



ACTIVITY

Myths provide answers to fundamental questions about human life and history. Often they give those answers using symbolic images and events that do not have obvious meanings. With this in mind, carefully consider the Shinto myth. What fundamental questions does it answer, and how?

Sacred Inhabitants: "Eight Hundred Myriads" of Kami

The Shinto myth introduces some of the *kami*, including Amaterasu, who is still regarded as the most important deity, and Ni-ni-gi, Amaterasu's grandson and Japan's

first emperor. The Japanese have traditionally regarded their emperors as *kami*, even while the emperors are still living. (After Japan's defeat in World War II, Emperor Hirohito was forced to announce publicly that he was not divine; many Japanese were likely shocked by that.)

Not only deities and emperors are sacred to the Japanese, however. The great scholar Motoori Norinaga writes that a wide variety of things can be considered *kami*:

Speaking in general . . . it may be said that *kami* signifies, in the first place, the deities of heaven and earth that appear in the ancient records and also the spirits of the shrines where they are worshipped.

It is hardly necessary to say that it includes human beings. It also includes such objects as birds, beasts, trees, plants, seas, mountains and so forth. In ancient usage, anything whatsoever which was outside the ordinary, which possessed superior power or which was awe-inspiring was called *kami*.

(Quoted in Earhart, *Religion in the Japanese Experience*, page 10)

Motoori goes on to cite thunder, dragons, echoes, foxes, tigers, wolves, peaches, and a necklace as *kami*. The list is seemingly endless. The ancient histories, in fact, assert that the *kami* number "eight hundred myriads," or eight million. This is to be regarded not as a literal figure, but as a recognition that the islands of Japan abound with the sacred forces that the *kami* embody.

In general, it is helpful to think of *kami* as that which is sacred, whatever the specific form it takes. The importance of *kami* clearly relates to the Japanese love of nature. Nature, in all its manifestations, is considered sacred.

This sacredness is celebrated and worshipped in its embodied form of *kami*.



ACTIVITY

The concept of *kami* is central to Shinto. After reading the descriptions and examples of *kami*, close your book and describe *kami* in your own words.

SHINTO IN THE RELIGIOUS LIFE OF JAPAN

Given the abundance and variety of *kami*, it is natural that Shinto includes many forms of worship practice and of institutional organization.

Shinto Worship: Revering the *Kami*

Shinto worship focuses on simple expression of respectful gratitude to the *kami*, and to the experience of unity with them. Worship can take place in the home, at shrines, or during large and joyous seasonal festivals in which entire communities join together in colorful pageantry.



Japan's Emperor Hirohito, seen here shortly after World War II, renounced his divine status and broke with tradition by meeting directly with the Japanese people.

kamidana
(kah-mee-dah-nah)

The “*kami* shelf,” a small altar in the home, patterned after Shinto shrines, that serves as the focal point of domestic worship.

torii (toh-ree-ee)

An archway marking the entrance to a Shinto shrine or other sacred site, formed by two upright pillars and a cross beam; Shinto’s most recognized symbol.

bushido (boo-shee-doh; Japanese: “way of the warrior”)

A code of conduct for the samurai that is based on Shinto nationalism, Confucian ethics, and Zen Buddhist self-discipline.

Worship at Home: The Kamidana

The focal point of Shinto worship in the home is a small altar called the *kamidana* (kah-mee-dah-nah), or “*kami* shelf.” The *kamidana* can contain a wide variety of items, depending on the family’s particular objects of worship. Usually it holds the names of deceased ancestors. Statues of favorite deities, and items brought back from shrines are also common. These objects tend to be regarded as symbols of the presence of *kami*, although for the more traditional Japanese, they are thought to actually contain *kami*.

Worship at the *kamidana* is simple and commonly occurs daily. First, family members purify themselves by washing their hands and faces. Then they present offerings such as food or flowers, clap their hands to signify their presence to the *kami*, and say prayers. The *kamidana* can also serve as the focal point for more elaborate celebrations, such as weddings.

Ceremonial Worship at Shinto Shrines

Shinto shrines have a natural beauty and are found almost everywhere in Japan. Originally the *kami* were worshipped in natural places, such as groves, waterfalls, and mountains. Some such places, like Nachi Waterfall and Mount Miwa, still function as shrines. Today the *kami* are typically worshipped in wooden structures featuring a naturalness that expresses Shinto’s profound veneration of its surroundings (for instance, the wood is often left unpainted).

A visit to a Shinto shrine removes the worshipper from ordinary, everyday surroundings. The entrance to the sacred confines of the shrine is marked by a *torii* (toh-ree-ee), an archway formed by two upright pillars and a cross beam, usually fortified with horizontal supports. The *torii* is recognized worldwide as the symbol of Shinto.

The shrine is usually rectangular and surrounded by a fence. Often a grove of trees or a park can be found nearby. Having passed

The rope tied around this tree is a means of showing reverence for the presence of *kami*.



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through the *torii*, the worshipper finds a basin with water for the rite of purification. In this rite, water is splashed on the hands and the face, symbolically preparing the worshipper to appear before the *kami*. Next, the visitor enters the worship hall, the space reserved for worshippers during the ceremony. A second building, the chief sanctuary, can be entered only by priests. Within that building lies the *kami* body, usually a common object such as a mirror or a sword. The *kami* of the shrine is believed to descend into the *kami* body during the ceremony. The *kami* body is an extremely sacred object, and is rarely seen even by the priests. Once a priest has invoked the presence of the *kami*, prayers are offered

on behalf of the worshippers. A typical shrine ceremony culminates in an experience of unity with the *kami*.

Most of Shinto's shrines conform to this description, though the details vary. The most notable shrines are considerably more elaborate. The Grand Imperial Shrine at Ise, dedicated to the sun goddess Amaterasu, is the grandest and most famous of all. Rebuilt every twenty years to ensure its purity, the Grand Imperial Shrine houses the three sacred regalia of Japan's imperial line: a bronze mirror, a sword, and a string of jewels. According to the Shinto myth, these were sent to earth with Ni-ni-gi by his grandmother, the sun goddess Amaterasu.

samurai (sam'uh-ri)

A Japanese medieval warrior knight; the term *samurai* can be either singular or plural.

seppuku

(sep-poo-koo;
Japanese: "cutting
the abdomen")

Also called hara-kiri (hair-i-kihr'ee); ritual suicide prescribed by *bushido* for samurai who have committed crimes or acts of dishonor.

BUSHIDO: "WAY OF THE WARRIOR"

Many people continue to be unsettled by the Japanese kamikaze (divine wind) pilots who willingly crashed their warplanes into enemy ships in World War II. The suicidal attitude of the kamikaze attack stems from a deeply rooted Japanese tradition established in medieval times: *bushido* (boo-shee-doh), "way of the warrior."

Bushido is Japanese through and through. It resulted from the combined teachings of three of Japan's prevalent religions: Shinto nationalism, Confucian respect for one's superiors, and Zen self-discipline and transcendence of the duality of life and death. These teachings formed the code of conduct for the *samurai* (sam'uh-ri), Japan's medieval knights.

Bushido is similar to the code of chivalry practiced by Europe's medieval knights. Its primary virtues are these:

- loyalty to one's master
- courage to fight, and to die if necessary
- honor, preferring death to dishonor
- politeness toward those in higher social positions
- justice; as a doer of just and benevolent deeds, the samurai protected victims of injustice

Most striking among the ways of the samurai—and glaringly different from the ways of Europe's knights—is the willingness to commit suicide. In fact, a

samurai carried two weapons—a sword to use against the enemy, and a dagger to use against himself. The ritual suicide, known as *seppuku* (sep-poo-koo) in Japan, and commonly called hara-kiri (hair-i-kihr'ee) in the West, was a painful death brought about by cutting open the abdomen.

Bushido is illustrated vividly in the medieval Japanese tale "The Forty-seven Ronin." A nobleman, angered by repeated abuse from his superior, attempted to murder the superior. In response, the courts required the nobleman to commit *seppuku*, which he did. His forty-seven samurai attendants thus became *ronin*, or samurai whose superior is dead and who are bound by the code of *bushido* to avenge his death. Eventually, through cunning and great courage, the forty-seven *ronin* captured the man their superior had tried to kill, whom they held responsible for their superior's death. With politeness and humility, the forty-seven explained their duty and told the man that he must now commit *seppuku*. The man hesitated, afraid to take his own life. And so one of the forty-seven attacked, cutting off the enemy's head with a dagger. The *ronin* then washed the head, and carried it to the grave of their deceased superior and offered it to his spirit. There they waited for several days, until the courts ordered that they must now commit *seppuku* for having murdered their superior's enemy. This they calmly did. Ever since, the forty-seven *ronin* have been revered for having perfectly embodied *bushido*, the way of the warrior.

Seasonal Festivals

Festivals abound in Japan. Including local and regional festivals, they number well into the hundreds. Shinto, along with Buddhism, is a significant presence at many of the festivals.

Shinto has always been closely tied to the agricultural life of Japan, and many of its festivals reflect this. For example, in October and November, festivals celebrate the new rice harvest. The first grains of rice are offered to Amaterasu. Festivals like these are especially important in rural areas.

Of Shinto's many seasonal celebrations, the most notable are the Great Purification and the festival of the New Year.

The Great Purification. The Great Purification is performed in shrines throughout Japan twice a year, in June and December. For a month before each ceremony, the priests engage in a number of practices and disciplines intended to enhance their purity. During the ceremony,

a priest waves a cleansing wand over a gathering of people. Participants rub paper dolls on their bodies to transfer impurities from themselves to the dolls. The priests then throw the dolls away.

Such emphasis on purification pervades Shinto. In the Shinto myth, Izanagi washes himself in the ocean after being polluted in the underworld. Worship of *kami*, whether at home before the *kamidana* or in the community at a shrine, always begins with a rite of purification. The rebuilding of the Grand Imperial Shrine at Ise every twenty years also stems from this emphasis on purification. Nevertheless, humans are not regarded as naturally sinful or impure. On the contrary, as descendants of the original deities, they are thought to be born with a divine essence but need purification to allow the light of this essence to shine through with its true luster. The Japanese reputation for cleanliness is directly related to this perspective on the human condition.

The entrance to this shrine is guarded by a *torii*, a gate that is the symbol of Shinto.



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ACTIVITY

For Shinto, purification is necessary to allow the light of one's inborn divine essence to shine through. Think about the purification rituals of other religions, and explain why religions practice purification.

The festival of the New Year. The most spectacular annual festival celebrates the New Year. The December Great Purification ceremony helps to prepare the people for this festival. Another ritual, cleaning their houses, allows them to begin the year with purified dwellings. The festival begins on January 1 and lasts for several days. During this time, the people are on vacation and are free to

PRIESTESS OF THE SHRINE

A young woman named Mine, from Aino, Japan, is a priestess of the Suwa Shrine in Nagasaki. Although the Shinto priesthood is made up primarily of men, women have always played significant roles in shrine life. Mine discusses her experience as a contemporary Japanese woman who is also a member of the Shinto priesthood:

I like the feeling of being able to walk down the street, looking just like any other woman my age, and to have this little secret that I'm a Shinto priestess. . . . I'm proud to be who I am, even though it is a bit unusual for a woman in this day and age.

My family is a Shinto family and has been in charge of the village shrine at Aino for longer than anyone can remember. When I was in high school, I promised my grandfather to study Shinto when I got older, thinking at the time that it would be a good way to get to Tokyo from my little village down in Kyushu. I was like anyone else who watched TV and had their favorite singers and shows; I thought that Tokyo was where it was all happening. . . .

At one point during my university days, we had to undergo a training period. You know, the kind that is supposed to make you tough and pure and bright. We had to get up at 4:30 in the morning and thoroughly clean the shrine and gardens surrounding it, then study hard all day, even doing some meditation, and weren't allowed to sleep until 11:00 at night. The worst part was having to perform the *misogi* purification in the ocean while reciting the Oharae prayer about all the impurities and evils that we were washing away. . . . When we did it first in winter I was absolutely frozen to the bone. . . . Other than that intense training session, it was all pretty much routine study.

When I got out of school, I kept my promise to my grandfather and returned to Aino, and through his connections to Suwa Shrine, it was agreed that I [would] come and further my studies. Now that I'm out in society, meeting a variety of people all the time, when they ask me what I do and I answer that I'm a priestess, their reaction is usually the same. "Incredible!" they say. But this is my career and it seems very normal to me. I'm sure I'll have a relationship with a shrine all my life, even after marriage.

If you ask what my career goals are I'd have to say that they're not easy to pinpoint in the way other young people talk about becoming the head of the department or making lots of money or marrying some up-and-coming young executive or doctor. No, for me, what I'd like to do is to make whatever shrine I'm involved with a place where people can come and feel like they are "home" and want to linger. . . .

I guess the biggest problem I face now is the old attitudes about women and what their role is supposed to be at a modern shrine such as this one. I don't have hard training or anything like that, other than the juvenile tasks I'm expected to perform because of my rank, which I suppose are similar to pouring tea or making copies in an office. It just seems that other priests, the men, who are licensed the same as me and of my rank do much more than I do. Maybe it's because people might be put off when they come to the shrine and see a woman officiating. They might say, "Hey, there are men priests here—what's a woman doing at the ritual I'm paying for?" This is discrimination of course, and in a place like Nagasaki, which is still conservative and old-fashioned and where men are believed to be superior to women, I can't escape it, even here at the shrine.

But you know, women have always had an important role in Shinto, right from the very beginning. . . .

If I could change something about Shinto . . . I'd like to somehow restore the presence of the Kami to a more direct feeling or contact. It seems that people feel the Kami is something far away, that they have to go to a shrine or be at the family altar before they can share things with the deities. But for me, I think it's a fundamental part of Shinto to have a sense that the Kami is with you, so that if something happens or you need guidance, you can communicate with it immediately, wherever you are. This closeness to the Kami is something our modern civilization and society have completely lost.

(Quoted in Nelson, *A Year in the Life of a Shinto Shrine*, pages 125–129)

worship at Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples. On January 7, a great feast marks the beginning of the New Year and the return to an ordinary lifestyle.

Types of Shinto

Shinto has had a long and varied history and has taken on different forms through the centuries. Today three main types of Shinto can be identified, though they tend to overlap somewhat. Shrine Shinto is an organized institution, with officially designated shrines and priests. Sect Shinto is also organized but consists of a large variety of separate institutions, or "sects." Popular Shinto, though including many of the practices of the other types, lacks any formal organization.

Shrine Shinto

The Japanese government officially coined the term *Shrine Shinto* during the nineteenth century. However, the roots of Shrine Shinto extend into the distant past, when foreign religions first became prominent in Japan.

Already in the seventh century AD, Buddhism had become a significant tradition for the Japanese. Through the ages, Buddhism and Shinto became closely intertwined. From the Buddhist perspective, the *kami* were local Japanese manifestations of universal Buddhist truths. Followers of Shinto, in turn, came to regard the Buddhas and *bodhisattvas* as *kami*.

Buddhism was not embraced by everyone, however. Shortly after it first appeared in Japan, the imperial government began to take measures to preserve Shinto as the national tradition. It recorded Shinto's mythology, organized its priesthood, and began caring for its shrines. In the eighteenth century, Motoori Norinaga established himself as Shinto's most admired figure by purifying the religion of all Buddhist and other foreign elements.

Tensions between Shinto and foreign influences reached a climax in the nineteenth

century. In 1868, challenged by the United States and other nations to enter the modern age, Japan commenced the Meiji Restoration, a crucial project that transformed Japan into a modern nation. Massive political, economic, and religious transformations occurred. The religious transformation can be summarized briefly: Buddhism lost state support, while Shinto gained it. In 1882 Shrine Shinto was officially recognized as the state religion.

The period from 1868, the beginning of the Meiji Restoration, to 1945, the end of World War II, was both prosperous and tragic for Shinto. Adopted by the state as a vehicle for patriotism, Shinto was purified of its Buddhist elements. The state acquired authority over most of the shrines and over the priests who served them. It became the duty of every Japanese citizen to attend the shrines as a means of expressing patriotism. The Shinto myth of Japan's divine origins became a required part of every child's education so that students might learn loyalty to the emperor and his nation.

With Japan's defeat in World War II, the state support of Shinto ended in disaster. Japan's ancient and splendid tradition had been misused as a tool to fan the flames of extreme nationalism and militarism. This is not to say that Shinto somehow caused Japanese aggression. It was no more to blame than were Buddhism, Confucianism, and even Christianity, which were just as supportive of the nation's policies. On the contrary, the state's misuse of Shinto, not Shinto itself, fueled Japanese aggression.

Shrine Shinto, and Shinto in general, suffered a severe setback. Japanese tended to blame Shinto for the humiliating defeat of World War II. Nevertheless, Shrine Shinto continues to play a vital part in Japan's religious landscape. The shrines still stand, though they are assisted through the private funding of the nationwide Shrine Association rather than

through government involvement. And interest in Shinto has been growing in recent years.



ACTIVITY

Until the end of World War II, Shrine Shinto was involved with nationalism to an extreme degree. Such involvement, usually on a smaller scale, has been common throughout world history. What kind of connection do you detect between your nation and religion? What forms does this association take? In general, what do you think should be the relation between religion and a nation?

Sect Shinto

When the Japanese government recognized Shrine Shinto in 1882, it categorized the leftover elements of organized Shinto as sect Shinto. Thirteen sects were officially included. The government designated these as religions, along with other faiths such as Buddhism and Christianity. The sects were then required to call their places of worship churches, to distinguish them from the shrines that were under the control of the state.

Many of these sects were founded and led by women. This could be a reflection of ancient times, when women were likely to have had prominent roles in Japanese religion.

Popular Shinto

Popular, or folk, Shinto has hardly been affected by the government's categorizing of Shinto into Shrine and sect. Indeed, popular Shinto defies classification, for it has never been organized.

Popular Shinto includes a wide array of traditional practices, and in many instances can best be understood as Japanese folk



A traditional Shinto shrine stands in the midst of skyscrapers in modern Japan.

religion. Virtually all forms of Shinto worship that do not require a priest or a formal shrine are practiced in popular Shinto. Rituals of purification are emphasized. Personal blessings are sought for protection from harm and for help in times of crisis. For example, students commonly seek assistance on examination days. People also seek blessings at major stages of life, such as birth and marriage. Certain rites help to secure the successful growing of crops, especially rice. Such agricultural concerns have been central to Shinto through the ages.

TRADITIONAL SHINTO IN MODERN JAPAN

Shinto thrived for centuries in a Japan that was predominantly rural. Its deep veneration of nature and close ties to the agricultural life of the islands were in harmony with the rural lifestyle. Then, during the twentieth century, Japan rapidly became predominantly urban. It would seem that Shinto would have been threatened by that change. Yet, remarkably, the Shinto tradition appears to be faring quite well. Small shrines stand on street corners among the towering skyscrapers of ultramodern cities like Tokyo and Osaka. The Japanese,

however technologically sophisticated and economically productive they have become, seem to maintain the deep veneration of nature that is central to Shinto.

Considering Shinto's long history of holding on to the oldest ways while adapting to new influences, it is perhaps not surprising

that traditional Shinto is surviving in modern Japan. As the entire world strives to balance spiritual and environmental concerns with ever growing technology, the fate of Shinto should prove a telling measure of human commitment to love of nature and traditional ways.

CHAPTER REVIEW

1. What is a general definition of *kami*?
2. What is contained in Shinto's authoritative histories?
3. Who are Izanagi and Izanami?
4. According to the Shinto myth of origins, what is the nature of the ancestry of the Japanese?
5. According to the great Shinto scholar Motoori Norinaga, a wide variety of things can be considered *kami*. List at least four of them.
6. What do the ancient histories recognize when they say the *kami* number "eight hundred myriads," or eight million?
7. What is the *kamidana*? Briefly describe how it is used.
8. What is the *torii*?
9. What is a *kami* body, and what is believed to happen to it during worship?
10. Identify the grandest and most famous of all Shinto shrines.
11. From the Shinto perspective, why do humans need to undergo frequent acts and rites of purification?
12. What measures did Japan's imperial government take to preserve Shinto as the national tradition after the appearance of Buddhism?
13. What was the Meiji Restoration? What religious transformation took place during that period?
14. How did Japan's defeat in World War II affect Shinto?
15. How did sect Shinto come about?
16. Which type of Shinto defies classification? Why?