

Title: Conversations

Subtitle: Shintoism

Second Subtitle: Shintoism

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Quote:

Numbers: 4 million

Founder: Shinto claims no founder

Main Tenets: Shinto (or kami no michi, "way of the kami," or gods) is a prehistoric religious tradition indigenous to Japan, which has been influenced by Buddhism and Chinese religions and provides a worldview that has become central to Japanese culture and national identity. Shinto recognizes no all-powerful deity and is a diverse set of traditional rituals and ceremonies, rather than a system of dogmatic beliefs or ethics. The kami are the powers of nature primarily associated with such things as animals, trees, mountains, springs, boulders, the sun, and so forth. They also sometimes include the earliest ancestors of the Japanese, as well as the souls of the dead, and are revered in matsuri, or celebrations that seek to ensure continued order in the cosmos. Offerings such as fish, rice and vegetables are presented to the kami and later eaten. Music, dancing, and praise are also offered, and Shinto priests bless all with the branch of the sacred sakaki tree dipped in holy water. Another, shamanistic type of Shinto ritual exists in rural areas, in which miko (women shamans) speak for the kami by falling into a trance.

Main Sacred Text: Shinto has no comprehensive canon of scripture. No written Shinto documents survive from before the seventh century. But a written Shinto mythology appears in the early sections of the eighth-century books "Kojiki" ("Records of Ancient Matters," completed in 712 C.E.) and "Nihon Shoki" ("Chronicles of Japan," completed in 720 C.E.), which record the role of the kami in creating Japan and the Japanese imperial lineage. The divine pair Izanagi and Izanami brought forth Amaterasu, the sun goddess and ancestress of the Japanese emperor (hence the sun on the Japanese flag).

Principal Center: Shinto shrines can be found in groves of trees all over Japan. All the shrines have sacred gates (torii) and often contain water for symbolic purification of hands and mouth; larger shrines have main halls, buildings for offerings, and oratories. Inside the main hall resides the goshintai (god-body), which is sometimes represented by a mirror, but more often nothing at all. The classic Shinto shrine is the world-renowned Ise Shrine, the primary cult site for Amaterasu, arguably the most important kami.