



Japanese Traditions

Chapter Overview

The origin of the Japanese traditions lies in the blending of elements from the beliefs of original hunter-gatherer peoples, immigrants from North Asia, and Chinese traditions. There are persistent themes including a tolerance of doctrinal diversities, seeking benefits without regard to creed, a “market-place” approach, and reciprocal relationships between human and non-human agents.

The gods Izanagi and his “wife” Izanami produce all the various *kami* (spirits that animate all living things, natural phenomena, and natural forces). The emperors were believed to embody *kami*, thereby legitimizing their rule as a function of divine will. In the sixth century, a Korean king praised Buddhism to the Japanese king, and thus began the importation of Buddhism to the island nation. Mostly supported by various clans for the first 150 years, Buddhism became increasingly important in Japanese society, as symbolized by the building of Todaiji from 740–752. Connections between the Shinto *kami*, buddhas, and bodhisattvas became an enduring feature of Japanese spirituality. Some of the most popular Buddhas are Shakyamuni, Vairocana, and Amida. Some of the most popular bodhisattvas are Kannon (Avalokiteshvara) and Jizo (Ksitigarbha). These connections are explained with the theory of *bonji suijaku* (“manifestation from the original state”), meaning that the *kami* were manifestations of the buddhas and bodhisattvas.

The first capital city of Japan had numerous Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines within its borders. The city is called Nara and provides the name for this period (710–794). Later, in the Heian period (794–1184), a second capital was built in Kyoto and new Buddhist schools (Tendai and Shingon) were supported there. In the Kamakura period (1185–1333), new sects and new emphases emerged. This included the Pure Land, the Zen, and the Nichiren schools of Buddhism. Japanese spirituality was not only expressed here through practices such as conducting rituals, purchasing amulets, going on pilgrimages, and making donations, but also in activities like *ikebana*, the tea ceremony, Noh theater, and *haiku*.

Christianity arrived in 1549 and was able to make some inroads due to the general ongoing internal conflict in Japan, as well as the profit that the Japanese could make through trading with Europeans. Although the Japanese government was tolerant towards Christians, problems soon developed and Christianity was restricted. By 1620, Christians were considered disruptive of the social order of Japan and Japanese Christians were forced to reconvert to Buddhism. Some underground Christian activity persisted but with little influence. Neo-Confucianism was also used to stabilize society during this period.

Beginning in 1868 (the Meiji period), the syncretic institutions with Buddhist and Shinto elements were split apart and Shinto was made the official state religion. This and other developments were instrumental aspects of the Second World War both for Japan and for the Allied forces. After the war, Shinto lost its status as state religion and the emperor was forced to renounce his divinity. Since then, Buddhism and Shinto have continued to be important institutions in the Japanese landscape, but there have also been a variety of new religions that attempt to answer the spiritual needs of the people.

Learning Objectives

In this chapter, you are encouraged to

- explore the persistent themes in Japanese religious traditions;
- appreciate the ancient myths that establish the *kami* spirit tradition;
- outline the foundational aspects of tending to the spirit world;
- examine the development of Tendai and Shingon Buddhist traditions;
- understand the gravitation to Buddhist traditions with an emphasis on practice: Pure Land, Zen, and Nichiren;
- explain the adoption of Confucian hierarchical structures;
- outline the emergence of Shinto ritual practice;
- examine encounters with “Western” cultures and their effect on economic trade and religious traditions;
- understand the Meiji restoration and modernization’s effect on Japanese religious traditions; and
- explore post–World War II restructuring, new religious movements, and other religious adaptations.

Key Terms

aramitama The rough or violent side of the *kami*, responsible for natural disasters, illness, political disorder, etc.

kami The spirits that animate all living things, natural phenomena, and natural forces. Shrines were built to accommodate their presence during rituals.

nigimitama The benevolent side of the *kami*, associated with peace, prosperity, good health, and ample harvests.

Study Questions

See below for answers with page references.

1. Contrast the Japanese ideas of religious belief and practice with those of Western Christianity.

2. Why was Todaiji built and what can it tell us about Japanese approaches to religion?
3. What did the term “*bonji suijaku*” from the Buddhist *Lotus Sutra* mean, and how did Shinto change it in the 1500s?
4. What are the teachings of Pure Land Buddhism? How did Pure Land become the most popular form of Buddhism in Japan?
5. Who was Nichiren and what did he teach?
6. What are five forms of Shinto practice?
7. What are five examples of the cultural expressions of religion in Japan?
8. Describe the rise and fall of Christianity in Japan.
9. What happened to Shinto during the Meiji period?
10. What were the religious developments in post-1945 Japan?
11. How did the Japanese believe spirits are able to pervade objects such as trees or animals?
12. What did the Nara government do to prevent religious organizations from undermining the state?
13. How did Dogen get around the prohibition of funeral rites for all but the clergy and increase his following in the thirteenth century?
14. What is the Obon festival?
15. How has the notion of “funeral Buddhism” shifted in modern times?

Reflection Questions

1. Ancient Japanese people placed clay figurines within the burial mounds of their rulers. What was the purpose of these figurines? Why is this significant, even the notion of reciprocity and appeasement that is prevalent in Japanese culture?
2. Given the relationship between cultural, economic, and political shifts during the Kamakura period and an increase in religious sects, do you think it likely that an increase in religious sects would be an outcome of globalization and economic uncertainty in our current times? Why or why not?
3. How does Dogen’s encounter and discussion with the cook (p. 362) enlighten the reader? What does the cook mean?

4. In 1641, Japanese leaders decided to close themselves off from the rest of the world in response to a perceived religious and cultural threat through contact with European countries. What do you think were the ramifications of this decision? Pros? Cons? Are there parallels to how some people may feel nowadays in the world of globalization?
5. What do you think of the “Japan Buddhist Federation’s Appeal for a Lifestyle without Dependence on Nuclear Power”? Do you think that intra-faith dialogue among Buddhist groups is useful? Should religious leaders be involved in the public sphere or remain within the privacy of their own religious temples?

Research Paper Topics

1. Explore the various ways in which the concept of reciprocity is present in Japanese relationships with both the deities in the natural world and the ancestor spirits. How might these understandings inform future economic and environmental concerns in Japan?
2. What was the context in which the word *shukyo* (meaning “religion”) was introduced in Japan? What does this mean in terms of religious belief and practice in Japan, both before and after the word was employed?
3. The *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* are important texts in understanding Japanese religions. Discuss the publication of these texts and the role that they played in the Shinto tradition and Japanese identity.
4. What is the relationship between economic success and the cult of Kannon? Elaborate on the interconnections between the mundane world and the unseen worlds.
5. How did the Japanese Buddhists link the ancient teachings of the *kami* with Buddhist understandings of buddhas and bodhisattvas?
6. Who was Oda Nobunaga? Discuss his response to the various religious sects of his day.
7. Discuss the adoption of Confucian understandings of relationship and hierarchy by the Japanese shoguns in the Tokugawa period.
8. What is the difference between the *kami* and Shinto traditions? How is this accentuated during the Meiji Restoration period?
9. The Ise Shrine is completely rebuilt every 20 years (the last rebuilding occurred in 2013). Research in detail the steps that are taken at the site. How are cultural and religious understandings preserved in this undertaking?
10. What were the ramifications of adopting Shinto as the state religion and recognizing the Japanese emperor as a direct descendant of the *kami* Amaterasu?

Additional Resources

Audio-Visual

Embattled Buddhist: Under the Rising Sun. Global Management. 2001. 47 minutes.

Mountains and Rivers. Dharma Communications. 1996. 45 minutes.

Print

Ama, Toshimaro. 2005. *Why are the Japanese Non-Religious?* Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

Breen, John and Mark Teeuwen. 2000. *Shinto in History: Ways of the Kami*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press.

Sered, Susan Starr. 1999. *Women of the Sacred Groves: Divine Priestesses of Okinawa*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Internet

<http://www.tendai.or.jp/english/>

<http://www.ciolek.com/WWWVL-Zen.html>

Study Questions: Answer Key

1. After the Protestant Reformation, the West viewed religion as a matter of personal belief based on individual experience and need, but still with sometimes strict guidelines determining behaviour. In Japan people easily tolerate doctrinal diversity at the popular level, religions lack rules on what is or is not allowed, and religious activity is more important than religious belief. (pp. 334–35)
2. Todaiji was built in response to a series of earthquakes and poor harvests, with construction completing in 752. The god Hachiman, from Kyushu, advised the emperor to build the temple and demanded that a shrine to the god be constructed there. Major and minor Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines still conduct rituals for both the emperor and nation. In some ways, this demonstrates the Japanese tendency to not always clearly distinguish between these two dominant religious traditions, resulting in considerable interaction between Buddhist and Shinto concepts and activities. (pp. 339–340)
3. “*Honji suijaku*” can be translated as “manifestation from the original state.” This refers to the relationship between the Japanese *kami* and Buddhism, and helps to explain the implications of this relationship. *Kami* are manifestations of buddhas and the bodhisattvas, and aided the interaction between the two traditions. In the 1500s, Shinto priests altered the meaning to suggest that

the *kami* were lesser manifestations of the original buddhas and bodhisattvas. This aided the separation of the two traditions. (pp. 343, 350)

4. The Pure Land teachings were organized into a coherent system by Genshin, who, in addition to teaching about the Pure Land, also taught about the six realms of existence. Honen, a Tendai monk, then developed Pure Land Buddhism into its current state. Honen taught that there was a need for practice grounded in the Pure Land teachings because he felt that it was impossible to attain salvation in an age of *mappo*. Honen did not distinguish between a lay person and a learned monk, as the principle of universal salvation meant there was no difference between the two. Shinran taught that a *single* sincere repetition of the *nenbutsu* would secure salvation. The main Pure Land practices are repeating “*Namo Amida Butsu*” and the concept of relying on “other-power” instead of one’s “self-power” for attaining salvation. Pure Land practice was spread around the country through small, independent groups (*keo*), but in the fifteenth century Rennyo systemized the teachings, organized the groups, and used them to create a military network. Pure Land thus became the most popular form of Buddhism. (pp. 344–346)
5. Nichiren was a Tendai monk in the Kamakura period. He emphasized the *Lotus Sutra* as the only way to salvation for individuals and the nation. He taught that one should repeat the mantra “*namu myoho renge kyo*”; he felt that in his view, other types of Buddhism were not relevant in the age of *mappo*. His followers founded a network of temples in Japan. (p. 349)
6. One example is that of individuals petitioning spiritual agents, like buddha or *kami*. Another example is the purchasing of amulets or talismans. Going on pilgrimages to sacred places is another example, as is making donations to temples and shrines or their priests. A final example is the grand festivals that include entire communities. (pp. 351–352)
7. One is *ikebana* or flower arranging, which first developed in the Buddhist temples. Another is the art of garden design. A third is *haiku*, a form of minimalistic poetry. A fourth is Noh theatre, which focuses on Buddhist themes. A fifth is that of the more modern *anime* and *manga*, which contain many religious references. (pp. 353–354)
8. Due to Japan’s weak religious cohesiveness due to ongoing internal conflicts and the possibility that Christianity could have political uses, Jesuits were initially permitted to enter Japan. After first having been extended tolerance for decades, Christianity came to be seen as meddlesome and disruptive of the social order. In the early 1600s Tokugawa Ieyasu ordered all people to be registered at Buddhist temples and to denounce Christianity. Japan closed its door to Europe in 1641, and although some underground activity persisted, including one major rebellion, over time Christianity lost all influence. Adherents were for a long time forced into hiding in remote valleys and on faraway islands. (pp. 354–355)
9. During Japan’s westernization, Shinto became the state religion. The government sponsored shrines in honour of the soldiers who died in service to the nation—a new development in Shinto—and local festivals were appropriated for civic and national unity. The most extreme example of the idea of religious duty to the state is that of the *kamikaze* in WWII. (pp. 357–358)
10. With religious freedom guaranteed, new sects and new religions flourished in an attempt to answer the needs of the Japanese people. These sects included Soka Gakkai, Rissho Koseikai, Shinnyoen, Mahikari, Perfect Liberty Kyodan, Aum Shinrikyo, and Asahara Shoko. Currently,

due to various abuses of power and attacks by a few groups, the government has become more diligent in monitoring religious organizations by instituting rigorous measures. (p. 358)

11. Japanese culture believes that there is an essence or life energy that permeates all things. Through worship, the *kami* are thought to enable human beings to align themselves with this life energy and tap into it. The *kami* are thought to be fluid and changeable, so they are able to move into and out of natural phenomena, such as birds, mountains, rivers, or fire. The *kami* manifest with the natural phenomena, acting as messengers between the human realm and that of the *kami*. (p. 349)
12. The Nara government began to oversee the various religious organizations found in Japan at that time. They set up a ministry to oversee the various *kami* shrines within the country; the Ministry of Central Management organized Buddhist art, textiles, and architecture; all religious appointments and construction projected required supervision of a government official. (p. 355).
13. Dogen realized that he could not compete with Rinzaï Zen because of that sect's powerful affiliation with the samurai warriors. Rather than finding support among the elite, Dogen found a clever way to gain followers among the common people. At the time, only religious clergy were allowed to have funeral rites performed when they died. Dogen provided non-clergy with the opportunity to have a funeral rite performed in their honour by symbolically ordaining them as a monk or nun. The ability to conduct a memorial service for the deceased provided him with a large following. (pp. 361–362)
14. The Obon festival is one of the most popular events in Japan. It is celebrated in August in most parts of the country. The purpose of the festival is to entertain and interact with the ancestors. It is believed that during this time the spirits come back to this world, in order to receive food and drink, while having some fun. (p. 366)
15. “Funeral Buddhism” has a derogatory connotation as funeral rites have become “big business” for some temples that depend on this revenue. In Japan, Buddhism has been closely associated with death and funerals. This has turned into a lucrative business of late, as temples sell off parts of their land for use as cemeteries. Some feel that it is unfair for Buddhist monks to be making money at the expense of people who are grieving. (p. 373)