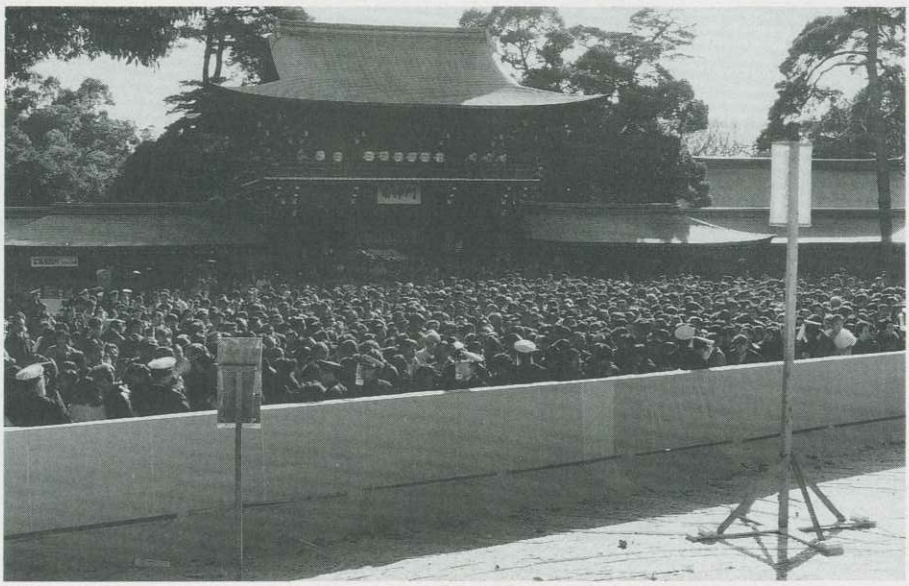
Shinto: A Spiritual Force

By Tsuneo Yatagai

When a certain Japanese company staged a trial operation for an expensive computer that it had purchased from a U.S. firm, it invited a Shinto priest to perform a purification ceremony beforehand. The U.S. technician who had come over with the computer found it very amusing that the Japanese should deify what was, after all, nothing more than a machine designed by humans to do the work of humans.

This anecdote pinpoints a major difference between Japanese and Western ways of thinking. It also illustrates a certain uniqueness of the Japanese mind. When they are going to build a new house or factory, the Japanese first of all ask a Shinto priest to cleanse the site of any impurities and to pray to the gods to give strength to the spirit of the structure so that all goes well in the future. The Japanese company was doing the same with its new computer, not deifying it but praying and asking for divine protection so that it would continue to work without a hitch.



Millions of Japanese visit shrines at New Year, even though they may not necessarily regard themselves as Shintoists.

Animistic belief

To give one more similar example, Japanese factory workers treat their robots as human beings, often giving them the names of popular female singers and calling "Hello, Sayuri" or "Goodbye, Keiko" at the beginning and end of shifts. The Japanese apparently believe that computers and robots have souls, just as human beings do. They seem to believe that spirits reside not only in living plants and animals and other objects of nature, including inorganic objects like rocks, but also in equipment and machinery put together by human technology. So they treat such machinery as if it were human. The Japanese continue to harbor this animistic belief, even though Japan has become one of the leading industrial nations of the world.

Lafcadio Hearn, who came to Japan in 1890 as a correspondent for a U.S. magazine and fell so much in love with the country that he later acquired Japanese citizenship, expressed surprise at the fact that Japan essentially remained unchanged from ancient times, despite the modernization that had taken place since the Meiji Restoration in 1868. This observation has remained true, even following Japan's defeat in World War II. The reason seems to lie in the existence of Shinto, a kind of folk religion.

At first sight, Table 1 is rather puzzling. It suggests that there are nearly 220 million religious believers in Japan, even though the total population of the country as of 1990 numbered only half of this—approximately 120 million. Since the number of religious believers in Japan is nearly double the size of the population, the religiousness of the Japanese has often been mocked.

As the table shows, however, the number of Shinto believers just about equals the size of the population, as does the number of believers in religions other than Shinto. The explanation is that most people are counted twice as following both Shinto and another religion. Certainly, many people are counted as Shinto believers simply because they live in the vicinity of a shrine, which for statistical purposes makes them parishioners of that shrine. At the same time, however, the figures clearly reflect the fact that the Japanese are capable of following two or more religions, that they are not especially conscious of Shinto, and that Shinto is tolerant of other religions.

Stratified culture

From around the 6th century, when the first history texts were written, various ideas and cultures flowed into Japan from abroad, exerting an enormous influence on the country that can still be seen today. This is the reason why modern Japanese culture is often described as complex and stratified (Table 2).

It is also significant, however, that none of these foreign cultures ever achieved a dominating position in Japan. While accepting advanced and influential foreign

cultures, Japan also seized the opportunity to develop its own indigenous culture. The energy for this process of digestion, absorption and creation of cultures appears to have emanated from Shinto, which served as an important foundation from prehistoric times and continues to function in the collective subconscious of the nation to this day.

The Japanese emphasis on cleanliness, for example, stems from their Shinto background. More than anything else, Shinto extols that which is bright and pure. In the middle of the 19th century Townsend Harris, who as the first U.S. consul general in Japan worked hard to bring about the first commercial treaty between the United States and Japan, admired the Japanese as the cleanest people "east of the Cape of Good Hope."

The workaholic spirit for which the Japanese are famous also comes from Shinto. While foreign religions and cultures entering Japan, until the arrival of Protestantism, tended to show a contempt for labor, Shinto traditionally extoled agricultural work as dignified labor. Furthermore, most Japanese place great importance on consumer items—at least they did until the advent of the throwaway society. The reason is that, according to Shinto, even objects have a spirit, so people should not break things and discard them at their own convenience.

Another significant point is that the world of myths lives on in Shinto. The Japanese understand the link between myths, history and the present, which is why they venerate the souls of their ancestors and still believe in the continuity of history.

Table 1 Number of Religious Believers in Japan (million)

Shinto	111.79
Buddhism	93.10
Christianity	1.42
Others	11.37
Total	217.68

Source: *Shukyo Nenkan 1989*, Agency for Cultural Affairs

Shinto is manifested in many aspects of Japanese life.

What is Shinto?

When confronted with the question of what Shinto precisely is, most Japanese are unable to give an explicit answer. Though Shinto is considered to be a kind of religion, it must be one of the most obscure religions in the world. Shinto has no founder, no clear doctrine nor elaborate theology, and no commandments that must be obeyed.

Indeed, the religion was given the name Shinto only after the arrival in Japan of Confucianism and Buddhism, which made it necessary to make a distinction between these new religions and the "something" that existed before. This "something," which later came to be called Shinto, had been developed naturally by the Japanese people in the process of carrying on their lives and had been handed down from generation to generation since ancient times. Now the Japanese are hardly conscious of their Shinto beliefs, but they exist all the same.

Table 2 Foreign Cultures Imported into Japan

Age	Foreign culture
19th century	Christianity
16th century	Western culture
9th century	Chinese culture
6th century	Buddhism Taoism Yin and Yang
Before 5th century	Fundamental Shinto

At the end of World War II the Americans believed that to have engaged in a reckless war that it had no chance of winning, Japan must have been possessed by some kind of ideology like Nazism. They believed, not unreasonably, that this ideology was Shinto, because before the war the Japanese government had forced state Shinto, which linked nationalism and Shinto, on the Japanese people and because during the war Japanese pilots were prepared to engage in suicide attacks, called *kamikaze.*

One of the reasons for the misunderstanding lies in the translation of the Japanese word *kami* as god. Actually *kami* is closer in meaning to the multiple gods of ancient Greece than to the single, superior and absolute god of Christianity or of Islam. The mistaken translation of *kami* as a singular god hindered Americans in their interpretation of Japan and also confused Japanese, especially in their understanding of Christianity.

Westerners tend to think in terms of "A or B"—there is only one truth, so if this side is correct, the other side must be wrong. This is a monotheistic way of

Numerous small shrines can still be seen among modern buildings in big cities.

thinking. In contrast, because of the influence of the polytheistic religion of Shinto, the Japanese tend to think in terms of "A and B." Since they are accustomed to looking for more than one truth, the Japanese find it difficult to follow the abstract thinking of monotheistic religions.

The origin of the word *kami* is not certain, but there are three types of *kami* in Shinto. First, there is the most basic *kami*. The Japanese believed that rather than being created by an absolute god, the world existed first and the *kami* appeared later. They considered that the *kami* is an incarnation of an extraordinary and superior force which is immanent within this world.

Second, people who led extraordinary and outstanding lives became *kami* after their deaths. The Japanese believe that the world of myths and the world of human beings are connected and that the world of the living and that of the dead are linked. Meiji Shrine in Tokyo, for example, is dedicated to Emperor Meiji, who contributed much to the modernization of Japan, and Togo Shrine, also in Tokyo, is dedicated to Admiral Heihachiro Togo, a hero in the 1904–05 Russo-Japanese War. There was talk during his lifetime of building a shrine for physicist Dr. Hideki Yukawa, the first Japanese to receive a Nobel Prize, but Yukawa adamantly refused, and no shrine was ever built. There are also many examples of shrines built for famous people who were wrongly accused during their lifetime, in fear that their vengeful spirit might return and cause a calamity.

Third, there is the *kami* that gives birth to and protects a community. In Japanese myths, a *kami* often creates an island or locality, or an existing guardian deity suddenly appears on the scene. Even today, most Japanese towns and villages have a shrine dedicated to a guardian deity, or *ujigami*.

Corporate shrines

Many large Japanese corporations have their own shrines, too. Corporate shrines are dedicated to either the company's founder, a deity linked with the firm's line of business, or the guardian deity of the district where the head office or factory is located. Companies use them to pray for prosperity and safety in the workplace and for memorial services for deceased employees.

Toyota Motor Corp., for example, built Hoko Shrine in the grounds of its head office. The shrine is dedicated to the guardian deity of the locality and the guardian deities of iron. On the anniversary of the company's founding, the company offers food and *sake* at the shrine and prayers are said for the safety of its workers. The Mitsubishi group of companies, meanwhile, has a shrine in Osaka dedicated to the tutelary god of Tosa (Kochi Prefecture), the birthplace of the group's founder.

Toyo Suisan Kaisha Ltd., a foodstuff manufacturer, set up a shrine at its headquarters to worship a local guardian deity in 1961, just when its sales of a staple hit product, noodles, began to pick up. When the company established three factories in Los Angeles in the United States, it built a branch shrine in each of them. Worship at the three Los Angeles shrines, which are enclosed in wire netting to prevent damage done by people of other religions, is not compulsory. Company executives from Japan often visit and pray there.

Interestingly, the Chinese character for the *sha* in *kaisha* (company) is the same as that for the *ja* in *jinja* (shrine). Originally the character meant "a place to pray for the productivity of a locality," but later it took on the meaning of "a group of like-minded people working together (around a central *kami* or spiritual force)." Essentially, a Japanese company is formed by an association of people linked together by the same spiritual force. The corporate shrine serves as a symbol of the company's spirit of full participation by its employees, with the emphasis on the group rather than the individual. Perhaps this explains why the concept of total quality control has been so successful in Japanese companies.

Tsuneo Yatagai is a critic on Japanese art and culture.