Chapter Overview

Shinto is an indigenous Japanese religion which illustrates the love for beauty in nature pervading this small country. Outside of Japan, it is common only in Hawaii and Brazil. Japanese people greatly respect artistic pleasure; thus, it comes as no surprise that this natural sensibility has shaped Shinto's artful world view, a world view that especially emphasizes the kami (the spirits) of waterfalls, rocks, trees, plants, and even families.

The goals of the chapter are these:
1. To describe the origin and major characteristics of Shinto
2. To describe three central aspects of the religion
   a) affinity with nature
   b) harmony with the spirits (kami)
   c) purification rituals
3. To illustrate some of the influence of Buddhism and Confucianism on this native religion

Origins and some distinguishing characteristics

Shinto religion is based on the reverence for the spirits of nature and the unseen world. Interestingly, Shinto does not have a known founder (unlike Jainism, Buddhism, or Confucianism), nor does it have a sacred scripture, an explicit ethical code, nor a concept of sin. Instead, it appears to have emerged from farming communities and did not need to be identified with a specific name until Buddhism spread to Japan during the sixth century C.E. After that time, this indigenous sacred way sought to distinguish itself from Buddhism. Until that necessity occurred, this sacred path was simply understood as the proper attitude with which to live one's life.

Chapter 7 outlines the three central aspects of Shinto: (1) affinity with natural beauty, (2) harmony with the spirits (kami), and (3) purification rituals. Natural beauty and symmetry have always been important in Japan. For example, historically the agricultural life of the country revolved around two important patterns of nature experiences: first, planting and harvesting, and second, the roles of the sun and elements in keeping the land productive. Mount Fuji was believed to be a sacred symbol of the divine power that forced the land up through the sea. In light of this imbued reverence for nature, an intriguing area of inquiry presents itself.

Since World War II Japan has experienced tremendous industrialization. How has modern industry changed this culture? For instance, it was not until the late nineteenth century that the Japanese language first produced a separate word for nature. How accessible is the world of nature for contemporary Japanese people? Is it still important to them?

The Shinto reverence for the natural order and the world of nature leads into the second major feature of this religion: honoring the kami. Shinto religion finds the sacred in everything. The divine is both immanent and transcendent (see Chapter 1 for a refresher on the meanings of these two terms). Kami are believed to surround us everywhere, hovering over and behind the material world. The word kami can be translated as god or spirit, but these interpretations do not say everything important. Kami can be either singular or plural in meaning. The word refers to a single essence revealed in many places. Kami is more of a quality than a being or beings. Kami keep the sun and moon and stars in motion and stir wonder and awe in humans. They can exist in rocks, trees, and other forms of nature, but also in processes such as reproduction and creative imagination. There are some eight thousand public shrines in Japan honoring the kami. Followers of Shinto are likely to have a shrine in the home where a mirror symbolizes the purity and clarity of the universe. Some households have simple, but meaningful, daily rituals which honor the kami. These spirits can also be honored by formal temple celebrations. For one's life to be lived in harmony with nature, one needs to follow the kami. The word for this process is kannagara.
A third distinguishing feature of Shinto is its beliefs in purification. Shinto has no concept of sin; rather, it teaches that evil actions can contaminate individuals by causing them to accrue impurities that poison innocence and offend the kami. This is called tsumi. To rid one's self of these impurities, Shintoism prescribes ritual washings in natural phenomena such as a waterfall or the ocean. Purification rituals are an important aspect of this sacred path.

In addition to living in affinity with natural beauty, honoring the kami, and purification rituals, Shinto is further characterized by its celebrations or festivals. These festivities are associated with the calendar year and special turning points throughout one's life. One begins four months before the birth of a baby, due to the belief that this is when the soul enters a fetus. At 32-33 days after birth, a child is taken to the family's temple for initiation. Other ages such as turning 13, first arranging one's hair as a woman at 16, marriage, becoming 61, 77, or 88, are also occasions for ritual celebrations. Seasons are also celebrated, especially New Year's.

Today, Shinto peacefully and fruitfully coexists with Buddhism and Confucianism. A Japanese person may use Shinto rituals for especially joyous occasions such as birth and marriage, but turn to these other religions for events such as funerals, or for understandings of suffering. Also today, increasing urbanization, pollution, and technological production offer fertile areas for the major tenets of Shinto to address and hopefully influence for the better.

Key Terms

kami
kannagara
tsumi
ki
oharai
Oomoton