

JAPANESE RELIGION

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Introduction Japanese culture was influenced extensively by Chinese and Korean civilization during the early years of its development. New ideas on technology, religion, language and more were well received by the ruling elites who were seeking normative structures for society. In particular, though Japan had its own religion known as Shintō, Confucianism and Buddhism found a receptive population and was widely adopted in antiquity. Ideas on statehood, law, taxation, social structures and gender were also embraced in the years before the Nara era (710-794). In spite of this, Japanese culture retained a very strong sense of identity separate from that found on the mainland. Its position as a series of islands on the edge of the vast Pacific Ocean allowed its leadership to pick and choose what elements of culture it wanted to adopt and what elements it wished to discard. Like Great Britain, the ocean protected Japanese society from the worst forms of imperialism originating on the mainland. Because of this, Japanese society shares a number of cultural markers with China and Korea, but has its own unique heritage, culture and civilization.

PREHISTORY—The Neolithic Age (10,000-2000 BCE)

Early Religion. Organized religion had not yet emerged in neolithic period Japan, but early people were nonetheless very spiritual and sought out answers to some of life's persistent questions. Given that each clan or group existed as a fairly independent unit, customs and rituals varied from place to place and throughout time. They left evidence of many and varied symbols representing spirits associated with hunting, fertility, agriculture, stars and the moon. In particular, bear skulls are known to have been carefully placed in inland pits in areas of spiritual significance. According to Nelly Naumann, one of the foremost scholars in the discipline, large-animal hunting, represented by the most fearsome predator then known in Japan, the bear, is thought to represent this important food source. In coastal areas where fishing provided much of the protein needed for subsistence, dolphin skulls have been found buried in sacred spaces. Other objects such as clay masks have also been found. Finally, among the most pervasive found in sacred pits are objects representing the female form. These objects are associated with fertility deities, the renewal of life and the safe birth of the next generation. Often accompanying the female form are representations of phalluses. For Naumann, the moon was thought to be among the most important deities because of its association with death and rebirth in Japan.

IRON AGE (1000 BCE-500 CE)

Religion. Organized religion in Japan during the iron age was still in the formative stage. It is known from the Chinese sources, in particular, the *Wei Zhi* (The History of the Wei Kingdom), that the Japanese were spiritual and sought out wisdom through divination. Iron age Japanese burned bones and then attempted to interpret them as a way of discerning spiritual direction. This assumes the presence of an interpreter, most likely a shaman or other holy man or woman. Evidence exists in the form of fired clay images of animals, frogs, the moon and the like that iron age Japanese likely followed animistic practices and were also generally superstitious. The Chinese sources indicate that when going on a long voyage, they appointed a fortune keeper, someone whose job it was to act as the spiritual presence on the trip. He was required to abstain from sexual relations, not eat meat and not even to wash for the duration of the trip. If successful, he was showered with gifts upon his return. If ill fortune befell the trip and the holy man was deemed to have not kept his vows, he could be killed. It is very likely that many Japanese, based on the connection to the Han and Wei, were aware of Confucianism and Buddhism, both of which were well-established on the mainland. However, conclusive proof that organized religion had taken hold in Japan has not yet been discovered.

POST-CLASSICAL PERIOD (500 CE-1500 CE)

Shintō. The indigenous religion of Japan is called Shintō. Shintō means the “way of the gods” and is polytheistic. Rather than worshipping one single, all powerful God, as is the case in the religions from the

Abrahamic traditions, adherents of Shintō venerate and worship many different gods (*kami*) which are reflected in the natural world. Natural wonders, old trees, waterfalls and the like are examples of objects to be venerated. Shintō has no sacred texts, no code of conduct, little concept of the afterlife and a poorly defined liturgy. Shintō provided a cosmology for Japan and introduced the sun goddess Amaterasu, the founding deity of Japan. It would be difficult to convert to Shintō if one were not Japanese. Shintō is often described as being a way of life for the Japanese, but it is not necessarily a philosophy. One can worship at a Shintō shrine or where ever objects in nature are found. Shintō is not exclusive. In fact, many Japanese are adherents of both Shintō and Buddhism.

Buddhism. Buddhism arrived in Japan in the 5th and 6th centuries (probably earlier—but documentary and archaeological evidence for this is lacking) and remains a vibrant part of the religious landscape of Japan today. There are many, many different sects of Buddhism in Japan, some of which have largely disappeared in places such as China and India—where Buddhism originated. The emerging Yamato rulers of the 7th and 8th centuries eagerly embraced Buddhism as a way to legitimize their own rule and provided funding for the building of temples and monasteries. The earliest temple complex constructed, of the Tōdaiji sect, can be found in the ancient capital city of Nara. It was the Emperor Shōmu (701-756) who is credited with the casting of the gigantic, 49ft tall statue of the Daibutsu (great Buddha) which now rests in the great hall in Nara. During this period, Buddhism was privileged in Japan, generously funded and protected by the Emperor. Temples were built all over Japan and Buddhism became institutionally linked to the throne. The Emperor Kanmu (737-806) also understood the importance of Buddhism in Japan and decided that the new capital city of Heian should have religious institutions of its own. He decided to become a patron of two new sects of Buddhism—Tendai and Shingon. Both of these organizations were later urged to ordain their own clergy (which further diminished the power of the Todaiji sect in Nara) and build complexes on the mountains near the city. Both of these sects are still prominent in Japan today. Buddhism is as important in the history of Japan as the Roman Catholic Church is to the history of Europe.

Zen Buddhism. In the absence of a strong central government, the Ashikaga period (1336-1477) is remembered for cultural and religious development. Buddhism, in particular, enjoyed a renaissance. This was, in part, because Ashikaga Takauji himself embraced Buddhism as he aged and patronized the religion by funding the building of monasteries and temples. It was the Ashikaga who illuminated the connection between the warrior ethic (*bushidō*) and Zen Buddhism. Zen (Chan in China) had a long presence in Japan, but it was (and still is) a very small sect. Zen stressed an austere lifestyle, the clearing of the mind and the total abandonment of ego. These characteristics, when internalized by soldiers, yielded a disciplined, unselfish warrior, free from worldly attachments and willing to sacrifice his life in service to his lord.

EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1500-1800 CE)

Religion. Buddhism enjoyed a renaissance during the Tokugawa era (1600-1868), but its role had changed from the Warring States Period (1477-1600). Before the reunification process began under Oda Nobunaga in 1560, Buddhist sects played a prominent role in the political milieu. Given that there was no central state and little in the way of law and order, abbots, priests and monks moved to protect their own interests and prerogatives. In order to do this, they contracted mercenaries and engaged warrior monks, both of which become a security threat in their own right. Nobunaga, however, made it one of his highest priorities to break the power of the church and to remove them from the governmental sphere. He is well known for engaging in acts of excessive brutality and viciousness against Buddhist institutions. Arson, wanton slaughter and vile acts such as the large scale burning at the stake of survivors, the total destruction of temple complexes and the like were all a part of Nobunaga's military campaigns. Buddhism thereafter returned to its more traditional role.

The Tokugawa later found Buddhism to be useful as a tool for social and cultural control. State sanction was returned to the faith. Every family had to register with the local Buddhist temple, which became a repository for recording births, deaths and marriages. It was a way for a non-governmental organization to maintain records which could be used by the state but which cost to the state very little. In a spiritual sense, adherence to the Buddhist faith was mandatory because priests were to interact with

parishioners on a yearly basis. Nonetheless, state obligation facilitated perfunctory adherence to the faith, which minimized personal observance.

Christianity. Christianity first arrived in Japan during 16th century and was very well received. Christians of all sects, Roman Catholics and Protestants, alike appeared and began to make converts among the people and among a number of powerful *daimyō*. These western missionaries and merchants also brought innovations in metallurgy and weaponry, and were willing to sell them to the highest bidder. Oda Nobunaga was an enthusiastic adopter of western military technology. The Tokugawa, however, were very suspicious of all religions other than Buddhism and the indigenous faith, Shintō. Christianity was suspect because Christians believed all authority was derived from Christ—not a secular lord. This was made manifest in the Shimabara Rebellion in 1637 in which several *daimyō* rebelled, in part, against increasingly strict rules on religion. This was the largest conflict between the Battle of Sekigahara and the battles associated with the Meiji Restoration in 1868. Christianity was then outlawed and all missionaries were expelled. Many Japanese Christians were martyred.

19th Century

The *Kokugaku*. In the decade or so after the Meiji Restoration in 1868, intellectuals, government officials, philosophers, journalists and the like began a period of great experimentation. They looked around the world for a philosophical and ideological framework to replace the Chinese Confucian system they believed had been superseded. Men such as Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835-1901), Mori Arinori (1847-1889) and Nishi Amane (1829-1897) and many, many others were active in various learned societies, published numerous articles, made speeches and debated before many different groups as public intellectuals. This was known as the “Civilization and Enlightenment” movement and though relatively short lived, was very influential but precipitated a cultural backlash. By the 1880s, many Japanese had had enough of the endless embrace of foreign ideas and believed that the period of experimentation had stripped Japanese culture of its essential nature. During this same period, a group of philosophers and intellectuals began to look backward to Japan’s ancient past and to the writings of Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801). Motoori studied works such as the *Kojiki* (8th century) and the *Man’yōshū* (759CE). Put succinctly, adherents of Motoori and the *kokugaku* came to believe that Japan and Japanese culture was the purest expression of East Asian culture. This is often described as a nativist ideology. For them, China had gotten it wrong and had strayed from the right and true path.

Many of the leaders of the Meiji Restoration had been heavily influenced by *kokugaku* ideology during the 1840s and 1850s and had temporarily strayed from its central tenants in the first decade or so of the Meiji period. However, as Japan moved into the 1880s, this ideology became ascendant. By the turn of the 20th century, it was the ideology which defined virtually all of the second series of reforms. The cult of the emperor, the state support of Shintō, the Imperial Rescript of Education, the development of *kokugo* (national language) and many other initiatives all reflect this perspective. This remained the central ideology of Japan until 1945.

Readings

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