



**HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS**

Hugvísindadeild

**Shintô's Spiritual Value to the Ancient  
and Modern Japanese**

**Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs**

**Eyjólfur Eyfells**

**September 2008**

**Háskóli Íslands**  
**Hugvísindadeild**  
**Skor þýsku og Norðurlandamála**

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## Summary

This essay will be covering the topic of Shintô, the native religion of Japan. The essay will try to explore the relationship between the Japanese people and Shintô, both in the past and present.

First there will be an introduction to Shintô followed by a comparison between Shintô and Lutheran Christianity, which is split into two sub-chapters; the first sub-chapter will compare the religious aspects of both religions and the next sub-chapter will compare the practitioners of both religions. Following is another sub-chapter explaining about the relationship between Buddhism and Shintô and how both religions have managed to synchronize. Then there will be an introduction to the teaching of kegare (impurity) and how it affects the Japanese people.

The next chapter will cover Shintô in ancient Japan. We will be exploring how Shintô was practiced during that period and how faithful the ancient Japanese were.

In the following chapter, the essay will investigate how Shintô is being practiced in modern day Japan and how it affects the modern day people of Japan. The following sub-chapter will cover the emperor of Japan and his relationship with Shintô and the Japanese people. Then in the final sub-chapter we will explore the Japanese people's attitude toward Shintô.

Then there will be a short chapter concerning future developments of Shintô and how people's attitude might change toward Shintô's spiritual value in the future.

The conclusion will include some of the author's personal feelings concerning the matter as well as summarizing the outcome of the whole essay.

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## 1. Introduction

Shintô is so fundamental in Japanese life that Shintô priest Motohisa Yamakage has said “Shintô is the consciousness underlying the Japanese mentality<sup>1</sup>, the foundation for Japanese culture and values” (13). This may be something that the general Japanese are not aware of, but when we take a closer look at things, we can see a strong relationship between Shintô and the Japanese way of thinking. Kasulis has noted that “For many Japanese, “feeling Shintô” and “feeling Japanese” are barely distinguishable” (4). That is how closely Shintô is related to the Japanese and their everyday lives. Furthermore, John K. Nelson has said that “What we today call Shintô has been at the heart of Japanese culture for almost as long as there has been a political entity distinguishing itself as Japan, or Nihon, “Land of the Sun Source”” (3). Shintô has been with the Japanese people for such a long time, which roots it strongly to the Japanese culture and mentality.

Nonetheless, how do Japanese people feel about Shintô’s spiritual<sup>2</sup> value<sup>3</sup> in today’s society? How did they feel about it in the past? What role did Shintô play in the past and what changes have taken place? This essay will try to elucidate the answer to these questions.

Many Icelandic readers may not be familiar with Shintô, so in order to prepare the Icelander for the latter part of the essay, there will be an introduction to Shintô. Explaining what Shintô is in a concrete way, is not an easy task as there is no single

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<sup>1</sup> a habitual or characteristic mental attitude that determines how you will interpret and respond to situations

<sup>2</sup> of, concerned with, or affecting the soul

<sup>3</sup> liking or affection

definition of it. However, the essay will explain about the fundamentals of Shintô. We will be looking at some of the basic aspects of Shintô, such as the teaching of kegare (impurity) and the connection between Shintô and Buddhism. The essay will also compare Shintô with the national Icelandic religion, Lutheran Christianity<sup>4</sup>, which will give the Icelander a better understanding of what Shintô is.

For that reason, the author found it most logical to cover the introduction of Shintô first, and then move in a chronological order from the past to present, as well as make a short prediction of its future developments.<sup>5</sup>

## **2. What is Shintô?**

Shintô is the indigenous religion of Japan. It is the traditional folk religion of Japan, which has been handed down from parents to children for generations through the customary *Matsuri* (festival or reverence) (Hirano 1). Shintô developed on the Japanese archipelago. According to professor Thomas P. Kasulis:

Shintô was not simply a direct import from the Asian mainland but developed its character within the Japanese cultural and geographical context. In short: as a religion, Shintô is undeniably of and by the Japanese people. (38)

Since Shintô was developed by the Japanese people and is the oldest religion of Japan, it has been the religious foundation for the Japanese people since ancient times.

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<sup>4</sup> Throughout the essay, Christianity will be a reference to Lutheran Christianity in Iceland

<sup>5</sup> This essay uses MLA style reference

According to Nelly Delay, “It was not until the 3rd century that a primitive form of Shintô began to emerge... People’s strength and fears come from nature and Shintô, which is an expression of that relationship, is bound up with the deepest roots of humanity” (19). Taking that into account, one could expect that the relationship between the Japanese people and Shintô would be strong. Therefore, exploring Shintô is in many ways exploring the Japanese mindset. Instead of exploring only Shintô or only the Japanese mentality, the essay will try to examine Shintô and how it has affected the Japanese people.

Harris explains the meaning of the word “Shintô” quite well, “Shintô is composed of two ideograms, one for kami [the Japanese ideogram 神] and one for ‘the Way’ [道]. It has been translated as The Way of the Gods, although opinions are divided over whether Shintô is a religion at all...” (14). Indeed, it is quite arguable whether Shintô is a religion or not, since it is so different from the other major religions. Yamakage points out that it is “often considered non-religion by Japanese scholars as well as foreign intellectuals” (52). However, he also comments that “What [Shintô] does have are ambiguous characteristics like sympathy and silent experience” (52). Some people “say that Shinto is just old Japanese manners and customs” (36). This is true in some ways, for example reverence towards one’s ancestors, respect and gratitude towards nature as well as various customs that are interlinked between Shintô and the Japanese culture, which will be covered in a later chapter. Yamakage claims that “Shinto, however, certainly has its own way of thinking and feeling as well as its own distinctive world view that cannot be adequately contained within the western concept of religion” (37). The essay will also cover this topic later when it compares the religious aspects of Shintô with Christianity.

Japanese people who are asked whether they are religious or not, will usually provide negative answer even though they might have visited a Shintô shrine few hours before being asked. One reason for their answer might be due to the fact that the ideograms composing the word ‘religion’, indicates sects and doctrines as shû 宗 can be translated as “sect” and kyô 教 as “doctrine”. The average Japanese person might not have anything to do with sects or doctrines and in that sense, their answer of not being religious is accurate (Nelson 8). What the general Icelander considers to be a religion differs from the Japanese notion of the concept. In the next section, let us compare Christianity, the national religion of Iceland, with Shintô.

## **2.1 Shintô and Christianity**

### **2.1.1 Comparing the Practitioners of Both Religions**

The information in this chapter is mostly knowledge from the author’s personal experience from being brought up as a Christian Lutheran and from what the author has read and studied about Shintô as well as having lived in Japan for about one year. The chapter will begin by comparing Christianity and Shintô in everyday lives of the Icelanders and Japanese respectively.

Let us begin by looking at a comparison between the Shintôists’ visits to shrines with Christians’ visits to churches. Like Christians, Shintôists’ faith and devotion varies from person to person. A devoted Icelandic Christian might visit his/her local church every Sunday morning. He/she might also visit his/her church during special occasions



such as baptism, weddings, funerals, Christmas time and Easter to name the most common examples. In a similar fashion, the devoted Shintôist might visit his/her shrine everyday on his/her way to work to offer a short prayer or to offer his/her respect to the shrine and the kami. The Shintôist, like the Christian, also visits his/her shrine during special occasions such as festivals or New Years eve. The noticeable difference here is the frequency of the visits. It would seem that the Shintôist visits his/her shrine more often than his/her Christian counterpart visits his/her church. For example, the Shintôist might visit his/her shrine every morning on his/her way to work. He/she would usually only make a short visit at the shrine. While it is quite rare for Icelandic Christians to stop by at their church everyday on their way to work. Then again, in many cases the Christian spends a longer time at his/her church than the Shintôist at his/her shrine. It might also be possible to compare the short visits that the Shintôist makes everyday to his/her shrine, to the Christian's morning prayers which he/she also conducts everyday.

Generally, the Christian will listen to his/her priest's sermons. The Shintôist might not have the opportunity to listen to his/her Shintô priest's guidance, especially since Shintô does not have any formal teachings or doctrines. The few occasions that the Shintôist might have the opportunity to listen to his/her priest's guidance or stories, would be during festivals or special invitations when the priest is explaining about a certain festival or ritual.

The duty for the devoted Shintôist would include monetary offerings to his shrine, promoting his shrine by spreading leaflets, offering cleaning services at his/her shrine to name but a few ways to be of service. The Christian community receives funds from the government in Iceland so Christians do not have to make personal donations. In Japan,

however, laws demand the separation of state and religion so the shrines generally depend on voluntary donations.

Concerning baptism in Shintô, it may differ from shrine to shrine but generally it does not exist, at least not in the same way that Baptism occurs in Christianity. Donald Richie comments that “When a Japanese is born, the local Shintô shrine is usually notified; when a Japanese dies, a priest from a Buddhist temple often officiates” (64). However, in Christianity the Christian minister performs both roles, baptizing and officiating at funerals. We can see that people are born into Shintô or belong to the family’s traditional Shintô shrine without having to go through an official baptism even though the parents might bring their newborn child to a Shintô shrine to receive a blessing (Hama, kaji, and Rice 39). This might be a point the Japanese people do not think much about. For example they might visit Shintô shrines without giving much consideration to whether they are labeled “Shintôist” or not. The Christians on the other hand are baptized and are better aware of their religious orientation. As mentioned earlier, the Japanese people may not consider themselves religious even though they might visit Shintô shrines. On the other hand, Christians who visit their church every week would most likely consider themselves to be religious. Even Christians who do not visit their church every week might also consider themselves to be religious.

Most Icelanders are baptized before the age of 1 so they do not have a choice regarding that. However, Christian teenagers at the age of 13 have a choice of whether to receive confirmation or not. Overall, it could be said that baptism or membership into Christianity is more formal and important than in Shintô. In the next section, let us look at a theological comparison between Shintô and Christianity.

### 2.1.2 Comparing the Religious Aspects

Some Westerners might consider Shintô to be rooted from the chronicles *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki*. However, when one looks closely this is not the case. While the *Nihonshoki* was written for the Chinese elite, the *Kojiki* was written for the native Japanese (Kasulis 82). In spite of that, the Japanese people do not generally read these texts. One would expect that if the sacred texts played a large role in their society, the Japanese people would memorize some of the text or use slogans from it, as is popular in other religions such as Christianity's "Love thy neighbor as thyself" (Kasulis 73). Also, in Christianity there is one absolute God, Father in Heaven. One would therefore expect that most shrines would be dedicated to the highest god in Shintô, Amaterasu. On the other hand, we find out that this is not the case (Kasulis 73). Even though the main Shintô shrine, Ise-Jingu, is dedicated to Amaterasu, most shrines are dedicated to various other kami, for example about 30% of the shrines are dedicated to the kami of rice, Inari. There are innumerable kami (Delay 20) but to name a few examples, shrines can be dedicated to the kami of good fortune, or the kami which gives protection to students during examinations etc.

Moreover, the term kami does not only cover the gods and goddesses, but also anything awe-inspiring (Kasulis 72-73). In fact, the word "kami" spans a broad range of subjects. Nelson K. puts it this way: "Then suddenly it dawned on me – so this is what Shintô holds as divine! Not a text or dubious miracles or what someone maybe said or a particular structure but the actual phenomena of the world itself" (26). Ancestors or lost ones from wars can also be considered as being kami (Richie 64). Their souls (tama)

would then join the main ancestor soul when they pass away. This is true of those who are inaugurated at the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo, who are considered to be kami (Kasulis 144). Aidan Rankin comments that “Kami are sometimes gods, but even they cannot be pinned down by Western definitions of this term” (30).

Hence, there is no one accurate translation of the word ‘kami’. In connection to the word kami, it is interesting to mention that the ancient people of Iceland and even some modern Icelandic people believe in nature spirits. They are called the hidden people and elves and they live in rocks and in nature (Icelandic: “huldufólk” and “álfar”). This ancient Icelandic belief can be compared to the ancient Japanese belief of the kami residing in nature.

Since there are different levels and types of kami, it is considered from a Western point of view that Shintô is a polytheistic religion. Within the range of all the kami, there exists a sophisticated hierarchy and as mentioned earlier, Amaterasu is the highest kami (Yamakage 212).

In connection to this, even mountains can be referred to as kami. For example, you may climb up a mountain and notice a gate (*torii*) but no shrine. That is because the mountain itself is considered to be the kami (Kasulis 20). According to Harris, “human beings, birds, animals, trees, plants, mountains, oceans, all may be kami” (14). From this, we can see that Shintô is more of a belief in nature than a belief in scriptures and holy texts, such as Christianity.

Shintô does not teach about absolute sin. Instead, Shintô teaches us to lead cheerful and pure lives. It regards life as the journey to happiness, rather than being overly worried about doctrines. Shintô teaches us that we can all become like kami, or

god-like. To achieve that, all we need to do is polish our soul and personality through spiritual practices (Yamakage 127, 149).

Like Kasulis, Yamakage has pointed out that the Western conception of a religion typically consists of “a founder, a doctrine, precepts or commandments, and objects of worship, such as symbols or idols.” However, Shintô does not include any of the mentioned above (37).

Yamakage also mentions that Jean Herbert, a former professor at the University of Geneva, met over one thousand Shintô priests and Shintôists. Herbert noted that each one of them spoke in a different way about Shintô (40). This situation would be hard to imagine for Christian priests, who would be expected to answer in a similar way.

## **2.2 Shintô and Buddhism**

When speaking of religions in Japan, it is not possible to deny that Shintô was influenced by Buddhism after it was introduced to Japan. Unlike Buddhism, Shintô developed in the Japanese islands and was not brought from abroad. Harry Cook comments that when Buddhism was first introduced to Japan in the early 6th century there was some struggle between the Buddhist Soga clan and the Mononobe and Nakatomi clans (the Nakatomi clan had priests of Shintô cults). However, Cook points out that “the form of Buddhism that reached Japan was tolerant of other religions, and relations between the old and new religions soon settled into peaceful co-existence” (17). In some contexts, it is difficult to separate the two religions.

During the Edo period (1600-1867) men such as Norinaga Motoori (1730-1801) started to define Shintô as being a specific religion to the Japanese. Then around 1870s, the government allowed the legal separation between Shintô and Buddhism, known as the Meiji policy. Before that, Japanese religious culture had been strongly influenced by Buddhism (Breen and Teeuwen 4). It is interesting to note that in 1926, Genchi Katô wrote:

While intrinsically national in itself [Shintô] has, at different times, assimilated spiritualistic nourishment in the form of Confucian ethics and Buddhist philosophy, and today it stands, stronger perhaps than ever before, inseparably interwoven in the national life of the Japanese race. (ii)

So we can see that even though Shintô was influenced by these other Asian religions, it had become an independent religion with strong influences on the Japanese people. Even though “today, few Japanese are purely Shintoists, but most will observe Shinto rituals alongside Buddhist practices” (Thiro 22).

In a survey, over 90% of Japanese consider themselves to be Shintôist and at the same time, about 80% also consider themselves to be Buddhist (Kasulis 28). Even though Shintô can fulfil the role of a funeral rite if the need arises, it is more likely that the Japanese would prefer a Buddhist funeral. Moreover, Yoshio Sugimoto reports that “A number of Japanese families have both a household Shintô shrine and a Buddhist altar” (255). Hence, showing us the double aspectual faith of most Japanese people.

Paul Varley gives us a good explanation of why the two religions have intermingled:

Another reason why the Japanese throughout the ages have with little or no difficulty considered themselves to be both Shintoists and Buddhists is that the doctrines of the two religions complement each other so neatly. Shinto expresses a simple and direct love of nature and its vital reproductive forces, and regards death simply as one of many kinds of defilement. Buddhism, on the other hand, is concerned with life's interminable suffering and seeks to guide living beings on the path to enlightenment. It is fitting that even today in Japan the ceremonies employed to celebrate such events as birth and marriage are Shinto, whereas funerals and communion with the dead are within the purview of Buddhism. (22)

In Buddhism, there is the notion of karma which follows the law of cause and effect. Hence, bad deeds will result in bad consequences and good deeds in favourable results. Similarly, Shintô teaches about the act of becoming impure (kegare) and once impure, there is a need to purify (misogi). In the next section, the essay will touch on the subject of kegare since it is important to the Japanese mentality.

### **2.3 Kegare**

As mentioned above, the teaching of kegare is an important aspect of Shintô. Kegare, or impurities as it would be translated into English, may have influenced the

Japanese way of thinking. According to Kasulis, “forbidden behaviour brings about impurity, pollution, or defilement. Kegare denotes something offensive to be cleansed” (47). However, kegaré differs considerably from the Christian notion of sin. Kasulis further comments, “if death and menstruation are examples of defilement, or [kegaré], we can see how wrong is the common translation of “[kegaré]” as “sin”, “crime”, or even “offence”. Death and menstruation are not intentional acts; indeed they are not even avoidable” (48). Therefore it is not possible to compare kegaré with sin.

If one becomes polluted, the best thing to do is to receive purification (*misogi*) which can include water, salt, or fire. Water is the most common way of purification (Kasulis 50). Rankin notes that “In Shinto, spiritual purity is associated with physical cleanliness, and is expressed in the rituals termed *misogi*, which range from hand-washing before invoking *kami*, to mass bathing in lakes, rivers or the sea” (31). According to Yuki-taka Yamamoto, another way of purifying is to stand under ice-cold waterfalls during winter (Evans, xii).

Salt is also a common way of purification in daily Japanese life. Let us take a few examples; some Japanese people use salt to purify their houses after attending a funeral (which is considered to bring defilement as death is associated with impurity). They also place small amount of salt in front the house entrance. Another good example is Sumô wrestlers’ use of salt which they throw around the ring before they begin their match. This is done to purify the area where the match will take place.

Let us now look at an example concerning purification with fire. During ancient times women gave birth in a small house separated from the main house. As birth was considered impure, the small house was then later burned in order to purify the place.



Like Rankin, Conrad Schirokauer comments that the impurities could be perceived as physical. He adds “This concern for ritual cleanliness, noted by the Chinese chroniclers, probably explains the great importance the Japanese have always attached to the bath” (15). So the Chinese scholars who visited Japan during ancient times had already noticed the Japanese passion for cleanliness.

In relation to this, it is worth mentioning a part of the creation story which appears in *Kojiki*. According to the myth, Izanagi (Male Who Invites) and Izanami (Female Who Invites) are the couple deities that created the Japanese islands. Izanami dies while giving birth to the kami of fire. In search of his wife, Izanagi travels to the world of Yomi (underworld) only to find his spouse being devoured by maggots. Izanami then becomes angry that her husband has seen her in such a humiliating condition. She then follows and tries to drag Izanagi to the realm of death but he manages to escape. After this incident, Izanagi purifies the defilements by bathing in a river (Rankin 31). So we can see how the notion of kegare (impurity) and misogi (purification) has existed for at least more than 1300 years. From this sub-chapter we can see that this concept of kegare as it is defined in Shintô, both affected the ancient Japanese mentality and the modern Japanese as well.

In the next chapter we will be traveling into the past to take a closer look at how Shintô was practiced during ancient times.

### **3. Ancient Shintô**

The strong relationship of the Japanese people with Shintô since ancient times, can be seen from the following account:

The traditional Japanese way of life has always been closely intertwined with the practices of Shinto, which appeared millennia ago as a body of acts and rituals to spiritually connect the ancient people to their intimate and natural world, to understand it and define their place in it. (Hymas, Simmons, and Vilhar 106)

As expressed in this beautiful quote, Shintô has been close to the Japanese people for a very long time though people's view on Shintô has changed overtime. This chapter will try to investigate how Shintô was practiced in olden times and what value it had for the ancient people of Japan. There is no way of knowing exactly how much value the ancient people placed on Shintô's spirituality. On the other hand, we can investigate some factors that indicate the level of their faith.

How Shintô originated from the beginning is still unknown since we do not have written accounts from earlier than 700 A.D. Kasulis points out that "we have some archaeological data, some modern anthropologically accessible practices suggestive of patterns that might have originated in this early period, and a smattering of cryptic accounts by Chinese visitors to the Japan of that time" (74). So there are some ways of predicting or theorizing about the faith of the ancients from such an early account.

According to Harris "Religious beliefs in Japan had developed from many sources. Prehistoric shamanistic practices are believed to be the origin of much Shintô belief and ritual" (12). This is one indicator of the closeness between the Japanese, Shintô and nature, as shamanism is closely connected to nature. For example, Sandra Ingerman reasons that "Shamanism teaches us that everything that exists is alive and has a spirit,

and that we are joined with the earth and all of life via our spiritual interconnectedness”

(8). So we can see that Shamanism and Shintôism have some things in common.

Moreover, Sadao and Wada comment that “The native religion of Japan, Shinto, honored the sacred and awe-inspiring forces of nature through rituals conducted at sacred sites

(30). Hence, giving us more clues about the connection between Shintô and nature.

While on the topic of nature, Japan is an island of Earthquakes, typhoons and other natural disasters. Kasulis has pointed out that “in such a context, the prehistoric Japanese people likely believed in capricious forces needing appeasement – and this, in turn, probably led to rites directed to the nature, related kami” (76). We can expect that the Japanese’ belief in Shintô was quite strong, since they believed that by worshipping the gods correctly, they themselves could lead peaceful and happy lives.

The Jômon people (12.500 – 300 B.C.) seem to have lived peaceful lives with enough resources to survive fairly easily. ‘Richard Pearson has referred to them as “affluent foragers”’ (qtd. in Schirokauer 7). Therefore it is possible that the close relationship between the Japanese people and nature was developing during this period. They felt gratitude and respect towards nature (Harris 14).

Archaeological evidence from this period point to clanlike groups called *uji* and it is considered that each clan had it’s own guardian god (*ujigami*). These “hunter-gatherer groups lived in caves and pits on the hillsides” (Kasulis 75). So we can already see a link from these ancient people to Shintô.

The people of ancient Japan were more dependent on agricultural products and for that reason, their faith in the kami of rice, Inari, would have been stronger in the past than in the present. Still, some modern day people worship Inari in order to succeed in

business (Rankin 30). So there is still connection between the mentality of the ancients to the mentality of the modern Japanese people regarding Shintô's spiritual value. The ancients wanted their crops to bear rice and the modern day people want to succeed in business. Both seek the benefit of the Inari kami.

In ancient times as well as present, weapon making was and still is related to Shintô. The swordsmiths had a Shintô shrine dedicated to the kami of fire at their place for forging the swords. The way they made the swords was also done in the ideal Shintô way, which is: "cleanliness, respect for materials, adherence to tradition and selfless attitude to work" (Harris 66). Andrew Jordan went to Japan to study swordmaking. He remarks that "Historically swordmaking in Japan, from the earliest times, was situated within – and controlled by – Shinto temples" (25). He further comments that "In Japan, swords are not merely weapons, they represent much more than that. The making of the steel, forging of the blade and the different parts of a sword, were closely linked to Shinto temples. There was, historically, a strong link between the swordsmith and the deities who helped in the development and production of a sacred item" (25).

According to Philip Harper, "Sake brewing is intimately involved with Shinto beliefs, and all breweries have shrines or altars for the sake divinity (77). Hence, we can see that since ancient times, the Japanese have maintained the custom of keeping Shintô shrines at breweries along with the tradition of keeping shrines at weapon forges.

Another hint of how strong the faith of the ancients was, can be seen from the Shintô shrines that were constructed during ancient times. For example, Ise shrine, Izumo shrine, Tsurugaoka Hachiman-gū, Fushimi Inari-taisha, Iwashimizu Shrine and one could continue to count endlessly.

An old, beautiful, yet tragic poem written by Yamanoue Okura (ca. 660-733)  
gives us a picture of how an ancient desperate man turns to his gods during his son's fatal  
illness:

...

Blowing hard, a sudden crosswind

Of illness

Overwhelmed [my son].

Lacking in skill and knowing no cure,

With white hemp I tied my sleeves,

Took my mirror in my hand

And, lifting up my eyes,

To the gods in heaven I prayed;

My brow laid on the ground,

I did reverence to the gods of the earth.

'Be he ill or be he well,

It is in your power, O gods.'

Thus I clamoured in my prayers.

...

Yet the child I held so tight

Has flown beyond my clasp.

Is this the way of the world? (Henshall 25-26)

This seems to indicate a strong faith in the kami of the ancient people. Possibly stronger faith than it is today. So it is possible to assume that the ancient Japanese people placed more emphasis on Shintô's spiritual value during this period compared to modern day Japanese. In other words, the ancient people were more spiritual.

If we take this conclusion into a broad context by considering how the spirituality of other civilizations developed, we might notice a similar evolution. For example, the ancient civilizations of Latin America were most likely more spiritual than present day people of the same continent. In many ways, the evolution might have been global. Perchance, the spiritual value of ancient religions has been in decline on an international scale? It is an interesting question, but it would be too complex to cover this essay.

In the next chapter, let us investigate how Shintô is developing in contemporary Japan.

#### **4. Modern Shintô**

Due to excessive materialism following the post-World War II period, many Japanese people have forgotten about Shintô's spirituality. Ayako Jindai points out that "only after the Second World War did materialism evolve into something that seemed greater than life itself" (Hibi 6). So it is possible to assume that the Japanese people were becoming rather materialistic. In addition to that, State-Shintô was used to boost the war efforts and nationalism, which may be another cause for many people straying away from Shintô. Still, there is no denying that even today, Shintô plays a large role in the lives of the Japanese people. To take an example, Yamakage points out that "Charm cards are

issued to give confidence to those taking examinations, for instance, or to give drivers a psycho-spiritual defense against the dangers of the road” (11). There are Shintô festivals and rituals to which most Japanese people attend. For example; the Coming of Age ritual for twenty-year-olds, the autumn harvest festival, New Years Festival, Setsubun festival, the rituals for 3-5-7 years old, Shintô weddings and the blessings of construction sites etc. Parents also take their newborn babies to Shintô shrines (boys usually 22 days after birth and girls 23 days after birth) (Ito, Miki, and Yoro 221).

Harris points out that many arts in Japan have been strongly influenced by Shintô. These include “sumô wrestling, yabusame (mounted archery), kyûdô (archery), kendô (swordplay) and masked drama including Noh” (61).

Another interesting factor concerning the relationship between the Japanese and Shintô, is the similarity between the Japanese culture and the rituals of Shintô, which can be quite strict in form. Donald L. Philippi notes that “the official – one almost has to say bureaucratic – nature of the rituals determines their diction to a great extent” (1). This is also true of Japanese society which is generally labeled rather bureaucratic and firm.

There are currently two main universities that train men and women to become Shintô priests, Kokugakuin University in Tokyo and Kôgakkan University in Ise, Mie prefecture (Breen and Teeuwen 1). Kokugakuin University was founded in 1882 and has been the leading university of government-sponsored movements, particularly State-Shintô ideology. It not only offers scholarships of Shintô, priestly training, and cooperative efforts with the government regarding a number of conservative political agendas, but it also offers a variety of undergraduate courses. Kôgakkan University is the second most important university in becoming a Shintô priest (Nelson 258). We can see

that Shintô priests are still being trained to perform the various tasks that await them in the present day Japanese society.

#### **4.1 The Emperor and Shintô**

When talking about modern Shintô, one cannot leave out the emperor, since respect toward the emperor, could also be interpreted as reverence toward Shintô, as the emperor is the chief priest of Shintô.

How deeply the Japanese people respect the emperor can be seen from the fact, that in 1989 the government spent almost \$73 million on late Emperor Showa's funeral. The government then went on to spend \$90 million on the inauguration procedures for his son (Nelson 4). Such amount of money would not have been spent, unless there was great reverence for the emperor.

Further reverence for the emperor can be seen from John Gillespie's report: "there are many Shintô shrines deeply related to the imperial family. A typical example is Ise Shrine, established in the early part of the Yamato era" (16).

Kasulis points out that in the *Nihonshoki* and *Kojiki*, it is explained that if you are Japanese, you are directly connected to the kami and are therefore the kami's descendant. As the emperor or empress is a direct descendant of the kami Amaterasu, you are absolutely bound by allegiance to the emperor/empress if you are Japanese (90). Harry Cook points out that "before World War II", the importance attached to the cult of the divine emperor meant that scepticism towards the myth of his divine ancestry was considered tantamount to disloyalty. (Even today, some conservative Japanese revere the



emperor as a semi-divine being)” (8). Sadly, this is something that was used at the end of the 19th- and beginning of the 20th century when Japan was militarizing. It helps us to better understand the mentality of the kami-kaze pilots, whom some considered, gave their lives for the emperor (Kasulis 111). Nelson interviewed a Shintô priest who gave the following account:

‘I was in training as a kamikaze pilot when the war ended. I was ready to send my plane into a ship that perhaps your father was on – isn’t that incredible to think about now? Well, I was absolutely devastated that the war ended and I was unable to give my life in the service of the emperor, but I guess I was meant for other things.’ (57)

It is important to look at the historical significance of the word “kami-kaze” in order to deepen our understanding of the Japanese mentality related to Shintô:

On August 12, 1281, the second wave of Kublai Khan’s armada arrived and the Mongol forces combined for the final attack. The Japanese realized that the courage of the samurai would not be enough to prevent such a huge army landing and, in desperation, ex-Emperor Kameyama sent a special envoy to the shrine at Ise to ask his divine ancestress, the Sun Goddess Amaterasu, for her assistance.

It seems that the petition found favour in Amaterasu’s eyes for, on August 15, 1281, a powerful wind blew up, which lasted for two days and wreaked terrible destruction upon the Mongol fleet. When this ‘kami-kaze’ (‘divine wind’) had

blown itself out, the samurai attacked the survivors and successfully defeated the Mongol invasion.

...

The experience of the divine wind did much to strengthen the Japanese in their belief that they enjoyed divine protection. This belief was to endure throughout Japan's later history, even into modern times. It was invoked as a rallying cry for anti-Western samurai in the 19th century; and during World War II, it inspired the conception of the notorious kami-kaze suicide raids. (Cook 59)

This account might help to deepen our understanding of why the kami-kaze pilots were willing to give their lives for the emperor. The above text seems to indicate that it was because of their devotion to the emperor followed by strong belief in Shintô and the protection granted by the highest deity of Shintô, Amaterasu.

#### **4.2 The Japanese View on Shintô**

We can see how extensively the Japanese people are affected by Shintô. But how do the modern Japanese feel about Shintô?

To take an example, Kasulis has performed numerous investigations by interviewing people who stop at Shintô shrines. The questions and answers were usually in the following way:

“Why did you stop at the shrine?”

“I almost always stop on the way to work.”

“Yes, but why? Was it to give thanks, to ask a favour, to repent, to pay homage, to avoid something bad from happening? What was your purpose?”

“I don’t really know. It was nothing in particular.”

“Well, then, when you stood in front of the shrine with your palms together, what did you say, either aloud or silently to yourself?”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“Did you call on the name of the kami to whom the shrine is dedicated?”

“I’m not really sure which kami it is”. (28)

Thus, there was no concrete feeling such as asking for protection or a divine favour etc. They did not even know the name of the kami to whom the shrine was dedicated. We can therefore presume that most of the people that Kasulis interviewed probably visited the shrine because it was their custom to do so.

Many foreigners visiting Japan, are impressed by the lively Shintô festivals presented there. Some of the foreigners are curious and ask “what is the meaning of all this?”. The answer from their Japanese counterparts is usually “we are doing this because we have always done this – this is our ancestral tradition” or “we are supposed to do this,” without any further explanations (Yamakage 37). This would indicate the Japanese people are not holding these festivals because of their strong faith in the kami nor in order to receive blessings which might have been the case with the ancient Japanese. Rather, they hold these festivals as a custom and to maintain tradition.

In a similar fashion, Icelanders might be celebrating Christmas and Easter without having extensive knowledge about the religious origins of the events. So it could be said that generally both the Japanese and Icelanders have a rather shallow knowledge about the festivals or special occasions. For example, the average Icelander might know that Christmas is being held to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. While to some Japanese people, New Years festival is being held to offer gratitude to Toshi-gami-sama (Kami of years) because they consider the year as a gift from this kami (Nelson 80).

Some Shintô priests are worried about the present condition and feel that the general public has moved away from Shintô's spirituality. For example, Nelson interviewed a woman Shintô priest who noted that:

‘If I could change something about Shintô – whether it’s the shrine at Aino or Nagasaki or wherever – I’d like to somehow restore the presence of the Kami to a more direct feeling or contact. It seems that people feel the Kami is something far away, that they have to go to a shrine or be at the family altar before they can share things with the deities. But for me, I think it’s a fundamental part of Shintô to have a sense that the Kami is with you, so that if something happens or you need guidance, you can communicate with it immediately, wherever you are. This closeness to the Kami is something our modern civilization and society have completely lost.’ (129)

It is evident that this woman Shintô priest wants the Japanese people to become more spiritually oriented and come into closer contact with the kami as mentioned above.

Shintô priest Yamakage has also expressed concerns about the present situation of Shintô in Japan. He notes that “at Ise, the most important Shintô shrine in Japan, it is considered problematic if the priest has faith” (24). How can the general public value Shintô’s spirituality, if the priests have no faith?

## **5. Possible Future Developments of Shintô**

How Shintô might develop in the future is hard to determine but we do have some clues which might help us to predict where Shintô is heading. Ayako Jindai gives us some understanding about the spirituality of contemporary Japanese people in the following account:

Since the early 1980s, tranquility and comfort, concepts that echo man’s inner needs, have been replacing such common concerns as progress and efficiency. This change in values from the material to the spiritual, which is evident throughout Japan, demonstrates a weariness with placing progress ahead of all else. (Hibi 6)

From this quote, we can see that the recent trend has been to move away from materialism and into the direction of spirituality. It is therefore possible that Shintô will play a more important role in the future as more Japanese people will come to value Shintô’s spirituality. In connection to this aspect, Yamakage makes an important statement:

In our troubled modern era, materialism is the dominant force, and so talk of the invisible world, the realm of the spirit, is not always well received. Shinto, however, would not be complete without this aspect of mystery. There is much evidence, especially in supposedly advanced societies such as Japan and the West, of a growing dissatisfaction with the purely material and the narrowly rational, and a resulting hunger for the mysterious coupled with a desire to reconnect with the spiritual realm. As an evolving, organic system of spiritual values, Shinto is well equipped to satisfy these basic human needs. (12)

If we take this into account, it is indeed quite possible that many people will turn to Shinto in order to quench their spiritual thirst.

Another interesting point is the idea of Shintô spreading to other countries in the future. Shintô has already spread to some countries. Rankin points out that Shintô priest Motohisa Yamakage (mentioned earlier) has been able to pass his knowledge to foreign students. He notes that:

This has led to the founding of the Japanese Dutch Shinzen Foundation in Amsterdam, which seeks to create a Shinto relevant to Europeans, without compromising its essence or severing it from its Japanese roots. And Japan's Tsubaki Jinja (shrine) has a flourishing offshoot on the West Coast of America at Granite Falls, Washington. (32)

If Shintô continues to develop in this way, it might spread to other countries as well. It will be interesting to observe how it will develop in the future.

## **6. Conclusion**

Looking at the whole essay, we can see that Shintô has had to go through ups and downs with the Japanese people. The strong faith of the ancients was preserved, in one form or another, right up until the end of the Second World War which then brought great turmoil and confusion to the people of Japan. Most Japanese then turned to materialism but it is the author's hope and belief that the Japanese people will once again turn to Shintô and come to look at the emperor, the chief priest of Shintô, as their role-model in their practice of Shintô.

It is the author's belief that the present day Japanese people have become too materialistic. For that reason, they need to place more emphasis on Shintô's spiritual value and look up to the faith of the ancient Japanese concerning that matter. The author is not implying that the Japanese people should abandon materialism entirely. What the author is implying, is the positive synchronization of materialism with Shintô's spiritual value, as both could benefit from each other.

This essay comes to the conclusion that materialism has affected the modern Japanese' view on Shintô's spiritual value, and that Shintô's spiritual value has decreased since ancient times. It also comes to the conclusion that there might be a change in the close future since more people are seeking spirituality.

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