

## Component 2, Part 3

### Centripetal Forces in Japan: The Shinto religion

The indigenous Japanese religion of Shinto is another centripetal force in Japan. It is tied to the natural landscape as well as to the Japanese sense of identity (Gerbert, 2001). Doctrine and creed are not as significant in Shinto as practice. Shinto claims over 106,000,000 followers out of a population of 127,900,000 (Swanson, 2006).



**Figure 6:** The Heian Shrine commemorates the founding of the city of Kyoto.

**Source:** Alice Tym



**Figure 7:** The Yasaka shrine in Kyoto is lighted at night by lanterns. This shrine is considered the guardian shrine of the Gion, the entertainment and geisha district of Kyoto.

**Source:** Alice Tym

Shinto is the "Way of the *Kami*." *Kami* are Japan's revered spirits. Shintoism glorifies the principle of life and the principle of the Japanese nation. There are over 80,000 Shinto shrines (*jinja*) across Japan (Figures 6 and 7). The following website has excellent photos of Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples listed by historical periods: <http://www.art-and-archaeology.com/japan/japan.html>. They form part of the cultural landscape and are a constant reminder of the presence of the *kami* in the everyday life of the Japanese. *Kami* are believed to inhabit particular features of nature, such as trees and waterfalls. Religion was not separate from the secular in early Japan because the *kami* lived among the people and were unique to their

islands (Gerbert, 2001).



**Figure 8:** This parade in Kyoto features Heian Period costumes.  
**Source:** Alice Tym

The introduction of Buddhism in the 6th Century substantially added to the religious landscape. However, Buddhism did not displace Shintoism which had prior strong geographic ties within society and contributed to the Japanese sense of place. Festivals, (*matsuri*) which traditionally allowed the Japanese to communicate with the divine, were frequent and continue to be significant social affairs in cities and towns throughout Japan ([Figure 8](#)).



**Figure 9:** The famous torii gate, located in the water off the coast of Miyajima island, is the entrance to the Itsukushima shrine which dates from the sixth century. Miyajima is located in Hiroshima Bay in Southern Honshu.  
**Source:** Alice Tym

Shinto shrines dot the Japanese cultural landscape. The distinctive *torii* gate marks the entrance to a shrine and the shrine itself may contain art as well as ritual objects ([Figure 9](#)).



**Figure 10:** Water is available for cleansing at the entrance to many Shinto shrines.  
**Source:** Alice Tym



**Figure 11:** Young Japanese woman at the shrine basin.  
**Source:** Alice Tym

Visitors wash their hands and faces before entering the sacred spaces as a symbol of purification ([Figures 10 and 11](#)). Worshipers pull on a long cord to ring a bell to arouse the kami ([Figure 12](#)). For most of the archipelago's inhabitants, Shinto is an integral part of Japanese culture. Another useful website on Shintoism and shrines is <http://www.japan-guide.com/e/e3903.html>.



**Figure 12:** This young Japanese woman in a kimono prays at the Yasaka Shinto shrine in Kyoto.  
**Source:** Alice Tym

### **Note To Teacher**

Students should compare and contrast the US and Japan's sacred spaces understanding that Japan's Shintoism has natural sacred spaces as well as man-made shrines. Entrances, colors, and furniture of shrines may be compared to those of cathedrals and synagogues.

### **References**

Gerbert, Elaine, "Visualizing Nature in Japan," *Education About Asia*, Volume 6, Number 2, Fall, 2001.  
Swanson, Paul L. and Clark Chilson. 2006. *Nanzan Guide to Japanese Religions*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

### **Additional Resources**

The following website illustrates Shinto terms and elements: <http://www.onmarkproductions.com/html/shinto.shtml>.