SHINTO – A SHORT HISTORY

Inoue Nobutaka (editor), Itō Satoshi, Endō Jun and Mori Mizue

Translated and adapted by
Mark Teeuwen and John Breen

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Shinto – A Short History provides an introductory outline of the historical development of Shinto from the ancient period of Japanese history until the present day.

Shinto does not offer a readily identifiable set of teachings, rituals or beliefs; individual shrines and *kami* deities have led their own lives, not within the confines of a narrowly defined Shinto, but rather as participants in a religious field that included Buddhist, Taoist, Confucian and folk elements. Thus, this book approaches Shinto as a series of historical 'religious systems' rather than attempting to identify a timeless 'Shinto essence'.

This history focuses on three aspects of Shinto practice: the people involved in shrine worship, the institutional networks that ensured continuity, and teachings and rituals. By following the interplay between these aspects in different periods, a pattern of continuity and discontinuity is revealed that challenges received understandings of the history of Shinto.

This book does not presuppose prior knowledge of Japanese religion, and is easily accessible for those new to the subject.

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TRANSLATORS' INTRODUCTION

The term Shinto covers a many-hued array of Japanese religious traditions. In the Japan of today, these are represented by a considerable number of organised religious groups, an even larger number of more or less organised local shrine cults, and an ill-defined body of unorganised beliefs and practices that do not involve religious professionals. To the outside observer, Shinto appears less as a distinct religion, than as an extremely fluid body of religious phenomena linked, at best, by a family resemblance.

What defines these disparate phenomena as aspects of Shinto, is not so much shared beliefs, ideas or moral attitudes, but rather a common set of physical symbols and ritual patterns. There is no scripture, no set of dogmas, nor even a shared pantheon that could warrant the lumping together of Shinto's multifarious traditions under one label. Rather, practices are identified as some form of Shinto by such markers as the *torii* gate and *shimenawa* straw ropes, used to demarcate sacred spaces or objects; by branches of the evergreen *sakaki* tree, used as offerings or for purification; by shrine buildings with readily identifiable characteristics that set them apart from both Buddhist temples and the churches of established and new religions; and by the use of mirrors to signal the presence of the kami or deities. One ritual pattern that conveys a Shinto identity is purification (*harae*), performed by a priest waving a *sakaki* branch over the heads of worshippers; another is the parading of deities through the streets, carried on the shoulders of parishioners in elaborate portable shrines.

These symbols and rituals are immediately recognisable to all Japanese. Shinto shrines dot the landscape of Japan, and number more than 100,000. Some, such as the Meiji shrine in Tokyo, dominate large areas in city centres; others are tucked away in the corners of rural fields, or on the rooftops of office blocks. Statistics show that the majority of Japanese engage actively with shrines in some form or other on a regular basis. According to a 1997 survey, some 70 per cent of Japanese visit a shrine at New Year (*hatsumōde*), and over 50 per cent celebrate the birth of a new

baby (*hatsumiya*), or their child's third, fifth and seventh birthdays (*shichigosan*), by making a shrine visit. One in three employs a Shinto priest to perform ritual purification of a new building plot, or a new car. One in four participates in shrine festivals, prays at shrines for success in examinations, and uses Shinto-style marriage ceremonies. Only 16 per cent of respondents stated that they never pray at shrines.[1] Yet even these are likely to visit shrines for non-religious reasons, since many shrine precincts double as parks, and are used for a variety of recreational pursuits.

Yet, even though shrines play some part in the lives of most Japanese, few define themselves as followers of a religion called Shinto. In the same 1997 survey, less than 4 per cent did so. In fact, most Japanese have only a very vague understanding of the term, and a large proportion of the younger generation do not know it at all. In contrast to shrines, 'Shinto' is a concept of little consequence in Japanese society. Nor is this a phenomenon of recent origin. While shrines have been an enduring element of Japanese religious life, the notion of an overarching, abstract Shinto that integrates diverse shrine cults into a single cultic system has, at most times, been of marginal importance. In this sense, the present situation, in which shrines are integrated in the social life of contemporary Japanese while Shinto remains an unfamiliar concept, represents a continuation of the past.

It is, therefore, essential to make a clear distinction between shrines on the one hand, and Shinto on the other. Shrines are the concrete sites of worship of kami, the deities or spirits that form the focus of shrine practice. Central to shrines, of course, are the worshippers who manage and use them, and the changing social structures that have secured their upkeep through the centuries. Shinto, on the other hand, refers to structures (organisational, doctrinal, or both) that aim to integrate individual shrine cults into a larger, national or even universal system. Attempts at construing such structures and putting them into practice have been made by various groups during different periods in Japanese history. The institution of a system of regular offerings to shrines throughout the land by the court in the seventh and eighth centuries was the first, and one of the most successful, of such Shinto constructs. During the medieval period, the main superstructures that served to conjoin different local shrine cults were Buddhist ones, and most shrines were linked to, and accommodated within, Buddhist temples. The Meiji, Taishō and early Shōwa periods (1868–1945) saw yet other attempts at rallying shrines under a common Shinto banner; this time, they were political and designed to serve the cause of strengthening the emerging Japanese nation-state. Thus, we find that throughout history, shrines and their kami drifted in and out of consecutive Shinto constructs, presented to them (or, at times, imposed on them)

by various elites – be they court aristocrats, warriors, Buddhist monks, or bureaucrats of the modern period. The relationship between shrines and different forms of Shinto constitutes an important dynamic in the shaping of the history of kami worship.

A failure to make this critical distinction has bedevilled the study of the subject, especially in the West. Today, it is less controversial to state that Shinto was 'invented' in the Meiji period, than to trace its history to, say, the Nara period (710–94). If 'Shinto' is taken to refer only to post-Meiji Shinto, this is of course true; but such an insistence masks the existence of earlier Shinto constructs, and it threatens more damage than good. Even more serious is the fact that the study of not only earlier forms of Shinto but also the history of shrines has been undermined by the assumption that Shinto is a modern invented tradition. It should be clear for all to see that even though Meiji Shinto was indeed a Meiji invention, this does not change the fact that shrines have been important centres of religious, political, social and economic activity throughout Japanese history.

Compared to, say, studies of Japanese Buddhism, Western literature on shrines and Shinto is extremely limited in scope. In Japan, meanwhile, research into this subject has developed rapidly during the post-war period. Until the late 1970s, the history of shrines and Shinto was the unique preserve of scholars with close links to the Shinto establishment, who approached it with a predictable ideological bias. More recently, however, kami cults have also drawn the attention of historians without Shinto affiliations, and their researches have revolutionised the field. Especially, new light has been shed on the many centuries during which the shrines and their kami functioned primarily within a Buddhist framework. Historians such as Kuroda Toshio and Satō Hiroo have transformed our understanding of medieval Buddhism, and also of the role of the kami and their shrines within it.[2] Also, scholars of medieval literature such as Itō Masayoshi have begun to reconstruct medieval practices and legends around kami, drawing on sources previously ignored by Shinto historians.[3] A new critical approach to Shinto has finally been extended also to the modern period by scholars like Yasumaru Yoshio and Miyachi Masato.[4] At the same time, the Shinto world itself has become less rigidly ideological. Many Shinto scholars have taken on board the findings of historians from other disciplines and of other ideological persuasions, and further refined them.

As a result, a radically new view on the history of shrines and Shinto is beginning to take shape. This new perspective has become possible, first and foremost, thanks to the field's liberation from the ideological concerns of post-Meiji Shinto. Much older research departed from the premise that Shinto has existed since time immemorial as an unbroken, autonomous tradition that defined the basic outlook of the Japanese. Concern to uphold

this dogma had typically led to a heavy bias in favour of continuity rather than historical change, of 'native' elements rather than the pervasive Buddhist (and otherwise Chinese) influence, and of court-sanctioned orthodox practice rather than the more eclectic practices of the general populace. Only after historians from other disciplines began to show an active interest in shrines and Shinto could a more balanced view of their history emerge.

It was in order to present the preliminary results of this ongoing re-definition of Shinto history to the general Japanese public that this short volume was first conceived. Inoue Nobutaka, the editor of this book, is an established sociologist of religion specialising in Japanese New Religions. The three other contributors are relatively young scholars with backgrounds in history and literature, rather than in Shinto studies. The authors coordinated their approach by adopting a common perspective on Shinto, namely as a 'religious system'. The outline of this perspective is explained in the book's introduction, and need not be repeated here, but its merit is worth setting out from the start. By approaching Shinto as a religious system, an equal measure of attention is given to religious ideas and practices, the people who conveyed them, and the social structures that ensured their transmission. This ensures that the vital dynamic between Shinto and shrines comes to the surface. The result is a history both of Shinto, and of shrines, that in many ways succeeds in overcoming the limitations of earlier Shinto histories.

Our task has been that of translators, but we have on occasion adapted the original text when we deemed it necessary to clarify the author's meaning for a non-Japanese audience. For the sake for clarity, we have worked all substantial notes into the main text. While retaining the original references to Japanese-language works, we have provided key Western-language titles on the same subjects, as well as a list of recommended reading on Shinto in Western languages. Mark Teeuwen is responsible for the translation of the Introduction and Chapters 1 and 2; John Breen for Chapters 3 and 4.

Mark Teeuwen
John Breen

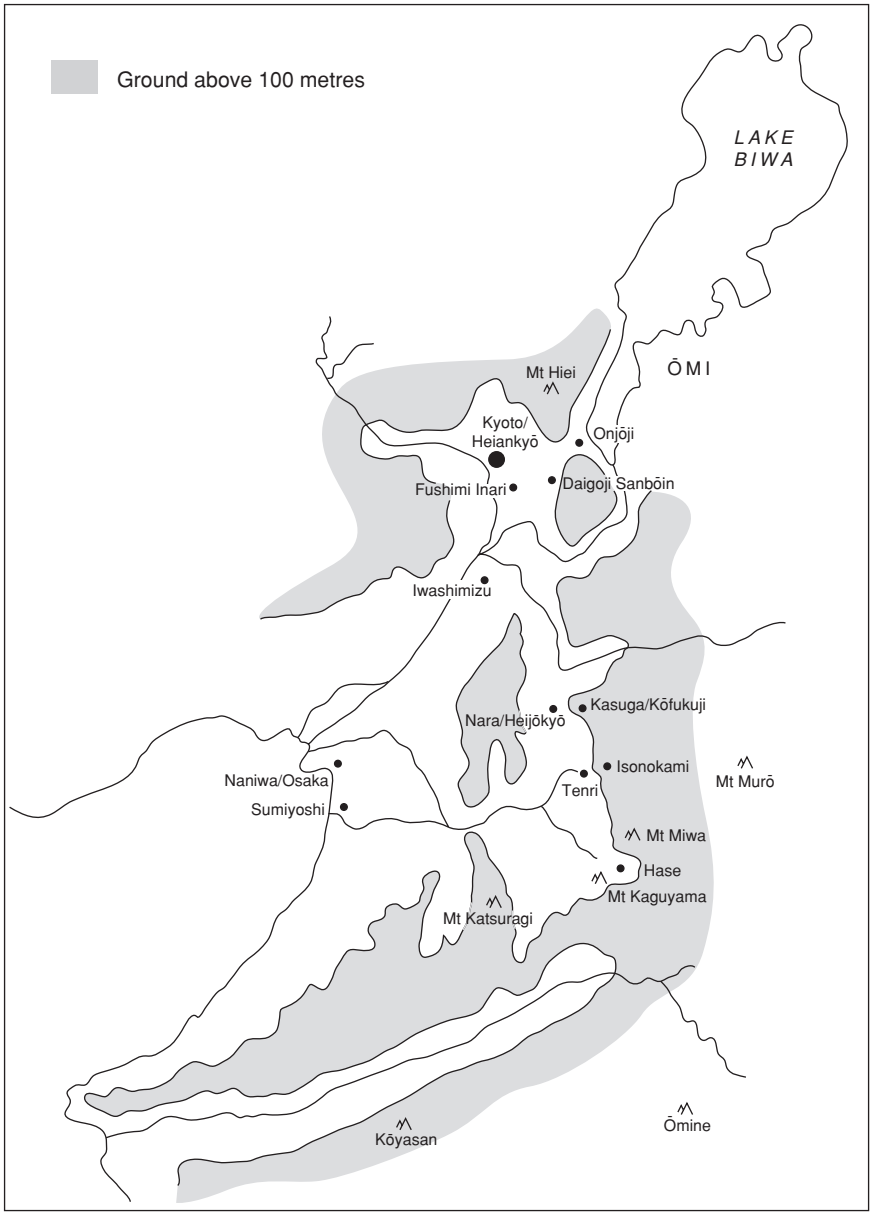
Notes

1 This survey was conducted by the Shrine Association, and is based on 1,389 returned questionnaires. Jinja Honchō Kyōgaku Kenkyūjo, *Jinja ni kansuru ishiki chōsa hōkokusho* (1997), p. 30.

2 E.g. Kuroda Toshio, *Jisha seiryoku* (Iwanami 1980) and 'Shinto in the history of Japanese religion' (*Journal of Japanese Studies* 7–1, 1981); Satō Hiroo, *Kami, hotoke, ōken no chūsei* (Hōzōkan 1998).

3 Here, we would especially like to stress Itō's work on the 'medieval *Nihongi*'; e.g. 'Chūsei Nihongi no rinkaku' (*Bungaku* 40–10, 1972).
4 See, for example, Yasumaru Yoshio, *Kamigami no Meiji ishin* (Iwanami 1979), Miyachi Masato, *Tennōsei no seijishiteki kenkyū* (Azekura Shobō 1981) and Yasumaru and Miyachi eds, *Nihon kindai shisō taikei 5: shūkyō to kokka* (Iwanami 1988).

Japan: Honshu, Kyushu and Shikoku



Central Japan: the Home Provinces

INTRODUCTION

What is Shinto?

Inoue Nobutaka

Shinto as a religious system

The term 'Shinto' is notoriously vague and difficult to define. A brief look at the term's history confuses more than it enlightens. Its first occurrence is in the *Nihon shoki* (720), which writes of Emperor Yōmei (r. 585–7) that he 'had faith in the Buddhist Dharma and revered Shinto.' Here, as in most early usages of the word, it seems to serve as a synonym for Japan's native deities, in Japanese called kami, in contrast to the new 'foreign kami' that entered Japan with the introduction of Buddhism in the sixth century. Only during the medieval and early modern periods was the term applied to specific theological and ritual systems. In modern scholarship, the term is often used with reference to kami worship and related theologies, rituals and practices. In these contexts, 'Shinto' takes on the meaning of 'Japan's traditional religion', as opposed to foreign religions such as Christianity, Buddhism, Islam and so forth.

A central element in a practical definition of Shinto will have to be systems of kami worship and shrine ritual that date back to classical times. Few will doubt that the kami and their cults form the core of what we call Shinto. However, when we try to pin down more specifically what teachings, rituals, or beliefs have constituted Shinto through the centuries, we soon run into difficulty. Some scholars have attempted to categorise Shinto into 'shrine Shinto', 'sect Shinto', and 'folk Shinto', and others have added 'imperial Shinto' (referring to imperial rituals focusing on kami), 'state Shinto' and 'Shinto-derived new religions'. However, many questions remain both as to the legitimacy of these categorisations, and as to their relationship to each other. In particular, it is well-nigh impossible to separate 'shrine Shinto' from 'folk Shinto'. In extreme cases, some have even resorted to labelling all religious folk traditions in Japan 'Shinto'.

In the field of Religious Studies, Shinto is usually described as an 'indigenous religion'. By this term is meant a religion that emerged naturally within the historical development of an indigenous culture, in contrast to 'founded religions', which are based on the teachings of historical founders. These latter are often described as 'world religions', because they spread across national boundaries to assume a global role. In contrast, Shinto as an 'indigenous religion' is inextricably linked with a single nation, Japan.

Shinto also displays many features of what we may call 'folk religion'. This term is here used as a generic term for popular beliefs and practices that are not directly controlled by a shrine, temple or church, or led by a religious professional such as a priest, a monk or a minister. As such beliefs and practices in Japan, we may mention the worship of various deity tablets (*ofuda*), the tabooing of certain dates or directions, belief in different kinds of spirits (such as spirits of the dead, or 'revengeful spirits', *onryō*), worship of natural objects such as trees and mountains, and worship of the kami of fields and mountains (*ta no kami* and *yama no kami*). Most of what is commonly called religious folklore, local customs, or superstition belongs in this category.

Not only Shinto, but also Buddhism and the new religions of Japan are closely connected with folk religion. Even Christianity, both in Japan and elsewhere, contains many folk influences. In the case of Shinto, however, such elements are so prominent that it is impossible to draw a line between folk religion and some fictional 'pure Shinto'. This is a direct result of Shinto's history, which is rooted in a long tradition of kami worship that developed in close relation with the rhythms of everyday life, both cultural and economic.

There is another reason why it is difficult to follow Shinto through history as a distinct religious tradition: the fact that Shinto has been profoundly influenced by other religious traditions. The influence of the religions of China has been prominent since ancient times, and among them, the religion that left the most profound impact was Chinese Buddhism. Even if we were to use the term 'Early Shinto' to refer to some archaic prototype of Shinto, we would find that such a distant ancestor of Shinto would already have been transformed in important ways by Chinese forms of Buddhism. In addition, other continental traditions such as Confucianism, Taoism, and theories about Yin and Yang and the Five Phases of matter (wood, fire, earth, metal and water) left their imprint in ideas about, and practices around, the kami from an early date. These facts further complicate our question, which appears so simple at first sight: what is Shinto? One is reminded of the onion of Peer Gynt: will there really be a 'core' to be found after we have peeled off layer after layer of foreign accretions?

These are the sort of fundamental problems one is faced with when trying to define Shinto. Looking for Shinto's 'core' or 'true essence' will not take us very far in resolving the issue. In this volume, we have chosen a different approach. Here, we will introduce the concept of a 'religious system' as a new angle on Shinto and its historical development.

The concept of a 'religious system' is here proposed as a tool to explore the historical development of religion in its intimate relation with the structural characteristics and changes of society as a whole. Traditionally, religious history has occupied itself with the histories of individual religions, schools or sects. We have histories of Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Shinto, histories of the Methodist church and of Pure Land Buddhism, and histories of Tenrikyō and Sōka Gakkai. While this is a valuable approach to the history of religion, it tends to ignore the fact that the concept of religion itself can vary widely from period to period, or from religious group to religious group. It is obvious, for example, that the Catholic Church in Korea and its counterpart in Japan differ in many respects, in spite of the fact that both are grounded in the same religion. Similarly, Buddhism in classical Japan was fundamentally distinct in character from modern Japanese Buddhism. Conversely, we find that different religious groups display similar characteristics when developing in a common social and cultural environment. The new religious movements of modern Japan, which are collectively known as the 'new religions', are a good example of this: behind the multitude of sect names we find many similarities in actual teaching and practice. If we were to compare, for example, the modern Risshō Kōseikai and Myōchikai (both Buddhist-derived new religions), we would find that they are much more similar to one another than, say, the Buddhism of the Nara period (710–94) and the Edo period (1600–1867).

If we think of a religion in terms of written doctrine, individual religions or sects display a great deal of continuity over the centuries, but when we consider the roles these same religions or sects have played in actual society in different historical periods or in different cultural areas, we notice radical differences. If we regard individual religions as part of a wider religious 'ecosystem', it becomes clear that traditional histories of religion need to be reconsidered in various ways. It is to tackle these issues that the concept of a 'religious system' is useful. This concept allows us to treat clusters of religious groups that display typological similarities as one religious system. When studying such clusters as a religious system we relate their development to changes within society as a whole. This makes it possible to consider, say, the Sōtō Zen sect and the Jōdo Pure Land sect of the Edo period as two members of the same religious system: early modern Japanese Buddhism. Conversely, the Shingon school in the Heian

period (794–1192) can be studied as belonging to a different religious system from its Edo period counterpart.

To study religion from this angle is to exchange the metaphor of religion as an organism for that of religion as an ecosystem. The boundaries of different religious systems are regarded as fluid, both with regard to individual religious movements, and with regard to different historical periods.

When we isolate a particular religious system and try to make out its characteristics, it is necessary to approach it from three angles: the system's *constituents*, its *network*, and its *substance*. The *constituents* of a religious system are the people who carry and maintain it. In most cases, we can distinguish between two groups: the 'makers' and the 'users' of the religion. The first include the founders of religious groups and their successors: monks, shrine priests, ministers, missionaries, and so forth. These are the people who work actively to sustain a particular religious tradition. This category also includes those who carry out the administrative tasks of religious institutions. The 'users' of a religious system are the believers, followers and church-goers who participate in religious activities. It is important to note that not all 'users' are necessarily 'believers'; those who do not necessarily have 'faith' but are active in the periphery of religious groups must also be included in this category. This is because they are important to religious groups as possible future believers, and as targets for missionary education or conversion. The category of 'users', then, can be defined as those who already are, and those who may become, believers of a religion.

This takes us to the term *network*. We use this term to refer to the various elements that are related to the organisational upkeep of the religious system: the channels the religious system uses to ensure its future existence. Here, we can distinguish between 'hard' and 'soft' aspects: the sacred sites, shrine buildings, temples, churches and headquarters of religious groups constitute the first, while the latter includes institutional hierarchies, pilgrimage routes, etc.

The third and last key aspect of religious systems is termed *substance*. This refers to the message that a religion tries to convey to its users through its teachings, practices and rituals. A religion's teachings include both the doctrines laid down in its scriptures, and the contents of the sermons of its preachers – two aspects of teaching that are not always identical or even consistent. Practices and rituals range widely from secret, esoteric rites to public ceremonies.

Religious groups which display a clear similarity in structure or type can fruitfully be studied as components of a single religious system. A new religious system emerges when the three elements of *constituents*, *network* and *substance* come together in some new way. Changes in religious systems

occur when one of these three elements is transformed to such a degree that it affects the other two.

If religious systems are formed and transformed in close interaction with the society in which they partake, it follows that Shinto cannot be considered as a single religious system that existed from the ancient to the modern period. Nonetheless, it is also true that the religious system that emerged with the systematisation of kami worship in ancient Japan is connected with modern shrine Shinto through a long string of gradual transformations. The method we will take in this volume is to follow this long history of transformations. As our point of departure, we will choose kami worship as the characteristic that distinguishes Shinto from other religious traditions and gives it continuity through the ages. It will become clear, however, that the concrete beliefs and practices of kami worship changed considerably from period to period, and took on a great variety of disparate forms.

The classical system of kami worship clearly possessed all the elements of a fully fledged religious system. Its origin is difficult to date, but it was completed as a system after the establishment of a central imperial state governed by an adapted version of Chinese law (J. *ritsuryō*). Shrines from all over the country were included in a system of 'official shrines' (*kansha*). This network of official shrines formed the *network* of kami worship as a religious system. Also, the *constituents* of kami rituals were clearly identified, and their message (the system's *substance*) was transmitted to society through ritual prayers (*norito*) and imperial decrees (*senmyō*). It is not possible to identify a religious system that might be described as 'Shinto' before the systematisation of kami worship by the new imperial state during the classical period, because the constituents, network, and substance of kami cults during this early period were too ill-defined.

Together with the decline of the rule of *ritsuryō* law, the classical system of kami worship gradually lost its character as a distinct religious system. The system's network was lost, and as kami cults amalgamated with Buddhism, its substance was radically transformed. During the medieval period, warrior groups became important carriers of kami cults, leading to a partial shift of the religion's constituents. The spread of private estates (*shōen*) and the popular practice of 'inviting' spirits of the deity Hachiman to such estates encouraged the formation of a new network which partly replaced the classical 'network' of official shrines.

Simultaneously, the amalgamation of kami cults and Buddhism that had begun already in early classical times penetrated into all nooks and crannies of kami worship in the course of the medieval period, and in the process not only transformed the classical system of kami worship but also encouraged the founding of new religious systems, such as that of

Shugendo. This amalgamation generated changes in the substance of kami cults, because it placed kami cults under the strong influence of Buddhist doctrine. On the other hand, the process of amalgamation also encouraged the development of theological kami thought in opposition to Buddhism. During medieval times, Shinto as a religious system was all but absorbed by the much more powerful system of Buddhism, but nevertheless survived. Developments in the early modern and modern periods proved that medieval Shinto, though largely subsumed in Buddhism, still remained sufficiently autonomous as a religious system to move once more into a direction of its own.

Elements of the classical system of kami worship survived through the middle ages into the early modern period. This period saw the emergence of a new form of Shinto thought in the form of National Learning (*kokugaku*) and Restoration (*fukko*) Shinto. This form of Shinto can be regarded as a new religious system in its own right, and also proved essential in the later formation of sect Shinto in modern times. On the level of substance, we see that the multitude of medieval kami theories of the medieval period were rearranged into a new, close-knit discourse through the labours of successive thinkers of the National Learning movement. This was an important step in the formation of a new religious system. With regard to the network of Shinto, the early modern period saw the formation of a range of religious 'confraternities' (*kō*), whose existence was an important factor in the development of the Shinto sects of the modern period.

The Buddhist and Confucian forms of Shinto that were prominent during the medieval and early modern periods were incomplete as a religious system, because they did not provide for a network of their own, or only a fragmentary one. On the other hand, they prepared the ground both for the modern system of kami worship and for the formation of sect Shinto and Shinto-derived new religions. Therefore, it is not impossible to regard them at least as a religious system *in nascendo*.

Shugendo, finally, developed in the power field between kami cults and Esoteric Buddhism, and gradually matured into a religious system of its own. Shugendo will not be discussed in detail in this volume, but it was a factor of great importance in the historical development of Shinto.

The East-Asian sphere of religious culture and Shinto

Traditionally, there has been a tendency to stress the 'uniquely Japanese' character of Shinto, and little effort has been made to compare kami worship in Japan with the indigenous religions and folk beliefs of other East-Asian countries. It is only recently that researchers have focused on the similarities between kami cults and Taoism, and on the profound

influence of Chinese folk religion and Chinese theories of Yin and Yang and the Five Phases of matter on Japanese kami cults.[1]

Worship of spirits, spirit possession, divination, oracles and polytheism are all features that Japanese kami cults share with East-Asian folk religion. Also, the amalgamation of kami cults with Buddhism in Japan has parallels in the amalgamation of Taoism and Buddhism in China, and of Confucianism and Buddhism in Korea.

The influence of Chinese religion in East Asia is so prominent that the whole region may well be regarded as a single 'Chinese religio-cultural sphere'. Until recently, scholars who have wished to identify the characteristics of Japanese religion did so by comparing Japanese religious traditions with the monotheistic religions of the West. As a result of such comparisons, syncretism, polytheism and animism have frequently been highlighted as typical of Japanese religion as a whole. However, even a superficial glance at the religions of Japan's closest neighbours reveals that these are all features shared by the large majority of religions in the Chinese religio-cultural sphere.

Shinto worships an untold multitude of different kami deities. While this represents an important difference with monotheistic religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam, it is a feature that Shinto shares with many other religions across the world, and that constitutes the norm in East Asia. Buddhism incorporated many Hindu deities in India, and once again expanded its pantheon in China with a host of Taoist deities. These countless regional deities play an especially important role on the level of popular religion.

Moreover, popular beliefs and practices revere not only deities but also a multitude of other kinds of spirits and supernatural creatures. Japanese religion recognises many deities and, to some extent, attributes different functions to different deities. The dividing line between deities and human beings is vague, and extraordinary humans are frequently worshipped as 'living kami' (*ikigami*) or as 'emanations of a Buddha' (*keshin*). These features of Japanese religion, too, are widely shared by other religious traditions within the Chinese cultural sphere.

It goes without saying that polytheistic and animistic forms of religion can be found across the globe, and constitute one of the basic types of religion. In East Asia, these features are especially common. Moreover, East-Asian versions of polytheistic and animistic religions can perhaps be further defined as a special sub-species of this form of religion. Here, the role of Mahāyāna Buddhism and ancient Chinese deity worship, ancestor worship, and beliefs in demons must be emphasised.

The universal religion of East Asia has been Mahāyāna Buddhism, a religion of an exceptionally accommodative character. In the Chinese