



# An Essay on the Nature of Shinto (Japanese Traditional Religion)

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## Abstract

Recently my book, "Japanese Religion, How we understand it?" (2014, Tokyo) was translated in English and published with title, "Shi zen, Japanese Religion" (2021, Aracne Editor, Rome). In this book, I try to explain Shinto, which is worshipped as the Communal religion in Japan, and on the other hand, Buddhism, as Individual one, introduced from Paekche in 6<sup>th</sup> century. The two have been co-worshipped from 7<sup>th</sup> century to today. Even today there are about 80,000 Shinto shrines and about 75,000 Buddhism temples. Shinto had been believed from Jomon period (13000--3000BC) as the Hellolatory, of which Deity is Amaterasu. So Shinto is composed with three kinds of the worships, one is that of the Nature, of the Spirits of Ancestors and of the Imperial Family. Last one is understood by the fact of the continuity of 127 generations of this Family.

This essay on the Shizen (Nature) in Shinto, refers the text of this book, which explains the relationship between the Nature and the religion in Japan.

We know that there are no serious damaged by the Corona Virus. I think the traditional attitude against the natural disasters represented the effect. And of course we must thoroughly investigate the unknown reasons of Corona Virus, which killed many human beings in the world.

**Keywords:** Japanese religion; Traditional; Japan; Comunal religion

In the period of the disaster of recent coronavirus, Japanese people accepted it rather calmly. It was rather few dead in Japan. Almost ten percent of the number of dead, comparing with those of western countries. Because they received it like as ordinal disease, and even if it is caused artificially by Communist China, we received it by the traditional attitude toward natural disasters. Only we criticize Chinese communists who cannot understand traditional oriental attitude toward the Nature.

Now, let me explain the relationship between the Japanese people and nature.

We Japanese have a reverential sentiment toward nature, which could be called "nature worship". The Japanese people

accept even cruel circumstances brought about by natural disasters such as earthquakes, lightning and typhoons. Shinto=Shizen-do (nature's way) regulates the Japanese people's way of life and morals. It can be said that the Shinto way of thinking is to be grateful for nature's richness and tenderness but at the same time the Japanese people accept natural disasters in the same manner.

In this point, the Japanese are distinctly different from Westerners. In the Western world, nature is regarded as hard and sometime cruel. Especially in Northern Europe, in winter it is extremely cold and people are obliged to stay indoors, and spend most of their time indoors. I once experienced living in the northern and southern parts of Europe and I could feel nature and humans as being separate entities,

quite contrary to the way that I feel regarding the interaction between humans and nature, as I did while living in Japan.

Japan is comparatively different even today. People living in urban areas are not particularly aware of this, but originally humans were perceptive of their natural environment. Humans felt this through typhoons, seeing thunderbolts and even rainfall. The Japanese do not perceive man existing above nature, but “man,” “woods” and “mountains” are one entity.

The first polity model set up in Japan was the Seventeen-Article Constitution established by Prince Shotoku in 604. The Imperial government is described in the same manner as that of natural evolution. It says, “The sovereign is like heaven and the people are earth. Heaven covers and earth holds. As each of them faithfully carries out its own role, the four seasons of spring, summer, autumn and winter revolve favorably and all creatures develop respectively.” The existence of the sovereign is natural and follows the way of nature. “Man”, being a part of nature, only needed natural rule.

This idea is similar to that of the human mind “in natural condition” described by Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712 – 1778) in the 18th century in Europe. Rousseau wrote in his book titled *Origin of Human Inequality* that inequality among people arises once a community is formed, but that the primitive natural condition is “the condition of mutual care”, and therefore people are equal.

The Japanese people have never been in the habit of accepting worship expressed in the form of words. Unlike other religions, Shinto has none of what is called sacred books. Even at the present time, Shinto has no written teachings. This is because Shinto is based solely on natural conditions.

Why do people perform Hatsumode (the first visit of the year) to shrines on New Year’s Day? This practice is not a written precept, unlike what is written in the Koran. When a new year comes, the Japanese people solemnly feel the freshness of the passing time and quite naturally perform the Shinto ceremony of the first visit of the year to shrines. This voluntary feeling is deeply rooted in the Japanese mind and therefore it is a natural act. The coming of a new year is a natural transition of time and the Japanese people welcome it with an open heart.

The Japanese word 自然 (pronounced shizen) translates from nature. In fact, the word came to be used only since the Meiji Era. To the Japanese people, having lived in a natural environment, a word describing the concept of nature was not necessary.

What does “Shizen” (literally “self-evident”) mean? As I have previously explained, the Japanese people chose this expression as an approximation of the English word “nature”, because they thought that “first there was nature.” Before humans came into being and before Kami-gami came to exist, heaven and earth existed, and this heaven and earth is nature. I have mentioned that this is the first and foremost principle of Shinto. After heaven and earth, Kami-gami was born out of nature.

According to Western Christian thinking, first there was God according to the Bible. However, Westerners wonder why there are unpleasant natural disasters and cruel wars if there is an omnipresent God. Really, however, Westerners also know that there is no “God” but they cannot bear to decisively state that there is no “God”. In other words, they cannot stand the true state of nature and therefore they created a “God” out of words. The Old Testament was born out of the despair of struggling Jews. Greek poet Hesiod wrote the grand epic *Chronicle of God*, which is considered to be the origin of the view of the universe presented in Greek Mythology.

Unlike the Japanese Archipelagoes, which is surrounded by the sea, Europe is a vast expanse of land accommodating many countries and various peoples living under very unstable conditions most of the time, who fear that conflict among different tribes may occur at any moment. Consequently, they needed a “God” to protect them.

In the West, God came first. Japanese Shinto is completely different from Western religions.

### Shinto can be said to be Pure Polytheism

Religions profoundly reflect their respective civilization and culture. Japanese culture is based on the nature worship of Shinto and is roughly divided into two types: the worship of souls and spirits, which reveres the deceased’s souls as Kami, and the worship of Imperial ancestors’ souls, keeping in reverence the ruler of the people.

As cultural anthropologist Levi Strauss (1908 – 2009) pointed out, “Japanese mythology and history have continuity,” the writings in the *Kojiki* (The Record of Ancient Matters) and *Nihonshoki* (The Chronicle of Japan) constitute a part of Japanese history.

However, these two ancient books write about nature and Kami-gami, but they never refer to precepts. It looks as if there was no need for precepts.

It is certainly true that in reality the concept of Shinto has not become universal because Shinto is without words.

Nevertheless, in place of words, Shinto has rituals. It has unique festivals. Even today, more than five hundred rituals are held every year in Ise Shrine. And precisely, as Kojiki describes, every morning a meal is served to Amaterasu Omikami. This divine routine is carried out without even a day's omission.

I think that it will be very interesting to see what happens if we Japanese verbally disseminated to the world the idea and the way of thinking of Shinto as demonstrated in various rituals.

Here is a poem by Sugawara no Michizane: "Kokoro dani Makotono Michi ni Kanahinaba Inorazu totemo Kami Mamoramu." (If our mind is suitable for the way of the truth, Kami will surely protect us without our prayer.)

Even though this poem was adopted from Chinese classics, when these words were spoken by Sugawara no Michizane, a typical Japanese wise man, I suppose the way of the truth refers to nature.

In Japan, morals are interpreted not through words, but in a context that if humans follow nature, humans are able to live a righteous life. Japanese scholar Kume Takekuni said, "Shinto wa Saiten no Kozoku (Shinto is old customs of heavenly rituals), which can be interpreted as what people customarily perform in rituals and ceremonies is in itself fit for nature's reason.

What people do naturally makes sense. In other words, with Shinto rooted within the people's mind, there is no need for worship toward a specific saint who established religious teachings or worship toward entities such as Buddha and Jesus Christ. Nature is the founding father and missionary at the same time.

Prince Shotoku said that all humans are common people. I am sure that he thought he himself was one. In reality, the Japanese people do not seek perfection in a person. It is hardly conceivable that perfect people like Buddha and Jesus Christ actually exist. In the first place, there is no personified deity and therefore there is no need to worship people who represent Kami.

I believe it quite natural that Kami-gami born out of nature eventually entrusted "Amatsu kuni" (the High Celestial Plain) to Amaterasu Omikami. Amaterasu Omikami is the Sun Deity. It is a natural consequence that offspring of Amaterasu Omikami descended from heaven to earth and the Emperor came to reign in the country of Japan. This is described in the Article Three of the Seventeen-Article Constitution, which I have mentioned in the previous chapter. In the very sense that the Emperor is recognized as the ruler, it is precisely a

natural way of living in Shizen-do. And the existence of the Emperor symbolizes the wisdom of Shinto=Shizen-do, that it is important both for the community and for creating "Wa" (peace and harmony) to establish the authority derived from one lineage.

That is the reason why Kojiki (published in 712) and Nihonshoki (in 720) only discuss mythology and they are neither special books of religious teachings nor history books.

It may sound as if I was saying that "Shinto is not a religion," but the fact is that Shinto is a religion without words.

And I believe that this is the important key to revive Japanese religion today. Though it is not mentioned out loud, the popular Japanese expression "Otentou-sama" (dear Heaven's way) refers to the Shizen-do or the nature's way, and Amaterasu Omikami was born according to the "way" and this is duly inherited by the Emperor, generation after generation.

Concretely, the Imperial Family is derived from mythology, succeeded by actual Emperors, continuing to this day. No other country in the world has this kind of continuity, from mythology to actual history.

### Discuss the Emperor without discussing Shinto

From its unique developmental process, without fully explaining Shinto in terms of a way of nature, and instead through emphasizing the establishment of the Emperor using Kojiki and Nihonshoki, Shinto came to be understood as a form of religious centred on the Emperor.

However, Shinto and the way of the Emperor are one in the same in terms of the natural way.

Motoori Norinaga (1730 - 1801), a prominent philosopher during the Edo Period, felt the same way. Only he called it simply "the way." He said, "In ancient times, there was no mention of the way at all (Naobi no Mitama, digest of Motoori's views of Shinto and of the Japanese national entity). Instead of interpreting the way in terms of a way of nature, he contemplated "the way" derived from Kami-gami as described in Kojiki.

Motoori felt that the Emperor appeared in a natural way.

When he said, "The reason of heaven and earth rests on Kami's doing," he meant that the Emperor appeared from nature.

I think that now is the time for us to firmly recognize this point once again. Otherwise, with only an emphasis on the existence of the Emperor, Shinto becomes subject to criticism as “national Shinto” being derived from a monotheistic god.

However, the “way” existed prior to the appearance of the Emperor. Kami-gami born from nature chose Amaterasu Omikami as the ruler of the Plain of High Heaven and gave her descendants authority. It should be a natural conclusion that a ruler was needed in order to create a nation. This, of course, means “authority” and not “power.” While Amaterasu Omikami sent Ninigi no Mikoto from heaven to earth, she had five pillars of Kami, including Ameno Koyane no Mikoto and Ameno Uzume no Mikoto accompany him for assistance. Ameno Koyane no Mikoto in particular was to be in charge of the government. Ameno Koyane no Mikoto is the founding Kami of the Nakatomi clan, which later became the Fujiwara clan. The Fujiwara clan became the executor of the government, changing “authority” into “power”.

This can be understood from the viewpoint of Western political systems. First, the Pope represents God, and Emperor governs with the permission of the Pope. The system remains the same. Later, power changed hands from the Emperor to the king and prime minister. At present, Pope is the head of the Catholic Church, but he is the symbol of authority over all of Christendom.

### The Community Needs Such Authority

The Japanese people have contemplated such authority in terms of lineage. They respected the Imperial Family as a lineage. Otherwise, conflict would never cease. The Japanese established a religion, believing that all was created by “Otentou-sama” (The Sun as God). The Japanese have taken this idea for granted.

It is most likely that the thinking of various peoples around the world was the same. Authority based on worship of the Sun as God and earth must have been placed at the top.

Shrines still remain all over Japan. This is solely because the Japanese people need shrines. Shrines do not necessarily enshrine Emperors, but they were built in continuation with the existence of Emperors. Shrines demonstrate that Emperors also exist in the natural environment.

### Differences in Natural Environments changed Religions

In reading Japanese mythology, we find that all of Kami-gami including Amaterasu Omikami and Susanoo no Mikoto behave as if they were humans. They even labor with their bare hands. Kami-gami cultivates rice fields and keeps

silkworms to produce silk. They engage in human activities because they are a continuous with humans and Kami’s actions are nothing special. Nature demands human labour.

Our ancestral Kami-gami also perform various acts. Mythology describes their miraculous acts. Miraculous stories in mythology are very convincing because they often overlap with existing primitive issues.

As I have already mentioned, cultural anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss said, “One of Japan’s charms is that there is a close tie mutually between mythology and history.” (The Other Face of the Moon) .He does not necessarily refer to the Emperor. It is clear that he is conscious of the existence of the continuity of the Emperor, from mythology to history. He cannot have been unmoved by the fact that this continuity is still kept today. And nothing is more interesting than to know that Jewish scholar Levi Strauss is not the least impressed by this unique Japanese continuity.

Let me repeat. Kojiki depicts the earth coming naturally out of chaos and life coming into being as reeds sprouting in the mud. On the other hand, Genesis in the Old Testament writes: “God” brought forth all living things from His own will. This idea is based on the tenuous circumstance that both a “God” and humans cannot exist without living with firm will, sometimes being forced to do things against their will and other times fighting. Judaism was born in such a wilderness.

As is often noted, the Jews embody a vagabonding life, holding nature as aversive, thus creating the prototype of a religion of the desert.

### Monsoons, Deserts and Pastures

Japan is said to be located in the monsoon zone, where specific seasonal winds blow. The Middle East is in an arid desert zone. Europe is in a pastoral zone.

Japanese philosopher Watsuji Tetsuro (1889 – 1960) discussed these three environmental zones and the respective cultures that existed within these zones, including religions.

Although Japan is included in the monsoon zone together with India, I don’t think it is proper to discuss Japan and India as being in the same zone.

India has monsoons, but being in a torrid climatic zone, it has a very severe weather. In the summer, it is extremely hot and that is usual. It is very unlikely that Indians and Japanese share the same way of thinking.

Japan is an archipelago to the east of the Asian Continent, stretching for nearly two hundred kilometers from north to south, with the central line at latitude 35° N. The Indian Subcontinent is at latitude 30° to 10°N. Temperature, sunshine and winds drastically vary locally within the country. Consequently, cultures vary locally.

The same applies to Europe. For instance, Germany in the north and Greece and Italy in the south have quite different types of pasturelands. This is where Watsuji's theory fails to be applicable.

However, it is true that natural environments affect the way people think. In Japan, trees abound in forests and woods. In addition to plenty of green, there is plenty of water with much rainfall and the Japanese natural environment is very rich and suitable for habitation for plants and animals. It is equally important that we have four seasons in Japan. It is sometimes cold and sometimes hot, which requires people to be adaptable.

In a sense, Japan is surrounded by ideal environmental conditions, which has led to the development of the Japanese people's nature worship and has become a major factor in giving birth to the religion of nature.

Even if there is a country with a similar natural environment, there is probably no other country in the world where nature and humans are in as perfect harmony as in Japan, and where this harmonious relationship between nature and humans has continued from antiquity to the present. Today, there is agitation for people to be aware of an environmental crisis, of exaggerated climate change due to global warming. Nature moves of its own accord.

We live in the natural conditions inherent from ancient times and yet we do not think the religion born out of nature to be universal.

At present, peoples all over the world use various things which were born out of nature. Natural resources such as

timber and oil are, originally, products of nature.

Though natural conditions differ, when it comes to enjoying natural products, the world is one and universalized. Even if there is a country complaining that it cannot abide with nature or that its country is mostly desert, all country receive natural benefits in one way or another. Of course, some countries may be too poor to accept nature as it is. Economic conditions count if we are to properly accept nature. Even in the most dismal natural environment, there are ways in which humans overcome adversity. Nature can be revived and through benefits of water and soil, nature can be restored. In either case, we need the power of nature.

In a sense, Japan is equipped with the most favorable of natural conditions. But in principle, the use of nature should be shared in common with the world. This principle will not change as long as we live on the earth.

If this is the case, people can believe in nature, without needing to create a human-like god out of nature or assuming the existence of such gods. Have a look at the universe and we will instantly understand this. The universe works of its own accord. We know this with a glance of the sun or from our daily lives. We can comprehend that nature gives us benefits and at the same time controls us. Thus, we will think highly of nature, as a thing of respect, and not as an thing that is under our control. This is what Einstein referred to as "religiousness."

It hardly makes sense that Westerners, Christians, Jews and Muslims think "God created nature." We must clearly declare that this is "fiction." Maybe, only the Japanese can say so—that there was no "God" from the beginning, without needing to quote Nietzsche's words "God is dead" or Dawkins' "The God Delusion."

Now we conclude briefly that the Corona virus, which we know was caused by Chinese communists with collaborations of western countries scientists, and that we strongly criticize this bacteriological weapon as criminal tentative against the Nature, which we consider like above in Japan.

