

# Cultural Syncretism: Exploring the Coexistence of Shinto and Buddhist Practices in Japan

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**Abstract** -The religious composition of Japan includes a coexistence of Shinto and Buddhist practices that represents the belief system of one group, both historically and contemporarily. This coexistence is popularly referred to as *shinbutsu-shūgō*, and it has developed over centuries, allowing elements of both traditions to exist together peacefully in Japan. Shinto, an indigenous Japanese religion that has elements based in nature worship and ritual purity while Buddhism, which arrived in Japan through India, China and Korea in the 6th century, is based on philosophical precepts as well as notions of afterlife. Many Japanese people participate in rituals and festivals associated with both religions without claiming either as their exclusive faith. This relationship allows both religions to coexist harmoniously, and it is illustrated by shared sacred space, as both Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples may be located next to one another, or even in the same temple complex. This paper explores the coexistence of these practices which demonstrates Japan's cultural adaptability and the capacity for different belief systems to complement rather than conflict with one another.

**Keywords:** Shinto, Buddhism, Syncretism, *Kami*

## INTRODUCTION

Shinto and Buddhism are both religious traditions with significant and long-standing roots within Japanese society. These completely separate religious traditions have existed hand-in-hand and have largely co-existed in Japanese cultural existence for a considerable duration of time, even to the point where Buddhist and Shinto practices would intermingle in everyday living and cultural practices. This moderated syncretism radically shifted the religious characteristics of Japan's scientific landscape, and produced diversity and variety in beliefs and rituals.

Shinto is defined as the indigenous and ancient faith of Japan and is prehistorical, predating the written

word and formed deeply within the cultural meaning of the Japanese people. It is a naturalistic worship of the dead and a veneration of ancestors, striking between these are the *kami*, which are spiritual presences or divine spirits, that exist within nature. Shinto rituals contain ritual focus upon purification, expressions of gratitude or thanks, and blessings at various occasions in life. Shinto is related to the imperial family of Japan, with the emperor believed to be a descendant of Amaterasu, the goddess of the sun.

The influence of Shinto is much wider than religious customs. It permeates Japanese art and literature. The idea of *mono no aware* captures the emotion of recognizing the impermanence of things more than anything else. *Mono no aware*<sup>1</sup> is linked directly to Shinto traditions and tenets of appreciation of beauty and beauty in transience and contamination from nature. Shinto shrines, with their torii gates, grounds, and purification rites, act as a communal public space for the practice of festivals and rites of worship and connect with, and reinforce shared social connection.

While Shinto existed historically as the indigenous faith, on the Asian mainland and within the walls of Japan, Buddhism arrived into Japan around in 552 CE<sup>2</sup>. Buddhism brought established religious form, and sophisticated philosophical areas such as spiritual enlightenment, samsara, or the process of rebirth and the attainment of nirvana. Over the course of time, Buddhism in Japan got divided into a few sects such as Zen, Pure Land, Nichiren among others which provided different methods to enlightenment and attracted people with different spiritual priorities.

The introduction of Buddhism had a great impact on Japanese culture and influenced art, architecture, literature, and continued to permeate political

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<sup>1</sup> Mono no aware literally means "pathos of things". It refers to the thinking that everything is transient in nature. Nothing is permanent in this world.

<sup>2</sup> Saunders, *Buddhism in Japan*, 91

institutions. In addition to the religious aspect, Buddhist temples served as places of academic learning and artistic production, to contribute to the culture of Japanese calligraphy, painting, and sculpture.

The dynamism of traditional Japanese beliefs and Buddhism created a unique environment, where many Japanese people started taking part in both the practices that exist in Shinto and Buddhism. For instance, many individuals visit *jinja* (Shinto shrines) for blessings, life occasions such as weddings, and seasonal practices at end of the season. At the same time, many attend *otera* (Buddhist temples) for funerals, memorials, and ancestor veneration<sup>3</sup>.

The fully syncretic nature of Japanese traditional religion is exhibited in many aspects throughout daily life and Japanese culture. Indeed, many homes have both a *kamidana* (Shinto shrine) and a *butsudan* (Buddhist household altar). While Japanese seasonal festivals are often derived from West Asian concepts, they are often intermingled with aspects of Shinto, and even sometimes Buddhism, as Shinto purification rites precede the Buddhist festival. Some deities are venerated in both Shinto and Buddhist contexts, from the standpoint that certain *kami* are recognized or named as manifestations of Buddhist bodhisattvas<sup>4</sup>. This fusion of religious traditions is also evident in Japanese architecture and art. Many religious sites incorporate aspects of both Shinto and Buddhism, with some sites consisting of a Shinto shrine and a Buddhist temple that resides on the same grounds. Overall, the aesthetic principles of both traditions have served as invaluable influences on Japanese art, garden design, and many other domains of Japanese culture.

Shinto and Buddhism have also had a clear impact on Japanese values and social norms. Harmonious living with nature, respect for one's ancestors, and the reason behind purification rituals are deeply rooted in Japanese identity that stems from Shinto and Buddhist conceptualizations. The focus on group harmony and social togetherness that is evident in Japanese society comes from both Shinto's sense of community and Buddhism's compassion and sense of interdependence. Shinto and Buddhism also speak to ideas of time and history.

While Shinto emphasizes the notion of time as cyclical, highlighting seasonal rituals and the eternal existence of *kami*, Buddhism brings a more linear perspective around concepts of karma and rebirth. This juxtaposition has implications on Japanese historiography and on how Japanese society interprets its present, past, and future.

The simultaneous existence of Shinto and Buddhism has not come without conflict or tension at certain periods throughout Japanese history, particularly during the Meiji Restoration in the late 19th century, with strong attempts to separate the two traditions. Yet deeply embedded syncretic practices and thinking have streamlined against those restrictions, and reflect the enduring history of a kind of durable and dynamic, unique religious environment.

The syncretic nature of Japanese religion has meant that it is not only able to bring together Shinto and Buddhism, but has also meant that it has absorbed new religious movements and other foreign influences. For instance, Japan has absorbed from Confucianism, Taoism and even, to a slight extent, Christianity, among others, fully into the existing religious tradition. This openness to ideas from a range of spiritual beliefs has added a richness and complexity to Japanese spirituality. In present day Japan, many Japanese do not consider themselves strongly religious in the traditional sense. The syncretic quality of Shinto and Buddhism represents Japan's resilient ability to harmonize diverse ideas into a coherent wholeness.

In facing 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges, such as technological advances, demographic shifts and global environmental crisis, today's syncretic traditions will form a strong basis for the Japanese to draw upon as a sense of spiritual and cultural cohesion. The flexibility and adaptability of the syncretic tradition may prove invaluable to help address ethical and social challenges of today and in the future, bringing together tradition and innovation.

The study of Japan's syncretic religious environment provides insight into the nature of religious coexistence and cultural understandings. It is clear that different ways of life not only can exist peacefully over time, they can also enhance one another to create a richer more derivative spiritual worldview. The model of religious syncretism may offer an important model to consider for societies

<sup>3</sup> Reader, *Religion in Contemporary Japan*, 86

<sup>4</sup> Saunders, *Religion in Japan*, p-136

grappling with religious diversities and cultural integrations in an increasingly globalized world.

#### The Historical Development of Shinto and Buddhism in Japanese Society

Shinto and Buddhism had a great impact on Japanese society throughout history by creating cultural, artistic, political, and living aspects of Japanese society. Shinto is the indigenous religion of Japan and developed from ancient animistic beliefs and practices that venerates natural wonder and ancestral spirits. As a polytheistic religion, the notion of *kami* is central to worship in Shinto and embodies a variety of polytheistic idea exemplified by the mountain *kami*, river *kami*, and tree *kami*. Shinto worship includes ritual acts and ceremonies related to various transitions in people's lives and also to the change of seasons.

Buddhism was introduced to Japan in the 6th century CE from Korea and China. As Buddhism developed and gained prestige throughout the archipelago, it influenced Japanese society while gradually coming to coexist with Shinto. Additionally, as Buddhism arrived in Japan, it adapted to the sensibilities and values of Japanese society (Stuart, 2023). Over time, Japanese traditions and values enabled new and unique schools of thought in Japan such as Zen Buddhism and Pure Land Buddhism. Buddhism not only applies to ritual practice, it also shaped the Japanese conception of Japanese aesthetics and even philosophy and architecture.

In time, the two religions fused and many, if not most, Japanese individuals engaged in both religions simultaneously: *Shinbutsu-Shūgō*<sup>5</sup>. This unique relationship for Japanese individuals became emblematic of Japanese religious life, as variants of Shinto and Buddhism essentially fused. In many ways, syncretism and the melding of Shinto and Buddhism are seen typical in Japan, which include aspects in art and literature and even festivals.

Though Shinto and Buddhism fused to allow an entirely unique religious landscape in Japan that afforded individuals the chance draw from aspects of both traditions to obtain spiritual guidance and social support as desired, the Meiji period (1868-1912) national policy of *shinbutsu bunri* (meaning

“separation of deities and Buddha”) aimed to establish State Shinto as an independent national doctrine intending to remove its ties and associations with Buddhism simultaneously reestablished the divine essence of the emperor. Part of *shinbutsu bunri* policy involved the destruction and/or converting existing shrine and temple sites as being state-approved houses of worship.

After World War II, *shinbutsu bunri* was abolished and during the post-war period offered Japanese society the again express themselves and reveal their real religious and spiritual beliefs and practices; thus, allowing for the concepts of *shinbutsu shūgō* to reemerged as practice and social interest for the Japanese. At present, both Shinto and Buddhism co-exist peacefully in Japan along with other religions.

#### The Harmonious integration of Shinto and Buddhist Practices in Japanese Daily Life

Shinto and Buddhist rituals are a significant part of everyday life in Japan and infuse many parts of culture and society. These beliefs and traditions have long and abiding influences within the habits and customs, traditions, and worldviews in Japan, and created a distinctive spiritual space in Japan.

Shinto events, such as visiting the shrine for blessings and during seasonal festivals, happen throughout the year. Each event includes purification rites, offering to deities, and prayers for good fortune, health, and success. Many homes have a *kamidana*, which are small Shinto altars, where families performed daily prayers and provided offerings of rice, sake, and salt to both *kami* ancestral spirits and local gods. These familial shrines, act as ongoing reminders of the moral order between the world, the living, and the existence of the realm of the supernatural (*kami*).

Buddhist practices are also a large part of society in Japan. Many people will also have daily rituals such as offering incense in a household and use family altar (*butsudan*). An altar denotes the place where members of a deceased community member live in memory to honour them. Buddhist rituals for deceased relatives are known as *hōji*, and constitute a significant part of the practice of Japanese religious and cultural traditions that are observed.

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<sup>5</sup> *Shinbutsu Shugo* denotes the amalgamation of Shinto and Buddhist deities that occurred throughout Japanese history.

There are scheduled events after each event of death. Furthermore, participating in significant dates in the Buddhist calendar by honouring the dead such as in the Obon festival or taking part in *Higan* (equinox observances) is an important aspect to the spiritual lives of many Japanese.

The cohabitation of these two systems is evident in the way so many Japanese individuals develop a holistically spiritual life based on, and incorporating ideas from, both traditions, and often do so without even knowing or identifying specific practices or beliefs and to which tradition they may be related to.

This practice of cohabitation is typical of the Japanese, who throughout their religion often cannot separate Buddhist and Shinto practices, beliefs, and spaces. For example, it is not unusual for a Japanese person to visit a Shinto shrine requesting a blessing for the New Year (the first visit to a shrine each year), and then, later in the year to attend a Buddhist temple for a memorial service.

This cohabitation of belief systems can be seen in numerous customs and practices in Japan. New Year's celebrations, include elements of both Shinto and Buddhist tradition. Many people go to Shinto shrines for *hatsumode* (the first shrine visit of the year) to pray for good fortune, and they may also perform a Buddhist ceremony such as *joya no kane* (ceremony that requires ringing temple bells 108 times to dispel worldly desires).

Life cycle events also reflect elements from both systems of belief. Shinto ceremonies are usually associated with births including the weddings, while Buddhist ceremonies are more associated with funerals and memorial services. It is not unusual for a life cycle event to include elements from both.

The perspective that both systems of faith provide in contemporary Japan is more than just religious practices. The influences run deeper and deeper into the lives of the Japanese people. Traditional arts such as flower arrangements (*ikebana*), tea ceremony (*chanoyu*) contain spiritual dimensions from both traditions. Architecture, literature, and popular culture contain elements of and themes represented in Shinto and Buddhist beliefs.

In addition to this, the environment is a part of the Japanese world view, including Shinto beliefs that the natural world is sacred. This perspective has facilitated the view of harmony with nature and respect the environment for many Japanese. In the

same way, the thinking in Buddhism related to mindfulness, and impermanence has influenced Japanese aesthetics and their understandings of life, that is reflected in the design of Japanese gardens.

Overall, the distinction of the ways that Buddhism and Shinto function within one another as a unique reality in Japan continues to be essential to understand Japanese life. The gradual integration of both systems of faith into everyday living speaks to the ability of Japanese spirituality to adapt and remain a continuing influence on many aspects of Japanese society together. Their ability to adapt to life today and their influences reflect and apply to all aspects to Japanese society, including collective consciousness. As Japan experiences the challenges of modernization, the ancient systems remain meaningful and an essential reference in their lives.

## CONCLUSION

The simultaneous practice of Shinto and Buddhism in Japan is a rare illustration of cultural syncretism that has shaped belief systems for centuries. It showcases the openness and adaptability of Japanese spirituality that resulted in the integration of two systems of belief. The relationship of Shinto and Buddhist practice demonstrates how Shinto's nature-based rituals, along with Buddhist philosophical concepts, have blended together to create a living religious practice that continues to exist in contemporary Japan. This syncretic tradition illustrates how two distinct belief systems are able to coexist and complement one another in an era of change in Japanese religious thought. While Japan encounters new contemporary and global challenges, the continuing syncretic tradition are examples of how traditional beliefs, while making space for new, innovative paths forward. The wider implications may speak to the possibilities for religious harmony in the other regions of the increasingly connected and interdependent world.

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