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# **The Way of Shinto Through Modern Japan.**

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs í Japönsku máli og menningu

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## **Abstract**

This essay examines the Japanese religious environment, how Shinto is connected to other religions as well as exploring how modern-day Japan is almost always influenced by Shinto one way or another. Firstly, the religious environment of Japan is explained as well as how Japan works as a syncretic religious system, as well as the difference between the terms of religion and belief and their definition. The origin of Shinto, as well as the different sects and the often referred to eight million gods, will be looked at and explained thoroughly. In the end Shinto as it appears in Miyazaki's movies, modern-day movies, video games, and Marie Kondo will be inspected thoroughly and described in more detail. The question presented in this essay is if Shinto should be classified as a belief or as a religion and also if modern influencers such as Marie Kondo have been influencing people by bringing Shinto into their lives with her tidying methods, without people being fully aware of it.

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## Introduction

Japan, like many other countries, is a society full of new rituals, as well as traditions and mythology. What is idiosyncratic about Japanese belief is that religion is perceived differently from how many would view it normally. As people travel throughout Japan, they might notice that there are many temples where they can go and pray and honor many of the different gods which exist in Japan. Most of these gods are from the Shinto belief, which is the national religion of Japan. There are estimated to be around 80,000 Shinto temples throughout Japan, with some being more famous than others. The most central of those would be the grand shrine of the sun goddess, *Amaterasu*. The imperial family of Japan is believed to be the direct descendants of this goddess. It is said that Emperor Akihito is the 125<sup>th</sup> direct descendant of Emperor Jinmu, who is Japan's first emperor according to legend and also a mythical descendant from the sun goddess *Amaterasu*. (Schumacher, M.).

Another example of this visibility of belief practices in Japan are the home shrines and temples so, if people have the opportunity to visit a Japanese household, they will most likely see a small shrine or temple which the family made for family members who have passed away as well as the house god, *ujigami* (Hiroshi, 2005). The Japanese people often go to Shinto Shrines on the last day of the year to pray that the year to come will be better than the one before. High school students who are studying for their college entrance exams also go to shrines and pray for good luck. *Tenjin* was a scholar who was deified and is now the god of poetry, and he is a popular god that these students pray to get into their school of choice, as otherwise, they will have to become a *ronin*<sup>1</sup>

This thesis will examine the various Shinto beliefs and Shinto mythology by how they are presented in modern society for instance its representation in modern media, which is not generally

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<sup>1</sup> *Ronin* in the past were Samurai Warriors who had left their masters and were without one for some time but nowadays it is used to describe students which have failed their entrance exams into Universities and have to wait for a whole a year to try and get into them again.

associated with any type of belief system. Yet, in Japan, these associations become more visible. Furthermore, the question as to the religious element of Shinto will be examined from the theory that it better constitutes a belief system rather than a religion. As well as see how Shinto has influenced people in the modern-day without them being consciously aware of it.

## 1. The Japanese Religious Environment

The Japanese religious environment is a combination of Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and Shinto. The majority of the Japanese nation practices Shinto at some point during their life, and then shift towards Buddhism as death approaches. That is because Shinto is seen as life-celebrating while Buddhism deals with the afterlife. (Tibesar, L. 1937).

Shinto has the characteristics of many naturistic religions such as Wicca, which involve nature worship and taboos about impurity. Wicca is a part of Witchcraft, and in the Wicca community, Witchcraft is used as a particular word to mean a Pagan mystery religion as well as a nature religion that worships both Goddesses as well as Gods and is open to all genders (Crowley, 1998).

However, unlike Christianity and Buddhism, it does not possess a central tome that guides its followers through scriptures. Even though it does not technically have any written rules, some rituals do play a significant role as the base of ancient Japanese mythology about ancestors and emperor worship (Toshio, K. 1981).

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Hayashi Razan and other scholars from the Edo period formulated a Confucian theory about Shinto. Based on this analysis of Shinto, the meaning of Shinto as the official Japanese religion, as opposed to Taoism, Buddhism, or Confucianism, became apparent (Toshio, K. 1981).

For those that live in Japan, there are few religious clashes, it is common to go to a Buddhist temple at midnight on the last day of the year and then visit Shinto shrines on New Year's Day to pray for a better fortune for the upcoming year, or vice versa. Christmas is mostly celebrated with friends and lovers as a commercial holiday, while new year's is the more traditional mid-winter celebration. Funerals are based on Buddhist beliefs while naming ceremonies are generally associated with shrines. Many also believe in fortune-telling, which is based on the philosophy of

Yin and Yang, Taoism and these can take place in a neutral space or the grounds of shrines and temples. The modern-day predilection of Monotheistic religions makes it difficult to understand how more than one religion can function in the same place at the same time. The Japanese often practice both Shinto and Buddhism together throughout their life (Hara, K. 2003). Younger people especially have difficulties distinguishing between them often not being able to tell the difference between a shrine or a temple.

On March 28<sup>th</sup>, 1868, *shinbutsu bunri*, which means the separation of gods and Buddhas was enforced in Japanese society. At that time, the *Fukko* (restoration) Shinto, which idealized the Hirata and Mito schools of emperor worship, ordered that all Shinto shrines should separate the gods and the Buddhas. This was carried out with frightening outbursts of violence against the Buddhist institutions. Consequently, the religious tolerance between Shinto and Buddhism, which was said to have lasted for a thousand years, came to an abrupt end (Antoni, 1995).

In modern Japan, religion is not usually the cause of special status or discrimination, unless it comes in the way of other duties people have, such as neighborhood shrine cleaning. However, because of the ‘new religion’ group *Aum Shinrikyo* which had an extreme dogma and ended up releasing poisonous gas in the Tokyo underground in 1995, a suspicion of all religious sects arose (Hendry, 2019)

### **Religion vs Belief and a Religious Syncretistic System**

Japan has what is called a religiously syncretic system. Syncretism is a system wherein various sets of beliefs and religions are mixed together to form a sort of a whole, a whole which however people can to a large extent choose which bits to adhere to and when in life to do so. The only exception to this would be shrine duties, such as festivals and community, which are seen as a duty of those living in the said area and which go beyond your personal beliefs, so that even local Muslims and Christians are encouraged and expected to participate.

The term syncretism has been used by people and scholars as a concept to discuss transmission between any culture, which results in combinations and synthesis of different things which would not have been a problem if the idea had not been used as a disapproving term in Christian theology (Pandian, 2006).

Ontologist Miller argues that religion is something that you plan to do or something you end up achieving. He also argues that belief is something that is intended for temporary use until something better or more suitable is found (Miller, 2013). However, in her studies on Japanese society, Hendry explains that the difference between religion and belief is that religion is quite different from other affairs of life. According to her one can explain belief as someone believing in those affairs (Hendry, 2019)

Surveys which have been done in recent decades show that about 59 to 78 percent of homes in Japan have a Buddhist *butsudan*<sup>2</sup> altar, and a slightly less than 50 percent have a Shinto *kamidana*<sup>3</sup> shelf. Those household shrines are attended to regularly and deserve more attention from the family members living in the household. Upon inquiring as to their uses the most common motivation which is given were:

1. to communicate again with one's ancestors,
2. to gain a feeling of protection which is given from ancestors or kami,
3. to feel secure from such entities, and finally,
4. to fulfill the various obligations one's family has.

Everyday rituals related to the *butsudan* are such as lighting candles or incense, giving up offerings of specific foods or unique flowers, reciting prayers which have been memorized in time with rhythm on a small wooden drum, or mumbling informal prayers or greetings to those that have passed away.

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<sup>2</sup> 仏壇,ぶつだん, *butsudan* – “ancestor“ or “Buddhist“ alter.

<sup>3</sup> 神棚、かみだな、*kamidana* – house hold Shinto shrines.

In Japan, many people feel that making daily offerings or prayers in front of a *butsudan* or a *kamidana* is vital as a so-called social responsibility. These responsibilities are often highly valued in society and are thought to be for the well-being of the entire family. (Roemer, 2012)

Offerings at these *kamidanas* and *butsudans* are made regularly, and special services for a memorial are made so they can take care of the soul at a specific time after the person passed away. Those special memorial services are done for a period of around fifty to sixty years. It all depends on the region, where that family lives, how long those periods are (Hendry, 2019).

Everyday rituals related to the *kamidana* start with the person washing their hands as well as mouth, then cleaning up the floral or other decorations which are arranged around the *kamidana*. Then the person places an offering that is typically either raw rice, water, salt, and places it on the altar. After that, they make a slight bow once, then bow deeper twice and end with praying in silence. When the praying is over, the person then bows yet again twice deeply, claps their hands twice, then finalize the ritual with a deep bow then ending with a smaller bow. The food which is offered to the *kamis* through the *kamidana* is later added to a meal which the family eats, symbolizing the shared connection between the kami and the family (Roemer, 2012). It is not uncommon in Japan that some households have both a *kamidana* and a *butsudan* in their homes.

## **Buddhism.**

Around the 7th century, there was a population influx to Japan, which brought with it various technological advances as well as new ideologies mainly from China but also from Korea, and consequently, cultural elements were mixed. Their arrival brought far-reaching changes to Japanese culture and influenced the development of the hierarchical system in Japan. At that time, Buddhism was introduced via this cultural assimilation.

Although Buddhism originated in India, it has gone through some considerable changes, traveling through China, where it became influenced by various ideologies applied by Chinese traveling monks who brought the religion to Japan in the 7<sup>th</sup> century.

The Buddhist structures where people pray are called temples, which are different from the Shinto structures, which are called shrines. Though they are different, there are places in Japan where these religions co-exist, and priests or those that work at these structures can officiate in the buildings of the other religion they technically do not practice (Hendry, 2019).

In Japanese Buddhism, there are three significant sects which are *Zen*, *Jodo Shinsu*, and finally *Shingon*. These selections have the rightfulness of embracing two primary constructs that emphasize Buddhist piety in Japan. The first significant construct is the way of *jiriki* (self-power), which is very well known in *Zen*, and the second primary construct would be the way of *tariki* (other power), which is followed in the *Jodoshu* as well as the *Jodo Shinshu*. Also included is a type of Buddhism which goes even further than the sects which reach back beyond the immediate historical base in China, all the way back to its India prototypes. *Shingon* is centered at Koya-san, which is located in the south of the Kansai triangle of Osaka-Kyoto-Nara, and it combines attention to two things. On the one hand it is very close to yoga and tantra in their Indian Hinduism as well as their Tibetan Buddhist forms. On the other hand, it pays attention to a Mahayanist philosophy, which provides an underpinning for a powerful universalism and world affirmation (Cooke, 1974).

The Buddhist temples are arranged hierarchically, with a central temple for each of the main sects, which are usually in Nara or Kyoto, and then branch temples in the prefectures outside the capital which serve the smaller local temples (Hendry, 2019).

## **Confucianism**

Another word view that has dramatically influenced Japanese thought is Confucianism. In Japan, there are no priests connected with the Confucianism philosophy, and it has very few places where you can worship. Nevertheless, even though there are so few priests and places to pray, the

ideology which Confucianism brought to Japan has been used at different stages of Japanese history to support as well as justify rules about how to act around people and general moral behavior (Hendry, 2019).

Kuroda Toshio, a historian of the Japanese medieval period, thought of Shinto as not an original Japanese belief, he concluded after some studying that Confucianism profoundly influenced the concept of Shinto as a 'political and usual way'. He said that it was based on the understanding they have in Confucianism of the term *to* or *do*, which means 'the way'. After that, Kuroda, without hesitation, started calling Shinto 'Confucian Shinto'.

From his writings about Shinto and how it is connected to Confucianism, we can take out two critical concepts and use those concepts to further our studies of Shinto in the modern-day and age. Those concepts are that the idea of Shinto as a 'Indigenous religion of Japan' is no longer able to be upheld, and the second one is that many of the elements which account for the many ways of understanding of Shinto are initially from China (Dobbins 1996).

In their book, *A New History of Shinto*, scholars John Breen and Mark Teeuwen approach Shinto from the point of view which understands Shinto as being a result of complicated historical processes all put together, instead of being a part of a so-called Japaneseness in the basic sense. Breen and Teeuwen argue that the very concept of Shinto, or the many concepts, all get-together and make Shinto as it is now all with the process of defining the Japanese national identity in modern Japanese history, which is taught nowadays to those that want to study Japanese history (Breen, J., & Teeuwen, M, 2010 ).

## 2. Shinto

To better understand the essence of Shinto, we will look at the origin of Shinto as well as the different types of Shinto being practiced today, including the eight million gods which are thought to belong in Shinto.

### The Origin of the Shinto Belief

Shinto is said to have developed during the Yayoi period, which started at around 300 BC and ended at about 300 AD (Hara, K. 2003). Shinto has been associated with mythology, which explains the creation of Japan and also the supernatural ancestors of the imperial line. Because of that, Shinto has been related to the establishment of Japan's identity as a nation of itself (Hendry, 2019).

In the Shinto belief, purity is justifiable, while an unclear mind is thought of as a sin. To keep the mind as well as the body clean and pure, is the central idealism of a person believing in Shinto. The idea of hatred and other things related to that are thought only to be the perjury of a narrow-minded person (Tomoeda, 1930).

Around the 8<sup>th</sup> century and during the Heian period, which lasted from 794 until 1185, aspects of worshipping *kami* were based on traditions and rituals found in writings about the rituals and the written sources of Buddhism. Around the same time, the 8<sup>th</sup> century, routines focused on specific deities were put into ritual practices, sacred places as well as a system of thoughts, which were all strongly influenced by a few numbers of priests who were practicing Buddhism at the time. According to Japanologist Mark Teeuwen, "It was this *kami* thought and practice, pioneered by monks of the esoteric Buddhist sects, that opened the way for the *kami* cults to develop into something that may be meaningfully referred to as Shinto: a religious tradition that consciously and explicitly defined itself as non-Buddhist and self-contained" (Schirokauer. 2013).

The literal translation of Shinto into English is 'the way of the *kami*'. The characters which were chosen for 'the way' which is pronounced as *to* or *do*, is the same one which is used for arts and life-paths. An example of those is the martial art *Judo*, *bushido*, which means the way of the samurai, as well as *shodo*, which means calligraphy. The other character chosen, *shin*, has another reading to it, which is *kami*, which has been translated to 'god' in English. Even though the character means 'god,' it is also applied to natural things which are thought to be sacred, for example, trees, mountains, seas, birds as well as animals, and some human beings (Hendry, 2019).

According to the Shinto belief, a person's ancestor has not passed, but instead, they remain among those that are living and loved as well as cherish those that gave deeply. Because of this belief, it is thought that those who live and those that have passed away depend on each other firmly. In other words, the health or well-being of those that are living is connected to the health or well-being of those that have passed. Pure Shinto belief is thought to teach how to have a valid and genuine heart, as well as a clean soul in their body. By acting accordingly, the gods will be pleased and bless the people more often and better. In the Shinto belief, there is no greed, dogma, or any rules as to how to pray to the gods. Instead, Shinto leaves it to their worshippers to find their ideal formation for praying (Kitasawa, 1915).

Those who follow the Shinto belief believe that all things possess spirits. It stresses the importance of nature as well as family bonds. It values the group over the individual since it is a nationalistic religion in itself. Shinto's general principles are known as the 'Correct Way' (Adkins,2017).

Initially, those who practice Shinto seek to enhance the way of the *kami*, or god, by being grateful for their blessings, devoting themselves to rituals, seeking to serve the world as well as other people, leading a harmonious life and praying for national wealth as well as peaceful coexistence with the rest of the world. Shinto can be described as being a folk religion, tradition, and indigenous to Japan, and for most people, it is not a religion by itself but part of one's life.

Shinto can be seen as a religious awareness that puts the highest value and uniformity with Japanese deities such as the ones of nature or the souls of our ancestors to live truthfully and value our life energy. (Hara, K.2003).

In the Shinto belief, there is the idea of *kegare*, which means pollution, which means that people can get polluted, it is mostly though viewed as a mental pollution rather than physical. Those that are likely to be contaminated are those that break societal rules, such as criminals, women when they are going through their menstrual period as well as following giving birth and also people whose family members have passed away. Those who are polluted are not allowed to enter Shinto shrines for a specific amount of time and are not even allowed to enter the family household shrine.

Historically women that were contaminated from pregnancy were also not allowed to see the sun when they left the house, in case they would pollute the sun, so they had to wear a hat outside, which is a direct connection to the sun goddess *Amaterasu*. (Norbeck,1952).

*Harae* in contrast is a so-called purification ritual, which people can take part in if they think that they have been polluted. The purpose of the purification rituals was made for people as a way to physically and mentally purify themselves through ancient rituals at their local shrines (Boyd, 1999). These can take the form of presents to the shrine, general public assistance such as cleaning the environment as well as participating in festivals.

Most people do not notice that they are practicing Shinto in their daily life. The only time they find out they are practicing Shinto is when they voluntarily perform rituals, or something related to community rites.

In Shinto, there are two different types of worldviews about life and death. The first type is based on the vertical and three-dimensional ideas, which include the plain of high heaven (*takamagahara*), middle land, or the world of humankind (*Nakatsu-Kuni*) and finally the under-world of pollution, or the land of the dead (*Yomi*). The other type of worldview about life and death

pictures the universe as horizontal and two-tiered with the world where the purified spirits of the dead reside (*Tokoyo*) and the world of humankind. It was believed that the world where the purified spirits of the dead lived was far beyond the sea. In ancient times, the Japanese thought that the souls of those that had passed away would not go far away from their world, the world of humankind. They believed that their ancestors would stay in the mountains near them, watching over the lives of those that were born after them and then would come back to their house during the New Years" Festival, called '*Oshogatsu*' (Hara, K.2003).

During medieval times in Japan, the word Shinto meant the authority, activity of a *kami*, being a *kami*, power or in short, the stage, or even the attributes of a *kami*. The notion of Shinto being Japan's native belief ultimately emerged both in name and fact with the rise of modern nationalism, which evolved from the National Learning school of Motoori Norinaga and the Restoration Shinto movement which happened around the Edo period, 1603 until 1868, and established the State Shinto in the Meiji Period (Toshio, 1981).

The studies of Motoori Norinaga on the *Koji-ki*<sup>4</sup> provided a conceptual foundation of the modern Shinto belief practiced today. Motoori is also known as the now renowned scholar in Shinto, as well as in Japanese classical literature (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. 2019). He believed that it was not right to try and understand the accounts of *kami* in the *Kojiki* unrealistically and that it was egotistical to try and show no care or respect for the limitations which the human intellect holds (Schirokauer, 2013).

When Shinto was forcibly separated from Buddhism in 1868, Shinto was removed from the religious philosophy which the Japanese nation had achieved by that time. Because of that Shinto ended up being disowned as a religion altogether as a result from that (Toshio, 1981).

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<sup>4</sup> The *Kojiki* is a narration of the divine origins of Japan and the succession of early 'emperor' in the history of Japan. The *Kojiki*, contains the history of the gods, emperors, their children as well as their ancestors, which are all very important in establishing a basis for the systematic order of high kinship groups which they have in Japan. (Schirokauer, C 2013.)

## State Shinto and Other Shinto Beliefs

State Shinto served as one of the significant components in Japanese nationalism, which officially began in 1868 and ended at around 1945 and is often described as the 'State Shinto Period' of Japan. This period is said to combine with other Shinto elements (for example, ethics from Confucianism), which was put under the broad umbrella of the national essence (*kokutai*). It is, therefore, more often referred to as '*kokutai* nationalism' instead of 'Shinto nationalism' (Fridell, 1976). According to the official policy of the Japanese government in 1945, all shrines within the entire shrine system were nationalized, and those shrines were regarded as institutions of the state with a mission to boost values and national symbols. However, this definition of state shrines should be regarded more as a statement of intent, which was only really realized during the State Shinto Period.

Different types of Shinto played a significant role during the 'State Shinto Period' are, for example, Folk Shinto and Sectarian Shinto. In his book 'A Fresh Look at State Shinto', Fridell explains a few different types of Shinto which have been practiced throughout Japanese history and some which are still being practiced to this day. *Kokutai* ideology is one of those types of Shinto. A big complex which involves values, symbols, beliefs, institutions as well as practices which were done all over Japan in sacred centers during the life of Japanese citizens, which are grounded in the notion of the *kokutai*. As it focused mostly on the social life of the citizens, this ideology became increasingly visible during the prewar decades, reaching its end in the ultra-nationalistic period which started in the early 1930's and ended in 1945.

State Shinto is another type of those Shinto beliefs that had elements which were controlled by the Japanese state or under imperial supervision and at that time of the *Kokutai* ideology, they got fundamental support from them. Part of the State Shinto belief is the Imperial Household Shinto, the Ise shrines, shrines of the war dead and also the Shrine Shinto.

Lastly, The Shrine of the war dead is yet another type of Shinto which Fridell writes about. This type of Shinto is set aside primarily for those that have passed away while fighting in a war of some sort. It came under the support of the government at around 1874-75 and was supervised as a so called '*shokonsha*' which in English can be translated as 'spirit invoking shrine'. Through rituals, the spirits of those which have passed away while fighting in a war were called back to the land of the living, so they could receive praise from those that were living. In the year 1945, as many as 148 shrines similar to the shrine of the dead existed in Japan. The main shrine for the Shrine of the war dead is the '*Yasukuni* shrine' which is located in Tokyo and is enshrined for all of the spirits of those who died for the imperial cause. Even the emperor of Japan himself goes to the *Yasukuni* shrine to pray as well as to worship on special occasions (Fridell, 1976)

### **The Eight Million Gods of Shinto**

Japan is often said to be home to '*Yaoyorozu no kami*', rough meaning being , 'eight million gods', indicating that there are unbelievably many gods in Japan, and every one of those gods has its own following. Some are small, meaning it is only a single-family praying to that god, while others are much bigger, but all the followings are local to a specific landmark or a region in Japan (Kathryn, 2016).

The Japanese word for god '*kami*' does not mean the same as the English word god means for those that are Christian. In Shinto, *kami* is an ideology and is thought to be 'something thankful and a merciful being' who gives blessings on people's life. *Kami's* are not things which are believed in and followed blindly, but is based on something both supernatural and superhuman, something human beings believe is all around them, of nature yet apart.

There are three types of *kami's* classified in Shinto. The first is the *kami* of myths, the second is the *kami* of nature, and the third is the *kami* of holy people. In the Japanese concept of *kami*, no one *kami* is mightier than the others. There is no one almighty *kami*. Instead, each *kami* is put into

fields that they are specialized in. Most of the time, those fields are categorized into two types, nature *kami*, and human *kami* (Hara, K. 2003).

### **The creation myth of Japan**

The creation myth of Japan begins at the '*Takama-ga-hara*' meaning the High Plain of Heaven, where all the *kami* has lived before coming down to earth. According to the *Kojiki*, wherein all the mythology is described, fifteen gods and goddesses were introduced quickly without any personal stories about their life or what kind of personality that *kami* has. In the end, two *kamis*' are introduced, *Izanagi* and his wife, *Izanami*. It says that these two deities made Japan as it is nowadays. They were sent down from the high plain of heaven and performed mating rituals, leading to the creation of other gods, such as the sun and moon deities. In the end, *Izanami* passed away after giving birth to a fire deity whose name is '*Kagu-tsuchi*'. After finding out that '*Kagu-tsuchi*' killed his wife, *Izanagi* murdered '*Kagu-tsuchi*' and out of his body came the volcanos around Japan. Filled with grief because of his wife's passing, *Izanagi* went to the world of '*Yomi*', also known as hell, and tried to bring *Izanami* back, but it ended up being in vain. After leaving the '*Yomi*' realm, *Izanagi* went to the river of *Tsukushi* and purified himself of the pollution from the kingdom he had been in.

As *Izanagi* washed his face; the deities of the sun and moon were born from his eyes. His left eye gave birth to the sun goddess '*Amaterasu-o-mi-kami*' whom he gave responsibility for the 'High Plain of Heaven', and from his right eye came the moon god, '*Tsuki-Yomi-no-Mikoto*', whom *Izanagi* gave the responsibility over the night. It is also said that the god of storm and violence, '*Susa-no-wo-no-Mikoto*', was born from *Izanagi's* nose and the god of the wind, '*Shina-Hiko-no-kami*' was taken from his breath. While *Izanami* was in the underworld, she gave birth to a dozen more deities, for example, she gave birth to '*Waka-musubi-no-kami*' who made the silkworm and

the mulberry tree. '*Waka-musubi-no-kami*' had a child whose name is '*Toyo-uke-hime-no-kami*' and she is known as the 'Great Food Goddess' (Holtom, D. 1926).

Following are three examples of the types of kami's in Japanese mythology. The first example is from the *Kojiki* about the Sun Goddess *Amaterasu*. The second one is about *Inari*, who is more than often represented by an image of a fox and then lastly there is *Tenjin* who was believed to be a living human being before becoming a deity.

### ***Amaterasu Omikami - The sun goddess.***

An example of the first type of kami would be the mythical goddess Amaterasu. From the *Kojiki*. She holds the highest position among the Shinto deities as the 'sun goddess' and is a colorful character about, whom many stories have been written, this female goddess is the leader of all Shinto kami and the high ancestral kami of the Imperial family. The largest shrine where she is celebrated in The Grand Shrine of Ise in the Mie Prefecture. The Shrine of Ise focuses mostly on celebration the Japanese national identity.

Imperial House Shinto is conducted at three shrines which are placed within the grounds of the palace, as functions of the Imperial Family. These three shrines are all dedicated to *Amaterasu-o-Mikami*, as well as to the kami of heaven and earth (Fridell, 1976).

### ***Inari***

The fox kami *Inari* is an example of the nature kami type. *Inari* is one of the most popular Shinto deities with over 30% of Shinto shrines dedicated to Inari. Represented by his messenger the fox, *Inari* can be male or female, both or neither (Wieringa,2009). "The distinction between the god and the fox is sometimes blurred, and the god is said to be a fox. "(Werness, 2003). *Inari* is associated with a jewel, which is one of the earlier symbols of Japan and has a long connection with rice production and also with contemporary business. One reason why *Inari* is so popular

nowadays is that he is a symbol of fertility and growth as well as incorporating a primary meaning of changes and shapeshifting, characteristics which have been attributed to Japan for many years (Hendry, 2019).

### ***Tenjin***

An example of a holy people type is the modern-day kami *Tenji*. The god of education, literature, and scholarship, *Tenji* differs from the other kami, since he was once a human named '*Sugawara no Michizane*'. A scholar as well as a poet, he is said to have lived in the 8<sup>th</sup> century (Hendry, 2019). The story goes that while alive, he was a scholar of Chinese studies and a poet, and *Sugawara* influenced many people for a short while until he was sent into exile by the Fujiwara clan who were in control of Japan at that time. After he passed away, his spirit continued to punish those who were opposed to him, leading to a dozen storms, floods, droughts as well as fires and other natural disasters. That all stopped after he became a patron god of letters as well as calligraphy and was worshipped at shrines, which were built entirely for him. Those shrines were put into the capital as well as other places (Schirokauer, C 2013). Students that are worried about their exam results visit his shrines and pray for good grades or to get into their dream university or just any university at all (Hendry, 2019).

The belief in all the three *kami* 's mentioned above is still very alive and vibrant today, depending on the individual. Humans become *kami* after they die and are revered by their families as ancestral *kami*. When it is considered that every aspect of nature has its own *kami*, every house has its own *kami* and every city and region has its own *kami*, the notion of 8 million gods becomes understandable as it stands for virtual infinity (Mogi, 2018)

### 3. Representation of Shinto in Modern Society

Early Shinto mythology explained how the Japanese were the descendants of divine beings. After World War II, the state religion (State Shinto) was abolished, the Emperor abdicated his claim of divine ancestry and Shinto became a matter of personal choice. In modern day Japan, the majority of the citizens still pray to gods which are chronicled in the *Kojiki* in addition to some that are more recent and modern. Festivities celebrating the different kami take place throughout the year. *Amaterasu*, the sun goddess, is celebrated on July 17th every year, as well as on December 21st, which is the winter solstice. The winter solstice indicates her role in bringing light back into the world (Schumacher, M). *Inari* is prayed to by those that wish their crops, companies or businesses to grow further. And lastly *Tenjin* is prayed to by students who wish to pass their entrance exams and get into their dream schools. These manifestations are not limited to conscious observances since many Japanese may not necessarily practice Shinto as a religion today but are also expressed almost unconsciously through daily routines and rituals.

#### Shinto in Modern Japan.

Around the late 1950's, a new term emerged in post-war Japan. That term was *shin shukyo*, which means 'new religions'. In the first half of the twentieth century, academics and Japanese media generally referred to *ruji shukyo*, which means quasi-religion, or *jakyō*, which means false religion, as well as *shinko shukyo*, which means newly arisen religions when they were talking about *shin shukyo*.

This movement of the *Shin Shukyo* was called the New Religion Movement in Japan or NRM for short. These movements were alternatives to the more accessible, more developed belief systems of that time, such as Buddhism and Christianity, which had scriptures, as well as a history in Japan which spanned more than a millennium and legal elements in the social structure of Japanese religions, mostly related to rites of passages and social as well as household connections.

The change in terminology from '*ruij*' meaning false and '*shi*' meaning new, proves that '*shin shukyo*' in recent decades have reached more acceptability in academia as well as the media, even though *shin* still has the alternative/outsider religion status. *Shin shukyo* is thereby different from *kisei shukyo* meaning established religions, which Shinto and Buddhism are put under. (Reader, 2005)

Sectarian Shinto (Kyoha Shinto) is a collective name for various popular sects of Shinto which originated in the mid-19th century. These sectarian variations of Shinto all have in common that they are founded by private persons and based on various interpretations of traditional Shinto. They focus on the religious experience of the founding leaders who were thought to be charismatic, with an emphasis on the salvation of those that believe individually. (Fridell, 1976).

One of those New Religion Movements connected to sectarian Shinto is called *Omoto-kyo*. They claim to work cures which are spiritual as well as mental, and they seem to appeal mostly to those idle and uneducated. The founder of *Omote-kyo* was Nao Deguchi, an old lady who was born in 1836, uneducated who claimed to be the incarnation of a Shinto deity. The headquarters of this religion is crowded with those who desire to have the evil spirit inside of them exorcised. *Omoto-Kyo* is a religion that claims to be able to do that. This religion seems to encourage the belief in animals as well as demon possession, and because of that has driven weak-minded people mad. It is even so bad that the island of Formosa<sup>5</sup> had forbidden this type of exorcism (Saunders, 1922)

These sectarian variations of Shinto have been categorized into five different groups which are different from the state Shinto practices. These groups are: Revival Shinto; Confusion Sects; Mountain-worship sects; Purification sects; and utopian or faith-healing sects. These sects have then also developed many splinted sects (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2017)

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<sup>5</sup>The Republic of Formosa was a short-lived republic that existed on the island of Taiwan in 1895

Today Shinto can roughly be classified into three major types. Sect Shinto as described above is a relatively new addition. Shrine Shinto which has been around from the beginning of Japanese history to the present day. Shinto was dismantled as the state religion of Japan after World War II but Shrine Shinto, which includes within its structure the now defunct State Shinto still has close relationship with the Imperial family. The final type would be Folk Shinto which covers the aspect of Japanese folk belief that affects daily life and rituals (Hirai,2019).

## The representation of the Shinto belief in video games and movies

Shinto has been with the Japanese people from the beginning of Japanese history, so it is not difficult to imagine that it has an effect on daily culture and entertainment.

The computer game has become one of the major mediums of today. Playing a modern computer game may not conjure up images of beliefs, however when people play a game that is set in the ancient times of Japan, they often find themselves fighting with the help of friends against enemies, which are oftentimes based on mythical creatures and gods from Japanese mythology.

Like many religions, Japanese mythology is full of exciting stories that would be fascinating to see made into video games or movies. However, it is not necessary to take a whole story and use it completely as the basis on which to make a game or movie, it is possible to take only individual elements and provide them with a twist like they did in the *Okami* game described below.

Shinto has also found its way into animated movies that have garnered large audiences and acclaim worldwide.

### Video Games.

There are a number of video games which contain elements of Shintoism including the games *Okami*, *Marvel vs. Capcom 3*, *Ultimate Marvel vs. Capcom3*, the *Shin Megami Tensei* series, *Smite*, *Destiny*, *Final Fantasy XIV* and also *Pokemon*. But for the purpose of demonstration the following three games will be examined; *Okami*, *Zelda* and *Persona4*.

### Okami

In *Okami*, the handheld console game from 2006, the primary player is represented by a sword-wielding wolf, who is the son of the goddess *Amaterasu* herself. According to the sources, the creator, Hideki Kamiya, deliberately incorporated Japanese mythology into the game adding an interesting twist on the characters. An example of this is the legendary swordsman *Susano*, who in

Japanese mythology is the kami of sea and storms, but in the game is made into a drunken fool. And the one-inch tall *Issun* who is often alongside *Okami* in the game, is taken straight out of a traditional folk tale about a one-inch-samurai who goes by the name *Isshun-Boshi*. (Wen, A. 2017).

#### **Persona 4**

Persona is a game series made by the Japanese media franchise *Shin Megami Tensei*. The first Persona game, called 'Revelations: Persona' was released in 1996. The series revolves around a group of high school students who play a game called 'Persona' which is similar to the myth of saying 'Bloody Mary' three times into the mirror to summon a ghost, but in the Persona series, the high school students get powers to summon allies called 'Personas'. The game series for Playstation is now in its fifth iteration (Farokhmanseh, 2016)

In the fourth instalment of the game, the enemies are modelled after mythical Japanese figures. An example of that is the final 'true' boss of the Persona 4 series which is Izanami. In the game, she is intrigued by human's true desire and believes that by observing the ones who have awakened their Persona, she would be able to learn and carry out humanity's true desire. (Peyo212, 2018)

#### **Zelda**

The legend of Zelda is an action-adventure styled video game series created by Shigeru Miyamoto in 1986. In The Legend of Zelda, players are represented by Link, a young warrior who must fight monster to save princess Zelda, whom the game is named after. In the game, the player is also capable of discovering secrets, using tools and solving mysteries (Hilliard, 2017).

In the most recent Zelda game, Breath of the Wild, there are a number of references to Shinto belief. An example of that is when you offer fruits to a row of idol statues in the game, which is a

common practice in Japanese society, you will find '*Korok*' hiding there as well, whose background seems inspired by a *Kodama* or a tree spirit from Okinawan legends.(Kathryn, 2016).

It is clear that Japanese video game makers are getting inspiration from Shinto myths and characters, these are used to enhance the games, giving further depth to various characters and situations by invoking a sense of familiarity and perhaps unwitting obeisance. However, the same could also be said about another popular form of entertainment, the movies.

### **Movies**

When watching movies, people do not always grasp every single detail visible in the film. Re-watching a movie might possibly reveal few small details and references that went unseen during the initial viewing. It is unusual to watch a movie and all the while analyze or try to notice a reference to a belief or a religion appearing in the film but when watching a movie again, after figuring out its connection to a belief or a religion, sometimes the movie comes together and things make more sense.

### **Miyazaki movies.**

A set of movies that have gained international fame yet are also emblematic for Japanese society are the films of Hayao Miyazaki. Born in Tokyo, 1941, Miyazaki has directed 29 films and is considered one of Japan 's greatest animation directors (imdb,2020).

In Shintoism, it is said that a person should live with a pure heart/soul/mind, and that is the central theme of the 2001 movie, *Spirited away*. The story follows the lead character, Chihiro through her journey from being a sulking child being forced to abandon her old home and all she knew, into a young person who acts with sincerity towards the world and others around her. One of the most iconic scenes in the movie is when a so-called 'stink spirit' which looks like a walking pool of mud, comes to the bathhouse where Chihiro is forced to work in the spiritual world she gets

drawn into. Chihiro is ordered to serve the stink spirit, but in the end, the stink spirit although repulsive is not truly what it seems. It is actually a river god who has been polluted by all of rubbish which has been thrown into the river throughout the years. With help from the other workers at the bathhouse, Chihiro manages to pull out the substance which was stuck inside the god and sets him free from the pollution which had been surrounding him (Miyazaki,2001)

The stink spirit is most likely representing the idea in the belief that we are all born pure, and actions and the options we face and take in our life, pollute our heart, mind, and soul. The bath in which the Stink Spirit took represents the purification rituals that are performed at Shinto Shrines.

Another movie by Miyazaki, which has representative elements of Shinto in it, is the 1997 movie, 'Princess Mononoke'. In that movie, the lead character, Prince Ashitaka, is caught in a battle between the humans and the side of nature. The human side is controlled by Lady Eboshi, who controls stonework, which has started polluting the air around them as well as deforesting the hillsides, to help her stonework. The nature side is run by Princess Mononoke, who was raised by wolves and lives with them in the forest. She fights alongside the animals against Lady Eboshi with the help of the god of their forest, which takes the shape of a gigantic stag. In the movie, the stag is murdered by a hunter sent by Lady Eboshi, simply because the emperor wanted the stag's head. Because the stag was killed and him being the god of the forest, the forest itself started dying, but with the help of Prince Ashitaka and Princess Mononoke, they put the stag back together like he was before he was killed by putting his head back on, and after doing so, the forest comes back to life (Miyazaki,1991).

Yet another film by Miyazaki, which shows elements of Shinto, is the lesser known movie, 'Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind'. That movie follows a young princess in a post-apocalyptic world, who discovers a relationship between the forests and humans. After realizing that relationship, she tries to spread awareness and stop people from spreading radioactive waste over

the land and protect the woods around her, which are slowly purifying and healing the world, which had been damaged by all the poisonous chemicals (Miyazaki, 1984).

In an interview with Robert Epstein from The Independent, the director Miyazaki said that he did not believe in Shinto as a religion, but he did respect it. He felt that the ideological origin of Shinto is deeply rooted within him (Epstein, 2010). This would seem evident throughout his movies.

### **Your name By Makoto Shinkai**

In the 2016 animated movie *Your name* written and directed by Makoto Shinkai, there is a clear reference to the Shinto religion in the film. The lead female character Mitsuha Miyamizu is a maiden (*maiko*) at a Shinto Shrine, which is run by her family and it beautifully drawn in this movie. In the film, she is seen performing a ritual with her sister which involves her chewing on rice and spitting it into a bottle. Then later in the film, she goes with her younger sister who is also a maiko and their grandmother who runs the shrine, to a sacred place, where they end up leaving the bottle. The rice mixed with her saliva begins fermenting and becomes sake, Japanese rice wine. The lead male character, Taki, ends up going over to her town after seeing it being destroyed and drinks the sake he finds, which allows him to see and talk to Mitsuha, who has already been dead for three years (Shinkai, 2016).

As can be seen, themes from Shinto and characters based on kami are prevalent in Japanese movies especially animated ones where the creators, like the video game developers, have found a source of inspiration in what director Miyazaki mentioned when saying that the ideological origin of Shinto is deeply rooted within him.

## Minimalism and how it connects to the Shinto belief in modern Japan

The world today is moving at an ever-increasing speed where economic growth and material gains are the measurement of success. Many people are responding to this increased pressure by slowing down their daily pace. Find joy in less and re-discover nature which we can explore through wabi-sabi and Marie Kondo and her famous method of decluttering.

### The Japanese art style, *wabi-sabi*

*Wabi-sabi* is a concept that represents the transient power of nature and its beauty. Dating from the early Heian period (794 – 1185), *Wabi-sabi* connects to the roots of Japanese aesthetics, which have been grounded in the celebration and consciousness of nature, which is a big part of the Shinto belief. *Wabi-sabi* is often seen as faded beauty that is associated with a dark black beauty. It represents a beauty combined with sadness. *Wabi-sabi* is a Japanese term which both describes an austere beauty that people often can only see for a short time as well as the loneliness in nature and is representative of the syncretism in Japanese society which it expresses both Zen Buddhism and Shinto purity.

An object cannot have its *wabi* determined simply by looking at its exterior appearance. The beauty of one's *wabi* should be taken into account by thinking about its feelings as well as its history. The beauty is found in the way that it is, rather than by the observers' subjective view judgement of it. A single person cannot produce the quality of *wabi*, instead, it sums up its whole spirit (Prusinski, 2013).

In the book, *Zen in the Art of the Tea Ceremony* by the Japan scholar Horst Hammitzsch, *sabi* is described as "an absence of undeniable beauty", and it contrasts the beauty in the colorless, the old as well as the fragile with the vibrant refreshed energetic and labile vision. He claims that though old or faded, the worn that has become beautiful only exemplifies the power and the long life of a kind of beauty. As the years go by, the young, bright beauty of what it used to be like will

fade, but the steadfastness of *sabi* will be shown more fully because of that. Hammitzsch also says that *sabi* does not just signify age as well as wisdom but also tranquility and solitude.

Even though *wabi* and *sabi* are said to be two distinct aesthetic terms, they are often combined to describe an event of an object which contains much history because of its often faded or raw outwards appearance. *Wabi-sabi's* beauty changes with its surroundings, which also change, simply because it cannot be completely isolated from the surroundings. It is nature that creates an energy that surges in coincidence with humankind's work at every passing moment. An example of that is the *Kinkakuji* or the Golden Pavilion, in Kyoto. On a bright sunny and cloudless day, it is simply breathtaking, its golden color reflecting on the pond next to it, but there are times when it is cloudy, and it will not be as bright those days, but it is just as beautiful (Prusinski, 2013).

Wabi-sabi presents us with a holistic way of looking at the world and the things in it and understanding and respecting the true worth and beauty of things. Kondo Marie's approach to less is more uses elements of Shinto in her decluttering method where she with respect and joy declutters or 'purifies' people's homes.

### **Kondo Marie**

Recently, people all over the world have been introduced to Japanese ideology and concepts thanks to the Netflix show 'Tidying Up with Marie Kondo', where Marie Kondo goes to America with a translator and helps families tidy up their home as well as their lives. In those episodes, Marie always greets the house, sitting on the ground with her hands folded and stays silent for a few moments (Clark, 2019).

Kondo Marie, is a 34-year-old Japanese woman who is famous for her influential lifestyle books, 'The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up' (2011) and 'Spark Joy'(2015) of which she has sold 11 million copies in 40 countries expounding her KonMari method

Her method of tidying up and cleaning, draws a bit from Shintoism (Clark, 2019).

It revolves around the fact that humans should only hold onto things which, according to her, 'spark joy' in our lives. Things which do not spark joy in our lives, should be thanked for the time we spent together, then given to people who might have better use of it. While she was in her mid-twenties, her tidying company which she founded and ran by herself had such a long waiting list, that she wrote her first book 'The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying up' for those customers who were at the bottom of the waiting list or for those that could not wait (Yourgrau, 2017).

In the episodes it is very noticeable that Marie always greets the house she is about to declutter, sitting on the ground with her hands folded and stays silent for a few moments (Clark, 2019). In her book, she says that she began this custom based on how people worship at Shinto shrines. She believes that when entering the client's house, it resembles the feeling of when one passes under a shrine gate and enters the sacred place of the deities. The gate she is referencing is found at the entrance of every single Shinto shrine, and they are said to be a representation of the border between the human world and the sacred world of the deities.

When she goes to client's houses, she always shows respect to both the clients as well as the house, by never wearing anything casual while helping the clients tidy and organize.

Again, in her book, she says that she never wears sweaters or work clothes when she tidies, preferably a dress or blazer. The reason for this is that it is she is showing respect to the house and the things inside it. She believes that tidying is a celebration, a special farewell for those things which will end up departing from the home as well as the lives of the clients, so she believes that she should dress accordingly (Kondo, 2015).

## Conclusion

In this paper we have examined how Shinto appears in modern day Japan, its origins and permutations in an effort to answer the question of whether Shinto constitutes a belief system rather than a religion. We have seen that Japan has what is called a religiously syncretic system wherein various sets of beliefs and religions are mixed together to form a sort of a whole. In Japan's case we are looking at a combination of Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and Shinto.

We have looked into the different versions of how Shinto presents itself as in Shrine Shinto with its roots in ancient Japanese history, Sect Shinto where new forms of beliefs appeared and Folk Shinto which involves the everyday routines of everyday people.

We could argue that the only time an attempt was made to create a formalized religion out of Shinto was during the State Shinto period where the foundation of State Shinto was politically motivated and served as one of the significant components in Japanese nationalism, beginning in 1868 and ending around 1945 when it was shut down in the aftermath of the Second World War.

Because ritual rather than belief is at the heart of Shinto, Japanese people don't usually think of Shinto specifically as a religion - it is simply an aspect of Japanese life (BBC, 2019), as we see in filmmaker Miyazaki's comment that he does not believe in Shinto as a religion, but respects it and finds it to be deeply rooted within him. Shinto has no divinely revealed scripture, no founder, no official sacred scriptures, and no fixed dogmas (Williams, 2005). Shinto is involved in every aspect of Japanese culture: It touches ethics, politics, family life and social structures, artistic life (particularly drama and poetry) and sporting life (Sumo wrestling), as well as spiritual life. A whole range of talismans are available at shrines for traffic safety, good health, success in business, safe childbirth, good exam performance and more (BBC, 2019).

Every aspect of nature has its own kami, every house has its own *kami* and every city and region has its own *kami*, everything has a *kami* but - *kami* are not God or gods.

This permutation of Shinto as a belief system in modern day Japanese society can be seen in the way it affects and inspires its people as they observe nature the *wabi-sabi* way, create or play video games, make and watch movies or just tidy up homes. It would seem the belief in the essence of Shintoism is very much alive and well in Japanese society although it may have become somewhat more removed from the shrines or traditional ways of observances, yet when the need arises, when exams are about to be taken and new ventures undertaken the shrines are the first place the Japanese people will go visit for supernatural support.

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