

Name: _____
EQ: What similarities exist between animism and Shinto?

Introduction:

Belief Systems — Religions and Philosophies

Belief systems were basic building blocks for most ancient civilizations, and it is impossible to develop an understanding of them without delving into the religious and philosophical beliefs that people of these times held. Some belief systems disappeared when the civilizations ended, but others have endured to this day, including Hinduism, Judaism, Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism and Christianity. In this chapter we will focus on these major belief systems, as well as polytheism, the form of religion that most ancient civilizations practiced. In this early era, as in all periods that followed, belief systems and all the values, customs, and practices associated with them have shaped the story of the world.

How might we define belief systems? They include both religions and philosophies, and they form comprehensive guidelines for human behavior, both for individuals and collectivities. They often answer “big questions,” such as “What is the meaning of life?,” “What things in life are most worthwhile?,” “Where did we come from?,” and “What happens after we die?” Although we may give any number of explanations as to how religions and philosophies are different, a basic distinction is that religions are more concerned with events and forces outside the natural world. Philosophies, on the other hand, are focused on human interactions with others and in finding answers to the big questions in this world, not in another, less directly comprehensible one. Of course, religious and philosophical beliefs overlap significantly so that any one belief system may actually qualify as both.

1. Define belief system.
2. According to the reading, what is the difference between religions and philosophies?

Animism

“Animism” was once a very popular concept in the comparative study of religion. Its greatest early champion was E. B. Tylor, who also offered the so-called minimal definition of religion: “belief in spiritual beings.” Much of his famous 1871 *Primitive Culture* was dedicated to religion, and in that work he proposed animism as the original form of religion, which he understood as “the general doctrine of souls and other spiritual beings in general” or more specifically “an idea of pervading life and will in nature.” In other words, animism came to be seen as a (relatively primitive) notion that the natural world—animals, plants, objects, and even phenomena like wind and rain or sickness and death—possessed “animating” spirits or souls, with personal or mental qualities very much like humans.

Animistic gods often explain the creation of fire, wind, water, man, animals, and other natural earthly things. Although specific beliefs of animism vary widely, similarities between the characteristics of gods and goddesses and rituals practiced by animistic societies exist. The presence of holy men or women, visions, trances, dancing, sacred items, and sacred spaces for worship, and the connection felt to the spirits of ancestors are characteristic of animistic societies.

1. Define animism. What do animists believe?

Shinto

In early Japan... even before there was an emperor or an imperial family, separate clans ruled their own regions. Clan members practiced a form of animism called Shinto, meaning "the way of the gods." Each clan included a group of families descended from a common ancestor, often said to have been an animal or a god. The clan worshiped this ancestor as its special kami, or spirit. Practitioners of Shinto believed that *kami* dwelled within people, animals, and even nonliving objects such as rocks and streams. To honor this *kami*—and the *kami* of their ancestors—they held festivals and rituals. Often these ceremonies were conducted by the chief of the clan, who acted as both military leader and priest.

A Name with Many Meanings

In the Japanese Shinto cults, the objects of worship were the kami, a term that apparently had a number of different religious and social meanings. In this account, quoted in Sources of Japanese Tradition, Motoori Norinaga, a famous eighteenth-century Shinto scholar, ponders the various interpretations of kami.

"I do not yet understand the meaning of the term *kami*. Speaking in general, however, it may be said that *kami* signifies, in the first place, the deities of heaven and earth that appear in the ancient records and also the spirits of the shrines where they are worshipped. It is hardly necessary to say that it includes human beings. It also includes such objects such as birds, beasts, trees, plants, seas, mountains, and so forth. In ancient usage, anything whatsoever which was outside the ordinary, which possessed superior power, or which was awe-inspiring was called *kami*. . . It is needless to say that among human beings who are called *kami*, the successive generations of sacred emperors are all included. . . . [E]mperors are also called 'distant kami' . . . because, from the standpoint of common people, they are far-separated, majestic, and worthy of reverence. In a lesser degree we find, in the present as well as in ancient times, human beings who are *kami*. Although they may not be accepted throughout the whole country, yet in each province, each village, and each family there are human beings who are *kami*, each one according to his own proper position. The *kami* of the Divine Age were for the most part human beings of that time and, because the people of that time were all *kami*, it is called the Age of the Gods."

From: Don Nardo, *Traditional Japan*, San Diego, Lucent Books, 1995, p.19.

1. Describe the connection between Shinto and animism.

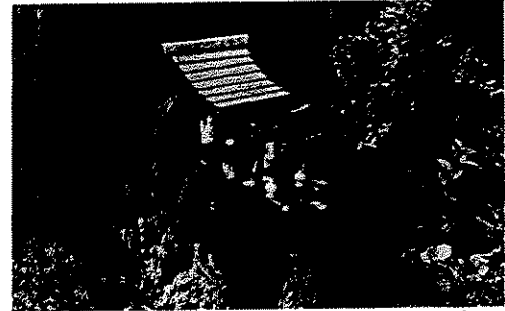
2. What is *kami*?

3. How can human beings be considered *kami*?



Japan, the Divine Country

The Japanese people took great pride in what they believed to be the divine origins of their land and their monarchy. These beliefs were a central part of Japan's Shinto religion. Shinto is an ancient religion, and it is still practiced by the Japanese today. Shinto holds that spirits called kami inhabit objects in the physical world. Shinto shrines are found throughout Japan. Shinto teachings also were the basis for a strong sense of Japanese nationalism (love for one's country and its traditions) that lasted into modern times. The following document was written by a 13th-century Japanese noble who supported the imperial family at a time when various factions in Japanese society were competing for power.



Komainu : the stone dogs which face each other at the entrance to shrines, guarding the precincts. One dog always has its mouth open and is called *A*, while the other has its mouth closed and is called *Un*.



Inari style - torii

The symbol of a shrine is its gate, or *Torii*. It represents the division between the everyday world and the divine world.



The main sanctuary of Toshogu Shrine

Chōruya: the small pavilion near the main hall with water and ladders. People come here to wash their hands and rinse out their mouths before going to the main hall to pray.

Japan is the divine country. The heavenly ancestor it was who first laid its foundations, and the Sun Goddess left her descendants to reign over it forever and ever. This is true only of our country, and nothing similar may be found in foreign lands. That is why it is called the divine country.

In the Age of the Gods, Japan was known as the "ever-fruitful land of reed-covered plains and luxuriant ricefields." This name has existed since the creation of heaven and earth. . . . [Japan] is also called the country of the great eight islands. This name was given because eight islands were produced when the Male Deity and the Female Deity [gave birth to] Japan. . . .

Creation Myth of Japan and Origin of Shinto.

[Adapted from an eighth century A.D. Japanese book called the *Nihon-Shoki*, or *Chronicles of Japan*.]

Izanagi and Izanami stood on the floating bridge of Heaven, and talking with one another, said: "Is there not a country beneath?"

Thereupon they thrust down the jewel--spear of Heaven, and groping about with it found the ocean. The salt water, which dripped from the point of the spear, hardened and became an island, which received the name of Ono-koro-jima.

The two Deities (gods) then went down and lived on this island. They wished to become husband and wife together, and to produce other islands. Soon they created the Great Eight-island Country.

Then Izanagi and Izanami consulted together, saying: "We have now produced the Great Eight-island Country, with the mountains, rivers, herbs and trees. We should now produce someone who shall be lord of the universe" They then together produced the Sun Goddess, who was called Amaterasu...

The bright shine of this child shone North, South, East, West, Above and Below. Therefore the two Deities rejoiced, saying: "We have had many children, but none of them have been equal to this wondrous infant. She ought not to be kept long in this land, but we ought to send her at once to Heaven, and trust her with the affairs of Heaven."

...Izanagi and Izanami next produced the Moon-god and then the Storm god and many other gods and goddesses. But it was the Sun Goddess who sent a grandson to Japan to possess and rule the islands, he and his descendants, forever, saying "...and may prosperity attend thy dynasty, and may it, like Heaven and Earth, endure forever!" A great grandson of this god, called Jimmu, was eventually enthroned as the first emperor of Japan.

1. Why did the Japanese call Japan “the divine country?”

2. According to the creation myth, how was Japan formed?

3. How did the Japanese people view the Emperor of Japan?

4. How was the Shinto religion tied into Japanese history and culture?

5. How does the Shinto creation myth compare to the creation myth you wrote for your Creation Myth/Map project?

Similarities

Differences