

Shinto in Japanese Culture

Honda Sōichirō

The Core of Japanese Spirituality. Japan today, having transformed itself from an agricultural to an industrial society, is no longer just "the land of vigorous rice plants" but has become the "land of the integrated circuit."

At a recent summit conference of advanced industrial nations, all the members except Japan, that is, the U.S., U.K., France, West Germany, Italy, and Canada, were of what might be called an "equestrian" origin typified by the use of the horse in connection with stock farming and wheat production. Only Japan developed out of a previous rice-producing agricultural society.

Japan is the first successful, highly industrialized nation to emerge from such a rice-producing base in the monsoon zone of East and Southeast Asia. Starting in the Meiji Era Japan tried to follow the example of the Western nations in its modernization and industrialization. Despite the set-back of World War II, Japan has avidly sought for and assimilated new Western technologies during the post-war period, changing them at the same time into forms more suited to the Japanese people. It has now become the world's second most important industrial nation, standing in the vanguard of technological advancement in recent years.

While in outward appearance Japan seems modern and Westernized, its spiritual essence remains rooted in the agricultural past. The rice cultivation that has taken place since the prehistoric Yayoi Period (c. 200 B.C.—c. 200 A.D.) forms the ground of the Japanese mental structure. At the core of that mental structure are the Japanese gods (*kami*) and the religious views of Shinto, with its prayers for abundant production and prosperity.

From ancient times, the ancestors of the Japanese people have deified the sun, the earth, water, and so on, and have marked the various stages of rice production by ceremonies in which prayers were offered to the *kami* for abundant production, safety, and prosperity for the souls of ancestors. These deities and the festivals dedicated to them, which were so much a part of the agricultural society are the source of the Japanese spiritual ethos that still lives in the hearts of the Japanese people today as it has in past ages. Working as a deep psychological factor, this ethos with its basis in Shinto thought has helped Japan to transform itself into a modern industrial nation.

Finding Joy in Working. In the first place, the basic principle of Shinto ritual, that is, the notion of praying for abundant production, safety, and prosperity, is, at the same time, the spiritual basis for the Japanese industrial society. A distinctive belief in the power which enables things to be produced, reproduced, and united, which in Japanese is known as *musubi*, lies deep in the heart of the Japanese psychology. It originated in

the agricultural past where it was closely associated with prayers for the fertility of the rice fields, but it continues to hold sway in the present industrial society.

Japanese people tend to have a very positive attitude toward work; they find joy in it and regard it as good. This attitude seems to be in sharp contrast to Western Christian countries in which one's job becomes a drudgery. The reason for the positive Japanese attitude is the Shinto consciousness of *shinjin-kyōdō*, which can be interpreted as the cooperation of gods and people, the notion that gods and people work together to produce a good harvest. In producing the rice harvest, the Sun Goddess (Amaterasu Ōmikami), the Emperor, the souls of the ancestors, the corn spirit in the figure of the *kami* of the rice field, and the people, all worked together. Their cooperation enhanced the stability and development of the communal society, known as *ie* (household) or *mura* (village).

Another thing that came out of the intensive cooperation involved in rice production and its associated rituals was a tendency to cherish the collectivistic harmony of the community. Thus, one can find a tendency in the Japanese unconscious mind to regard the company as the community of common fate. The effectiveness of the company in achieving its goals rests on a common commitment of every member of the firm. Raising productivity and promoting quality control, which are typical characteristics of Japanese management, are made possible by such a shared commitment. The resulting mental climate, one of co-existence and harmony, contrasts markedly with the mental climate of confrontation and conflict associated with Western individualism.

If one looks about in Japan today, one can find the latest in ultramodern institutions based upon advanced computer technology. The space center on Tanegashima Island in Kagoshima Prefecture, which launches Japanese artificial satellites, would be one example. Others include the atomic power plants, which are geared up to supply electric power for the 21st century; the automobile factories with their superior standards of quality and productivity; the newest of electronics factories, which produce the "new rice plants" of the industrial age, integrated circuits; and the many high, towering buildings in Shinjuku, the new center of Tokyo. Yet, all of these buildings are built and are being operated under the protection of the *kami* that our ancestors have worshiped uninterruptedly since ancient times.

The action of the *kami* is made conscious for us in a variety of ceremonies. For instance, when work is started on a new building, we have *jichin-sai* (ceremony for purifying a building site), and when work is completed, we have another ceremony to mark the completion, and one to mark the opening for business--all these carried out in the Shinto manner. The Shinto priest of the *genius loci*, the *kami* who guards and watches over the area and over the people who live there, comes to the site and hangs a sacred, straw festoon, called a *shimenawa*. Then he worships the *kami* at the *himorogi* or sacred place set up for the occasion, where he performs the Shinto rituals, praying for security and prosperity. And thereafter, the building will be equipped with a small Shinto shrine, or *kamidana*, where the guardian *kami* are enshrined.

In the case of airline companies, new airplanes, when introduced into the fleet, are prayed over for safety and prosperity. Pilots of the jet planes pay a visit to a shrine and obtain a charm to put in the cockpit. In a corresponding way, passenger ships

belonging to ferryboat companies and oil tankers, too, contain *kamidana* where prayers are said for safety on the sea. Even on the observation ship of the Science and Technology Agency called *Shinkai* (Deep Sea) a guardian deity is enshrined in the ship. In addition, many of the buses and trucks that traverse the highways in Japan are purified with special prayers for traffic safety, and have charms and talismans hanging in them.

Occasions that Go Beyond Science. Scientific machines and instruments may be made with the latest scientific know-how, but they still must be run by people, so we cannot disregard the human factor. On some occasions, there may be factors operating in a situation unknown to the persons involved. Therefore, there are occasions for people to pray to the *kami* for protection from unknown factors which may affect them after they have done their best according to scientific and technological understanding.

Our first practical stationary communications satellite, "Sakura 2," was launched from Tanegashima Space Center and it was really successful. You could say that this satellite was somehow the essence of technological know-how. And yet, on the occasion of its launching, three scientists paid a visit to Chichibu Shrine in Saitama Prefecture to pray for the success of the launch. From ancient times Chichibu Shrine has been known as *Myōken-sama* (the shrine in honor of the god of the stars, referring especially to the Big Dipper), where also *Ame-no-minaka-nushi* (the one who reigns over the heavens), and *Yagokoro-omoikane-no-kami* (the god of wisdom) are venerated.

According to the Shrine News, one of the three persons who paid a visit to the shrine was Dr. Miyauchi Kazuhiro, vice-chief of the satellite communications headquarters, who has the job of controlling transmission for the Nippon Telegraph and Telephone Public Corporation, which uses three thousand of the four thousand circuits of the communications satellite. The scientists went up into the main shrine building, made an offering (*tamagushi*), and prayed to the *kami*, asking them for their help in achieving a successful launch. It was Dr. Miyauchi's first visit to a Shinto shrine. He is said to have remarked, "The people who are engaged in science and technology are inclined to ask the *kami* for help, especially today when science has advanced to such an extent. I never had such a strong feeling as this before; I am deeply moved to have had the experience of visiting this shrine."

Apparently, these scientists, who strive to be thoroughly rational, have a stronger belief in the *kami* than other people. The more logical they are, the more they know the limit of scientific knowledge and the existence of unexpected factors that remain unknown.

In the Institute for Productive Technology at Tokyo University there is a small shrine dedicated to *Sentai-aragami* of Shinagawa, who is known for his strong spiritual power. The Institute is involved in many experiments on metals and uses fire in various ways. One can assume that the staff have set up the shrine in order to pray for safety.

An international exhibition of science called Tsukuba '85 is presently being set up in Tsukuba Academic City in Ibaraki Prefecture. A number of results of advanced technology will be shown there, and various countries are going to participate in it. On the site, which is about 100 hectares in area, there are buildings representing

the Japanese government, plus others of 24 non-governmental organizations and various foreign countries. The first ground-breaking ceremony took place on the site of "Green Mansion," an exhibit of the Sanwa Group, whose theme is "Bio-technology for the Opening of a New Age." Then, similar ceremonies took place on the sites of other pavilions belonging to the Fuyō Group, and so on, which are scheduled for completion by the end of 1984. The master of ceremonies in each case was the chief priest of Tsukubasan Shrine. It is interesting to see such a combination of advanced technology and the Japanese *kami*.

The New Villages of Industrial Society. Nowadays, it is companies that are playing the leading role in this economically progressive country. They are the new "villages" in the industrial society, corresponding to the old villages in the previous agricultural society. The basic principle of Shinto as the distinctive religious expression of the rice-producing agricultural society consisted of worshiping the *kami* in each village community and praying to them for fruitful products and eternal prosperity. The shrine festivals, by praying for fertility, safety, and prosperity, nourished a sense of community solidarity and unity in the people's hearts.

Today, many companies and factories have shrines or *kamidana*. These are the village shrines of the enterprise communities, and the guardian *kami* are enshrined in them. These *kami* have the same role and function as the ones worshiped in the shrines of the former village communities. The enterprise communities also pray to them for their safety and prosperity.

Many of the guardian deities of these enterprises were enshrined when they started business, or when the buildings were built. Toyota Motors is the second largest automotive company in the world and the largest company in Japan. Its guardian deity is enshrined in Toyooki Shrine in Toyota, Aichi Prefecture, and is also called "Toyota Shrine." It was built in 1925, when Toyota Motors started business.

The guardian deity of the Mitsubishi Group is enshrined in the Tosa Inari Shrine. This shrine is commonly called "Mitsubishi Inari," and today one can see similar shrines on the roofs of the branch offices of Mitsubishi Bank and the refinery of Mitsubishi Metal Industries in Osaka. Formerly, in the Edo period, there was a shrine in the residence of the feudal clan of Tosa. Then, in the Meiji era, Iwasaki Yatarō took over the family enterprise and established Mitsubishi. He rebuilt the shrine on another site.

The Mimeguri Shrine is well known for its association with the Mitsui Group. When the Mitsui family, prosperous merchants in Kyoto, established Echigoya, a dry goods store (now called Mitsukoshi) in Nihonbashi-honchō during the Enryaku era, it was built at Ushijima, along the Sumida River in Tokyo, to avoid the stigma associated with the Kimon district. Still today, its branch shrines can be seen in the allied companies of the Mitsui Group. Most famous of all is the Mimeguri Shrine on the roof of the main Mitsukoshi store.

The guardian deities of Hitachi and Toshiba, the vanguards of technology, were enshrined when their factories were built. Hitachi has taken for itself the guardian deity of the Kumano Shrine, which was the *genius loci* of the place where the first Hitachi factory was built. Since then, every Hitachi factory has established a shrine

to the same *kami*, which has become the guardian deity of the whole company. Even in allied companies like Hitachi Chemical there are shrines to the same *kami*.

In the case of Toshiba, there is an Izumo Shrine in the main office and in one of the factories in Kawasaki's Horikawa-chō. Other Toshiba factories in Kawasaki and Yokohama have mainly Inari shrines.

The guardian deity of Tokyo Security Exchange in Nihonbashi, Tokyo, is enshrined in the Kabuto Shrine. At the beginning, in 1880, the company simply enshrined the *genius loci* of a nearby place. Now, this *samekami* is the guardian deity of the whole market of security exchanges.

Other examples might be cited. For instance, there is the Munakata Shrine of Idemitsu Enterprise, the Seikō Shrine of Shiseido, the Kotohira Shrine of Kikkoman, the Ise Shrine of Tokyo Tower, and so on. In these cases, the guardian deities are enshrined as the offspring spirits of the parental deities.

Worship on Founding Days. The festivals of the shrines just described are usually held on New Year's Day or the day of the company's founding. The festivals on these occasions are held on a large scale, and are important events on the yearly calendars of the companies and factories. Presidents, staff, and managers participate in them, and some companies make the days of the festival a holiday and invite their employees and their families, customers, as well as the people of the community to attend the festival. This kind of activity promotes the unity and harmony of the whole company and has an immeasurable effect in bringing out a sense of solidarity and totality.

The international Toyota conglomerate starts off the work of the new year by a visit to the Toyooki Shrine, whose guardian deities, *Kanayama-hime* and *Kanayama-hiko*, are both considered to be "gods of iron." In typical Japanese fashion, Chairman Toyota Eizō, President Toyota Shoichiro, and almost all of the leaders and managers of the allied companies attend the ceremony in which a Shinto priest solemnly reads a prayer and everyone present prays for the prosperity and safety of Toyota. Every year, from the time the shrine was built, this ceremony has been held at a fixed time on New Year's Day. Last year, however, as the manufacturing branch and the Toyota dealership branch became one company, the date was changed to January 4th to accommodate the people living in Tokyo, most of whom belonged to the dealership branch of the company. The change of the date of the ceremony, which had been fixed for half a century, was a news item of some interest.

The Tokyo Security Exchange in Nihonbashi, Tokyo, the principal controller of capital flow in Japan, is itself controlled by computers. Yet, nearby is the Kabuto Shrine with its guardian deity. Every year at the end of April, the Chairman of the Board, the Trustees, and the managers of the stock companies take part in a festival officiated by a Shinto priest. Together, they pray for the prosperity and safety of the network of security companies.

The guardian deity of the Mitsubishi Group is enshrined in the Mitsubishi Inari Shrine. Its annual festival is held on the Day of the Horse in February by the two hundred members of the Society for the Support of the Mitsubishi Inari Shrine. The society has been organized mainly by the customers of the branch office of the Mitsubishi Bank in West Osaka. The festival, which is accompanied by various parties

and memorial lectures, is attended by about three hundred people. The Tosa Inari Shrine, located next to the main entrance of the Osaka Refinery of Mitsubishi Metal Industries, has three company-related festivals during the year: a New Year Prayer Festival, a Safety Prayer Festival, and an Inari Festival, each one under the direction of the head manager as presiding priest. The Inari Festival, held on November 1, involves the head of the company, the employees, and people of the surrounding community, in what usually turns out to be a lively social occasion.

The Mitsui Group is another example. While its guardian deity is enshrined in the Mitsui Shrine, its annual festival is carried out on a grand scale in the various offices of the company, with prayers for the prosperity of the company's activities.

Then there is the Mitsukoshi Department Store chain. A splendid shrine graces the roof of its main store, and on November 1 of each year it becomes the host to a grand festival. Other lesser festivals are held on the first of each month, and the first Day of the Horse according to the old calendar is celebrated as an auspicious day.

A Source of Practical Energy. The Hitachi Group's guardian deity is enshrined in the Kumano Shrine. There are six annual festivals, including Founding Day (July 16), New Year's Day (January 1), Safety Praying Day (July 1), and Extinction Day (December 1). The later was occasioned by the destruction of the Hitachi factory by fire in 1920. The Festival of Extinction provides an opportunity to pray that such an accident may never happen again.

Besides these festivals held at company shrines, there are many cases in which company heads or staff members are responsible officials of shrines or Buddhist temples or are active in parishioners' groups. Through such service to the deities they seek to enhance their self-discipline and acquire spiritual power to apply to their management activities. Of course, these same persons are company executives who have won their way to the top through hard competition. Their attitude is basically that one should worship the deities, but not rely on them. One cannot deny that such an attitude, accompanied by a never-ending drive to get ahead, and a strong personal self-discipline, has definitely paid off.

An example of such a self-made man is Matsushita Kōnosuke, who built the famous Matsushita Electric company out of nothing. Significantly, he has served as the president of the Worshipers of Ise Shrine, which is connected with the supreme shrine of the country, and he has been a long-time president of the nation-wide Shinto Shrine Representatives Association. He was quoted as saying, "Shinto has nourished Japanese thought and religious consciousness. When we look at the Japanese people's daily activities, we can tell that they are deeply rooted in Shinto." His words carry great weight.

Religious Belief Continues Unabated. The present president of the Worshipers of Ise Shrine is Mr. Hirose, the Chairman of Nihon Life Insurance, and the president of the nation-wide Shrine Representatives Association is Nagano Shigeo, the Chairman of the Japanese Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Other instances may be cited of managers of first class companies who are also staff members of famous shrines or managers of worshipers' associations. A list of such famous shrines would include: Ise

Shrine in Ise; Meiji and Hie Shrines in Tokyo; Ōkami, Kasuga Grand Shrine, and Kashiwara Shrine in Nara; the Kamo, Iwashimizu, and Heian Shrines in Kyoto; the Sumiyoshi Grand Shrine in Osaka; the Munakata Grand Shrine in Fukuoka; the Usa Shrine in Oita, and so on. In short, the people who shoulder the responsibility for the Japanese economy are also genuinely Japanese in the sense of being worshipers of the Japanese deities. These people are guided in their work by economic rationality, and they pray to the *kami* for the safety and prosperity of the enterprise communities over which they preside. They look to these *kami* to provide the light that keeps them on the right path. However it may happen, the *kami* can be credited with giving them a consciousness of a way of life to be followed, and indeed, a consciousness of life itself.

Such Shinto belief is hidden at an unconscious level in the minds of the Japanese people and is the spiritual ground of belief tacitly controlling this industrial society. The occasions when people pay their first visit of the new year to the Shinto shrines or attend the lively annual festivals are times charged with religious energy for the Japanese people. At such times, the *kami* who for the most part lie dormant in people's minds, make a powerful reappearance. Shinto is an innate part of Japanese life. We could not eliminate it from Japanese culture or from our daily life however hard we might try.

In the past, the *kami* reigned powerfully over the agricultural society. Now having transformed themselves, they are extending their mighty reign over the industrial society of today.

The above article originally appeared in Japanese as "Bunka no naka no Shintō," *Shūkyō Shinbun*, 1 February and 1 March, 1984. The translation was prepared by **Watanabe Manabu** and **Gilbert Johnston**.