

## Is shintō Even a Religion?

Much of shintō is firmly rooted in the practices of folk religion and tends to dispense with many of the trappings normally associated with organized religions. Because of this many of the people within those organized religions tend to dismiss shintō; as somehow being "inferior"; as not being a "real" religion.

This is especially true of minzoku shintō, which, like many folk religions, is usually represented as not even being a valid separate branch of shintō.

### Here are some of what shintō lacks:

- **No Founder** – shintō can not be traced back to a single founding figure like Christ, Muhammad, or Buddha
- **No Organization** – There is no central organization that has authority, like the Vatican has over the Catholic Churches, over local communities or shrines
- **No Doctrine** – There is no single book, like the Bible or Koran, that determines doctrine. There are a number of shintō texts, but what part of those texts, if any, is followed is up to the local community.
- **No Precepts or Commandments** – There isn't a single set of beliefs, like the Ten Commandments of Christianity or the Noble Eightfold Path of Buddhism, that a practitioner is expected to follow or act upon
- **No Need for a Building** – Sacred space is created where and when it is needed
- **No Idols** – kami temporarily dwell in a *shintai*. These act more as an antenna where kami manifest, than as a residence for kami.

## What is Kami?

*The term kami does not mean God* – at least, not in the Western monotheistic sense. kami can be forces, places, events, objects, plants, animals, living people, or ancestors.

So what exactly is kami? Joseph Campbell's concept of the sublime, in *The Power of Myth* with Bill Moyers, is probably the best English translation for the term kami.

### kami is anything which inspires feelings of:

- **Reverence** – A feeling of profound awe and respect and often love; veneration
- **Awe** – A mixed emotion of reverence, respect, dread, and wonder inspired by genius, great beauty, or might
- **Gratitude** – For the *megumi* (blessings) of kami and the beneficence of Ancestors
- **Fear / terror** – A feeling of agitation and anxiety caused by the presence or imminence of danger / intense, overpowering fear

### For Further Information:

minzoku NEO-shintō:  
A Book of Little Traditions

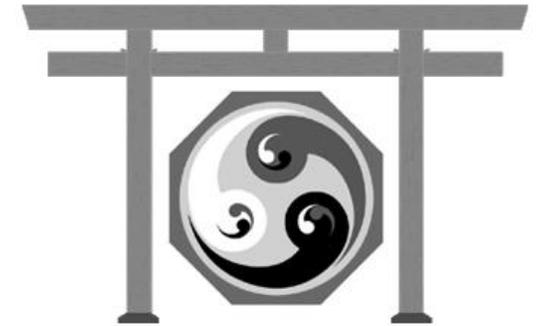
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**Contact:** Volkhvy  
volkhvy@shi-yaku-jin-no-hokora.org

shi-yaku-jin no hokora

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minzoku

NEO-shintō

民俗

ネオ神道

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## What is minzoku NEO-shintō?

The technical answer is, "A universalist approach to existential Japanese folk religion practices." But what does that mean? To break it down, universalist means it's open to anyone who's sincerely interested, it's not just for people of Japanese ancestry. Existential means it's based on personal experience, not on scripture or dogma. Folk religion means it's a religion as practiced by the commons – the everyday people – and on a local basis; it's not a religion as taught in the seminaries and universities, or on a national or international basis.

### Existentialist?

The mind-set of an Existentialist is: "Because I engage in these practices I am a member."\* It is not Essentialist — that is based on doctrines, creeds, scripture, or theology; the mind-set of an Essentialist is, "If I call myself a member, I **must** engage in these practices."

\* **Please Note:** That is, a member of the set of people who practice a particular religion or culture. *This is not the same thing as being a member of a specific community.* Membership in the set of practitioners in no way entitles you to membership in any particular community; that needs to be negotiated between you and the local community.

### minzoku?

*minzoku* means 'folk customs' and refers to the practices and beliefs of the commons — the common people of a region considered as representatives of a traditional way of life and especially as the originators or carriers of the customs, beliefs, and arts that make up a distinctive culture. Folk customs are based on the Five "E"s: *Existential, Experiential, Experimental, Empirical, and Event Oriented.*

## What is shintō?

shintō is the main channel through which many of the earliest religious forms of the Japanese people were handed down and preserved; also sometimes called *kami-no-michi* (Way of the kami). shintō is frequently called the indigenous spirituality of Japan and the people of Japan, but indigenous rather misses the mark as, in reality, shintō is a complex weave of ancient practices; local customs; indigenous folk religion; unofficial expressions of organized religions by lay people; and Buddhist, Religious Daoist, and Confucian practices and ideas.

### Okay, What is NEO-shintō?

NEO-shintō has several meanings: it can refer to one of the many Japanese, shintō-based new-religions; or as in the case of minzoku NEO-shintō, it refers to a mixture of Japanese minzoku shintō, Modern Heathen and Neo-Pagan practices. As minzoku NEO-shintō is existentialist, which particular mixture is entirely up to each local community.

Just how compatible are contemporary Paganism, Heathenry, and NEO-shintō? After doing a parametric analysis of the three groups and on examining the values for each of the parameters, a case can be made — from the viewpoint of the practitioners of these three groups — that while distinct these groups are much more similar than dissimilar. In fact, none of the values of any group in any particular parameter are mutually exclusive with those of the other two groups.

### What is Folk Religion?

Folk religion is a religion as practiced by the commons — the everyday people; part of what are referred to as the "Little Traditions". It's not a religion as practiced by institutions, or as taught in the seminaries and, universities,

or as practiced on a national or international basis; those are part of what are called the "Great Traditions".

### What are the Great Traditions

These are the practices and beliefs of the ruling elite; focused on the state, how it came to be, and why it should be maintained. They tend to be formal, dogmatic, slow changing — except when the ruling elite are deposed, and are made explicit in the forms of scripture and document; the mythology of the state.

### What are the Little Traditions

These are the practices and beliefs of the commons; focused on the local concerns of family, social responsibilities, occupation, and health. They are informal, flexible, changeable and usually implicit; the mythology of the commons.

### Praxis

minzoku shintō folklore is transmitted primarily by actions — by what the common people do and how they go about doing it.

### The practices focus mainly on issues of:

- Family structure, personal status within the family and the family's within the community
- Maintaining cultural integrity in the presence of new or foreign ideas and practices
- The transmission of traditional folklore and practices to the next generation
- Offerings to the kami and the ancestors
- Concerns of purity, taboos to maintain purity, acts and ideas that engender contamination, and the practices to re-establish purity