

# Japan history



## Shinto

Shinto is the aboriginal spirituality followed by the Japanese people. In the 8th century, Shinto practices were for the first time, archived in codified records of history of the Nihon Shoki and Kojiki. Shinto today is a term that is related to community shrines matched with various human ceremonies like historical memorials, marriage, harvest festivals and worship. People who practice Shinto express their varied values with a standard way of communication and activities, implementing similar ancient dress code and rituals.

There are two main Buddhism branches in existence and Mahayana is one of them. The term Mahayana means great vehicle. The origin of Mahayana Buddhism is India . Out of the two major Buddhism traditions in existence today, Mahayana is the largest. The Mahayana traditions teach that the tradition is a path of quest, for absolute enlightenment for the benefit of all mortal beings. Mahayana is also referred to as Bodhisattvayana . The history of Mahayana shows the spread of the tradition from India to other Asian countries. Mahayana Buddhism traditions exist even today.

The Heian period is a historical time in Japanese history, happened between the years 794 to 1185. During this period, Buddhism, Taioism and other Chinese traditions were at peak . The Heian period was named after the capital Heian-kvo, the modern Kyoto City. It was also the peak of the Japanese imperial court. The period is noted for its literature, art and poetry. During this period, the Imperial house had the power although the real power

was held by the noble Fujiwara clan who had intermarried with the Japanese emperor. In Japanese, the term Heian means peace and tranquility.

The establishment of Kamakura shogunate in Japan happened after the then ruling Taira clan was defeated in Genpei war. Kamakura shogunate was headed by shoguns. The shoguns were hereditary military dictators of Japan. The shogunate was based in Kamakura, and controlled the entire nation.

### Court Life in Heian Japan

The Heian period saw the Fujiwara clan hold the real power. The Fujiwara clan was noble and so, they had great influence on politics and culture in Japan. The noble families' life was focused on manners and beauty guided by a powerful civil code called *miyabi*. At the Kyoto court, etiquette, appearance and self-discipline were stressed.

According to the *miyabi* code, it was rude to laugh openly with an open mouth. Court nobles had a discipline of not touching food with bare hands and did not let other diners see their mouths while eating. Also, a letter would be returned unread in occasions when the handwriting was considered unrefined or the paper was folded incorrectly. *Miyabi* code guided that men should make own perfumes and the nobles would be identified by individual scents. Clothing rules were also strict mostly in color size and design.

The *miyabi* attention was in beauty and public appearance of the court nobles. The face features like mouth size, face color and shape were considered and facial change was allowed. A beautiful woman's hair would

be as long as possible. People believed that a person appeared ugly when asleep and they were advised to sleep only during the night.

Noble families spent their day time at court (Mason & Caiger 249). Here, they studied the influence of Chinese culture on them. Their court life demanded knowledge of Chinese Poetry. A popular Chinese board game known as Go, painting and landscaping were the popular recreational activities and nobles attended festivals, Shinto ceremonies, and parties which the emperor presided over.

### Kamakura Feudalism

Kamakura feudalism period happened from the year 1185 to year 1333. During this period, the emperor and the court were intact but their major functions were presiding over ceremonial functions. Governance during this period was headed by the shogunate. The national ruler was shogun, and largely controlled judicial, civil and military matters.

In kamakura shogunate period, feudal lords required strong warriors to safeguard their riches and thus, bushi, the samurai warrior was inherent. Samurai warriors were highly skilled and were hired by landowners who controlled wealth and power. The Bushido means the way of the warrior. It is a Japanese word which describes a unique Japanese code of conduct and a code of the samurai life.

Bushido was influenced by Buddhism and Shinto, thus a samurai warrior is trained to have greater wisdom and tranquility. The samurai code of morals stresses honor, frugality and loyalty. During the Kamakura shogunate period,

the samurai warriors proved to be trusted and loyal to employers . The few land owners who controlled wealth and power, each had an army of samurai for security purposes.