

Origins of shintoism and it's impact on pre-modern japan

Religion



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Origins of Shintoism and its Impacts on Pre-Modern Japan

Shintoism as a religion, worships spirits called " Kami" which may be anything out of the ordinary, may possess superior power or just anything that may be awe-inspiring. This definition of " kami" or spirits to be worshiped played a vast influence in the set of loyalties that the nation had at the time. The followers of Shintoism generally worship nature that ranges from rocks, rivers, waterfalls, moon and so forth. Shintoism also worships charismatic people, commonly defined as the emperor, and lastly, they also worship abstract concepts like fertility and growth.

The followers of Shintoism are expected to follow four affirmations in their everyday lives and in their ways of thinking. These affirmations are to the family, cleanliness, nature worship and matsuri which pertains to fiests and festivals dedicated to the spirits " kami". Ancient Japan is well known for images of geishas, samurais and great battles better known as the Tokugawa period. However, Classical Japan, also known as the Heian era, is more peaceful in comparison. The capital of Japan moved to Heian-Kyo in 796, which translates to the " capital of peace and tranquility" which will later on be known as Kyoto. Emperors were strong during the early parts of this period and had a continuing relationship with China. (1)

In 894, the communications between Japan and China ceased to non-existent and Chinese influence to the Japanese nation gravely declined. It is then that the nation truly developed its own culture and society. The Heian era is a period known for the manifestation of great arts and music like " gagaku" which is an imperial court music and poetry. Gagaku was a tradition introduced by China which was then performed during special occasions. (2)

The great influence of Shintoism will be seen through the unsparing ritual feasts which have started to take place in temples and have been recorded in various diaries and novels. During this period, Buddhism is also known to spread rapidly among the

1" Insei: abdicated sovereigns in the politics of late Heian Japan". GC Hurst. 1976.

2" Institution, ritual, and ideology: The twenty-two shrine-temple multiplexes of Heian Japan". AG Grapard. 1988

people, although it coexisted with Shintoism rather than cause conflicts. With was the slow but sure development of Japan's own concepts of independence from the Chinese influence. The power of the emperor continued to decline over time which eventually, despite the existence of an Emperor during this era, the position was merely of a figurehead ruler without true power. The real power in this period lies with the Fujiwara clan, mostly due to the political haggling. Several problems have arisen during this period which brought about the eventual downfall and end of this era. (3)

The effectiveness of the government declined and Taika reforms have failed. Taika reforms is a tax structure which gives heavy taxes to the farmers but none to the shrines and temples which were quite abundant. The income of the state as well as the public's welfare showed a very significant decrease. The dangers of the consequences of this state of the economy have brought on increasing public outrage. Landowners and nobles who have lost their powers alike have felt threatened enough to employ the services of protectors, giving rise to samurais, in order to protect themselves. Provincial governors have become, in general, corrupted and lazy. The welfare of the

public was ignored and the aristocracy of the court became decadent and useless. Leading clans by this time were the Minamoto and the Taira families. By this time, even monasteries were maintaining their own military forces.

One of the incidents that clearly elaborated this increasing power struggle occurred in 903. Tara-No-Masakado, who was the leader of the Kanto district decided to revolt against the government with his refusal to pay taxes. He established his own kingdom and threw out the nobles and kept the power to himself, although his claim to power to success was short-lived. Another bushi house attacked the Kyoto kingdom under the order of the Kyoto dynasty. This incident, however, have effectively tipped the scale of power from the sovereignty side into the side of the samurai. This method continues up until the establishment of the Kamakura Shogunate in 1192. Despite the power struggle exhibited on the latter part of the Classical

3" Samurai" from Calliope World History Magazine for Young People, Volume Three, No. 3, Jan./Feb., 1993

calligraphy, Zen gardens, as well as tea ceremonies. (3)Medieval Japan on the other hand, may be compared to Europe in its own medieval times. Warriors, castles and feudalistic structures. The code of honor followed by Japanese Samurais are not different to those followed by European Knights. Warfare, destructions and militarism dominates Feudal Japan. Samurai warriors held more power in this period and became the rulers of the land. The influence of this period carries on up to World War II, and remnants of which is still apparent even in today's Japanese culture. (4)

The samurais have become a class of themselves around the ninth and the twelfth centuries. Some of the samurais were related to the ruling class though the others are mercenaries. They pledge their complete loyalty to their "Daimyo" which is their feudal landowner, in exchange of which, they receive land and power.

A long struggle ensued and was eventually reached its climax. Toyotomi Hideyoshi reunified Japan after more than a century of war and political instability. During this period, it is the common people who endured the most suffering. They had no right to have weapons and are known to having resorted to using their farm tools as a weapon to protect themselves. It is also known that some of the farmers have opted to become Ninjas, which literally means secret warriors or assassins. Towards the end of his life, evidence of Hideyoshi's mental instability presented itself. As soon as he died, daimyo's struggling for power started planning their strategies. A decisive battle in the 1600 was won by Tokugawa Ieyasu. (5)

The Tokugawa period, which many considers as the pre-modern period of Japan, is a period of comparative peace and tranquil existence. This is described as the period wherein the urban culture itself refuses to be immersed back into the gloom of prior periods. The strength of Tokugawa bakufu himself aided in ensuring that this short period, lasting fifty years, is free of civil strifes. The new

4" Warrior Government in Early Medieval Japan: A Study of the Kamakura Bakufu, Shugo, and Jitao" JP Mass. 1974

5" Imperial restoration in medieval Japan" HP Varley. 1971.

stability exhibited by this period was all the encouragement needed for the

cultural and economic growth of the nation to flourish. Benefits which used to be enjoyed by the marginal elite became widely available such as academies and private schools. The roles of the warriors and the court aristocracy was not what shaped this period. Rather, it was the urban merchants who molded the culture. This period is more or less characterized by a busy world of commerce whose main orientation was consumption. (6) 6" Peasant uprisings in Japan of the Tokugawa period" H Borton. 1968

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