Shinto is the native religion of Japan and was once its state religion. It is a polytheistic and animistic faith, and involves the worship of *kami*, or spirits. Some kami are local and can be regarded as the spiritual being/spirit or genius of a particular place, but others represent major natural objects and processes; for example, *Amaterasu* (the Sun goddess), or Mount Fuji. About 84% of the population of Japan follows both Shinto and Buddhism. The two religions share a basic optimism about human nature, and for the world. Within Shinto, the Buddha was viewed as another kami. Meanwhile, Buddhism in Japan regarded the kami as being manifestations of various Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

The word Shinto, from the original Chinese, combines two kanji: "shin" 神, meaning gods or spirits, and "tō" 道, meaning a philosophical way or path (originally from the Chinese word dao). As such, Shinto is commonly translated as "The Way of the Gods." Some differences exist between *koshinto* (the ancient Shinto) and the many types of Shinto taught and practiced today, showing the influences of Buddhism when it was introduced into Japan in the sixth century.

Kami are not God or gods. They are spirits that are concerned with human beings - they appreciate our interest in them and want us to be happy - and if they are treated properly they will intervene in our lives to bring benefits like health, business success, and good exam results. Shinto is a very local religion, in which devotees are likely to be concerned with their local shrine rather than the religion as a whole. Many Japanese will have a tiny shrine-altar in their homes.

- The name Shinto comes from Chinese characters for Shen ('divine being'), and Tao ('way') and means 'Way of the Spirits'.
- Shrine visiting and taking part in festivals play a great part in binding local communities together.
- Shrine visiting at New Year is the most popular shared national event in Japan.
- Because Shinto is focused on the land of Japan it is clearly an ethnic religion. Therefore Shinto is little interested in missionary work, and rarely practiced outside its country of origin.
- Shinto sees human beings as basically good and has no concept of original sin, or of humanity as 'fallen'.
- Everything, including the spiritual, is experienced as part of this world. Shinto has no place for any transcendental other world.
- Shinto has no canonical scriptures.
- Shinto teaches important ethical principles but has no commandments.
- Shinto has no founder.
- Shinto has no God.
- Shinto does not require adherents to follow it as their only religion.
A shrine (jinja) is a sacred place where kami live, and which show the power and nature of the kami. It's conventional in Japan to refer to Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples - but Shinto shrines actually are temples, despite not using that name. Every village and town or district in Japan will have its own Shinto shrine, dedicated to the local kami. The Japanese see shrines as both restful places filled with a sense of the sacred, and as the source of their spiritual vitality - they regard them as their spiritual home, and often attend the same shrine regularly throughout their lives. Shrines need not be buildings - rocks, trees, and mountains can all act as shrines, if they are special to kami.

The gate to a Shinto shrine (Jinja), the Torii designates holy ground. As Shinto is a religion of worship of nature spirits, or Kami, most Shinto shrines are located outdoors. The Gate marks the gateway between the physical and spiritual worlds, and is often the only indication that one is entering a shrine.

References
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