Overview

For one beginning to study Japan, there is often curiosity around the subject of Japanese religion. For many in the West, especially those familiar with the Abrahamic faiths, the concept of religion is defined by a particular set of characteristics: a code of ethics, an orthodox canon of literature, doctrinal orthodoxy’s link to salvation. However, a study of the religions of Japan requires us to think differently. While many scholars suggest that Japanese religion is syncretic, Professor Trent Maxey from Amherst College maintains, in his September 2012 webinar titled “There’s a Shrine in my Temple! Combinatism in Japanese Religion,” that Japanese religion can be better understood with the concept of combinatism.

In short, contrary to the popular narrative, Maxey maintains that Shinto is not the “indigenous” religion of Japan, completely separate from Buddhism. Rather, it came into being in conversation with Buddhism and even Daoism. Therefore, we should not use the term “syncretism” to refer to Japanese religion. Rather, the term “combinatism” respects the distinctions between Shinto and Buddhism that are working in combination in the lifecycle and religious understanding of the Japanese people to this day.

While this conversation may become too philosophical for secondary school students, a more basic lesson can still be taught around a study of shrines and temples. As the physical spaces in which the practices and rituals of Shinto (shrines) and Buddhism (temples) are performed, these structures reveal that the lines between Shinto and Buddhism are not blurred. Rather, the two religious traditions are distinct while still working in combination in the religious life of Japan. In short, shrines and temples, Shinto and Buddhism can be distinguished by certain structural features and practices.

The essential questions of this lesson: What is the difference between shrines and temples, and how does one tell them apart? Shrine or Temple?

Recommended Grade Level or Course Placement
This lesson is most appropriate for secondary school World History or Human Geography. In order to complete the essay assignment, students will need the skills of close reading and text-based writing.

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1 Many scholars maintain that Japanese Religion is syncretic. Syncretism refers to a process of combining different (often contradictory) beliefs, while melding practices of various schools of thought. In the case of Japanese religions, it has been suggested that Shinto is the indigenous religion of Japan that later simply assimilated various beliefs and practices from the foreign, Chinese Buddhism. However, the presentation of Professor Trent Maxey that was the catalyst for this document aims to clarify that there are still multiple understandings about the relationship between the various traditions within Japanese religious practice.
Recommended Time Allotment for Instruction

This lesson is geared for one or two class periods. The study of terms should take one period. The second class can be used for the reading and text-based writing. The Supplemental Resources section should provide educators guidance if they wish to expand the lesson into multiple class periods. In particular, the book *Japanese Religions Past & Present* by Reader, Andreasen, and Stefánsson includes many concise primary sources that could be used for additional class discussions or writing assignments.

Objectives

Knowledge – Students will:

- Understand the difference between a shrine and a temple; be able to tell them apart
- Identify various structures that are proper to shrines and temples
- Discover references to Japanese religion a classic literary text

Attitude – Students will:

- Appreciate the complexity of Japanese religions
- Appreciate the uniqueness of Buddhism and Shintoism.

Skills – Students will:

- Speak and write confidently about the differences in Japanese religious structures

Materials/Resources Needed

Vocabulary lists, Shrine and Temple images, and a primary source document are included in this lesson

Shinto Shrine Vocabulary²

**Shrine** – Jingu in Japanese. It is a precinct set-off as a sacred space in which the Kami reside. Shrines are known for the rituals of life such as celebrations of child-rearing and marriage. Rituals are also conducted to entertain and please deities.

**Kami** – Often translated as “god” or “spirit,” kami are believed to dwell in animals, mountains, trees, rocks, water bodies, and weather. Mary Pat Fischer maintains that “Rather than evoking an image [...] kami refers to a quality” (209).³ Kami refers to things that evoke awe and wonder, the force that guides the universe, and experiences of creativity and growth.

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Torii Gate – tall gate-frames that demarcate sacred space

Sando – path of entrance to a Shrine
Temizuya – stone purification basin from which one purifies the hands and mouth.

Temizuya at a neighborhood shrine in Tokyo. In the background, a torii gate and shide.

Haiden – outer hall of a shrine in which all ceremonies are performed

Haiden, outer hall. Photographs are not permitted inside!

Honden – innermost hall in which the kami reside
**Shide** - zigzagging paper streamers used in Shinto rituals. These white streamers are also used to demarcate sacred space. In rituals, they are attached to **gohei**, wooden wands used for blessings.

The Holy Sakaki trees are adorned with shide at Meiji Shrine in Tokyo

**Kitsune statues** – foxes are a symbol of Inari, a Shinto kami, and serve as its messengers.
Buddhist Temple Vocabulary

**Pagoda** – a symbol of the Buddhist creed. Relics of the Buddha are housed here.

**Hoju** - topmost chamber said to house the Buddha’s remains

**Suien** - a decoration in the shape of a nobleman’s carriage

**Horin** - nine rings symbolize five famous jina deities and four famous bodhisattva

**Ukebana** - a decoration in the shape of a flower at the base of the horin

Toji Temple in Kyoto, Japan
Bodhisattva - a lay person who is undergoing religious training with the object of attaining Buddhahood

Jizo - bodhisattva protector of children, deceased children, expectant mothers, firemen, and travelers.
**Myo-o** – an envoy of the Buddha sent to fight evil. The appearance is often frightening.

**Sanmon** – gate to a Temple. Scary images here are meant to protect the Dharma.
**Kodo**- Lecture Hall, Buddhist scriptures are read here

**Kondo**- Golden Hall, Statues and images of the Buddha are kept here

Kondo of Todai-ji Temple in Nara. It contains Daibutsu-den, the Hall of the Great Buddha

The Great Buddha!
**Gorinto**- erected at graveyards or as a memorial stone

These gorinto are located in the Peace Memorial Park in Hiroshima, Japan.

**Instructional Procedures**

This lesson should arise in the context of a larger unit on religions and culture of East Asia. The first activity takes less than one class period. Present the vocabulary and images of shrines and temples listed above as a handout or in a PowerPoint. There are many more terms and concepts, but the terms listed above are the most essential in order to answer our essential question: *What is the difference between shrines and temples, and how does one tell them apart?* In particular, underscore the most basic ways to distinguish shrines and temples. Shrines have torii gates while temples have sanmon with scary statues. Temples have pagodas. Shrines have temizuya and a purification ritual for all visitors. Both shrines and temples have halls and walkways. Shrines, however, have shide and kitsune statues while temples have buddhas, bodhisattvas, and jizo. Test students by showing them images of the various terms or objects. They will demonstrate understanding when they can answer the question: *shrine or temple?*

If one wishes to extend this lesson into a full class or even another class period, I have provided a writing exercise with a brief primary source reading. Again, before giving this reading, the students should have read about Japanese religions and studied Daoism, Buddhism and Shinto. The vocabulary and images listed above should be incorporated in that general instruction on the teaching of Japanese religions. By understanding the difference between shrines and temples, students will come to see Japanese religions
as coexisting side-by-side rather than blended, syncretic traditions. Likewise, according to Professor Maxey, Shinto and Buddhism functions side-by-side in the lives of the Japanese. In his webinar, he notes that this combinatism is on display in a scene from the Japanese classic *The Tale of Genji* by Murasaki Shikibu. As a means of evaluating students' understanding of Shinto and Buddhism, students will be asked to read this edited selection from *The Tale of Genji* and respond in writing.

The Essay Assignment: This section of *The Tale of Genji* describes the birth of Genji’s son by his wife Aoi, daughter of the Minister of the Left. Read the passage carefully, highlighting examples of Japanese religion in the text. Then, in a short informative essay, give examples of various Japanese religions coexisting in the life of Aoi at the event of childbirth.

Students will be evaluated by their ability to recognize examples of Japanese religion in the text and distinguish them as Shinto or Buddhist.

**Supplemental Resources**


**Citations/Bibliography**


Akikonomu [an Ise Priestess] was to have gone to the palace the year before, but various difficulties had prevented her from doing so until this autumn. She was then to move in the ninth month directly to the Shrine of the Moor, which meant that preparations for the second Purification had to go forward urgently at the same time; but her mother was overcome by a strange lassitude and spent her time in despondent brooding, to the intense anxiety of the High Priestess’s staff, who offered prayers of every kind. Still, her condition was not actually dire, and she got through the days and months without displaying any clear symptoms. Genji called on her often, but Aoi was so ill that he remained deeply preoccupied

[...]

They led Genji to the curtain that stood near where she lay. She was so clearly dying that her parents withdrew a little, understanding that she might have some last word for him. The priests chanting the Lotus Sutra lowered their voices, to awesome effect. He lifted the curtain and looked in. Anyone, not only her husband, would have been moved to see her lying there, so beautiful and with so vast a belly, and since she was indeed his wife, he was of course overcome by pity and regret. Her long, abundant hair, bound at the end, lay beside her, contrasting vividly with her white gown. He thought her dearer and more beautiful than ever before.

[...]

When her cries died down a little, her mother brought the hot medicinal water in case she might be in reprieve; then she was lifted upright and quickly gave birth. Her parents’ joy knew no bounds, but the spirits expelled by the healers [male Buddhist clerics] now raised a wild clamor of jealous rage, and what remained to come was still a great worry. When all finally ended well, no doubt thanks to urgent prayers renewed in numbers beyond counting, the Abbot of Mount Hiei and the other most holy monks wiped away their perspiration in triumph and hurried away.

Days of acute and widespread anxiety now gave way to a welcome lull, and at last her parents breathed easily. The Minister of the Left commissioned a new round of protective rites, but happiness reigned, and exceptional delight in the child put everyone off guard. The Retired Emperor, Their Highnesses the Princes, and the senior nobles all attended the splendid birth celebrations that enlivened the succeeding evenings. These events were especially bright and gay because in the bargain the child was a boy.

Citation: The above text was found in The Tale of Genji: Abridged, edited and translated by Royall Tyler. New York, NY: Penguin, 2006. (p. 174-177)

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