

Tamara Schexnider

ASNS 1150 East Asian Studies

Professor Michael Thornton

How Shinto Merged with Buddhism Following its Introduction in Japan during the Suiko Period

Shinto and Buddhism are two of the most ancient religions in Asia, and both prominent in Japanese culture. Shinto arrived first in Japanese culture, being as ancient as Japan itself and known as an animistic religion indigenous to Japan. Buddhism, however, originally from India, became enforced in the country beginning in the 6th century. Instead of causing major wars and civil unrest, and instead of one canceling the other out, the two religions merged together in the country. Today, most citizens of Japan continue to practice both, as beliefs and practices from each religion are now deeply integrated into the culture and everyday life. This paper will examine Buddhism's arrival into Japan in the 6th and 7th centuries, and why the two religions came to coexist harmoniously rather than canceling each other out. Though violence did occur at the beginning, Buddhism became not only accepted but even blended with indigenous Kami worship.

The Japanese people have worshiped Kami, spirits or deities that exist in everything (nature or other elements), for so long that its origins are not clearly defined. Kami worship, later known as Shinto, is an arguably positive faith in which humans are inherently good and build shrines for the Kami, "As a way of honoring them and soliciting their benevolence and protection,"¹. Most Kami-worshipping rituals request protection and good harvests from the

¹ Hardacre, Helen, *Shinto* (New York, 2017; online edition, Oxford Academic, 22 Dec. 2016), <https://doi-org.ezproxy.neu.edu/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190621711.001.0001>

spirits, but also, “A divinely descended monarch rules through rituals for the Kami,”². This means early Japan was unified under imperial rule with Kami worship at the center.

The Kojiki, an early Japanese chronicle of legends and genealogies, provides insight on the political and religious state of early Japan before the arrival of Buddhism. Volume I with 43 sections, recounts stories of the births of various Kami and the creation of the land. Volumes II and III with 137 sections combined cover the histories of emperors and empresses from Emperor Jim-mu to Empress Suiko. Though the influence of Shinto is more straightforwardly evident in the first volume of the chronicle, the passages in the following two volumes still integrate Kami clearly in relation to rulers; for example Itsu-se, brother of Emperor Jim-mu, loses in a battle in Section XLIV because he can not fight while facing the sun, as “An august child of the Sun-Deity,”³. Rulers and their families are understood to descend directly from Kami.

This heavenly genealogy is why Buddhism caused commotion and backlash when it was introduced in Japanese court in the 6th century. Shakyamuni founded Buddhism in India in the 6th century BCE, and the faith spread across many Asian countries, including China and Korea. As the new religion gained traction throughout the land, Buddhism became “Inseparable from continental culture, and it was closely associated with literacy, medicine, the arts, and many technical skills,”⁴. The Nihon Shoki, the second oldest book of classical Japanese history, reveals how three different clans reacted in Japanese court when presented with a statue of Shakyamuni and accompanying scriptures in 552. The Soga clan advocated for Japan’s adoption of Buddhism because other countries already had and Japan should assimilate, while the

² Hardacre, Helen, *Shinto* (New York, 2017; online edition, Oxford Academic, 22 Dec. 2016), <https://doi-org.ezproxy.neu.edu/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190621711.001.0001>

³ Chamberlain, Basil Hall. *Kojiki: Records of Ancient Matters*, Tuttle Publishing 2012
<https://www.sacred-texts.com/shi/kj/index.htm>

⁴ Hardacre, Helen, *Shinto* (New York, 2017; online edition, Oxford Academic, 22 Dec. 2016), <https://doi-org.ezproxy.neu.edu/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190621711.001.0001>

Mononobe and Nakatomi disagreed, predicting that the Kami would punish the acceptance of a foreign god ⁵.

The Soga proceeded to initiate a campaign against the Mononobe and Nakatomi, which resulted in war between those clans. Thus, violence did emerge with the introduction of Buddhism in Japan; the violence was short-lived, however, and Buddhism quickly gained popularity throughout the country. In the *Nihon Shoki*, Emperor Yōmei converted to Buddhism in 587, and then the Buddhist Empress Suiko of the Soga clan rose to the throne in 593 ⁶. Empress Suiko (r. 593-628) and Prince Shōtoku (regent) are credited with officially establishing Buddhism in Japan. Suiko issued the Flourishing Three Treasures Edict in 594 which officially recognized Buddhism, and in 604 Shōtoku authored the Seventeen-Article Constitution. Within the Seventeen-Article Constitution, Prince Shōtoku makes some clear connections between his laws and values with Buddhist morals. In Clause II, however, is when Prince Shōtoku explicitly incorporates Buddhism into his laws: “Sincerely reverence the Three Treasures. The Buddha, the Law, and the religious orders are the final refuge of all beings and the supreme objects of reverence in all countries. It is a law honored by all, no matter what the age or who the person.” With this clause, he clearly states that Buddhism is law, and must be practiced by all, no matter what.

Additionally in less explicit fashions, other clauses in the constitution echo Buddhist values. From Clause V about ceasing from gluttony, Clause VI “chastise that which is evil and encourage that which is good,”, Clause VII: “In this world, few are born with knowledge; wisdom is the product of earnest meditation”, and Clause X “For we are all, one with another,

⁵ W.G. Aston. *Nihongi: Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest Times to A.D. 697: Translated from the Original Chinese and Japanese*. London: Pub. for the Society by K. Paul, Trench, Trübner & col., limited, 1896.

⁶ W.G. Aston. *Nihongi: Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest Times to A.D. 697: Translated from the Original Chinese and Japanese*. London: Pub. for the Society by K. Paul, Trench, Trübner & col., limited, 1896.

wise and foolish, like a ring which has no end,” . All of these allude to some of the main lessons in Buddhism: living without gluttony or luxury, accepting the nature of people, and wisdom as derived from meditation. All of these are steps taken on the path from samsara (the never-ending cycle of life and death through reincarnation) to nirvana (enlightenment and final rest from samsara) in Buddhism.

Yet, the adoption of Buddhism in Japanese court and then in law did not prohibit Kami worship to continue existing. Shōtoku calls for all Japanese to adopt Buddhist principles and worship the Buddha, but no text suggests leaving out Shinto altogether. In fact, Shōtoku created the following analogy to describe Japanese religious practices in which Shinto represents the roots of a tree, “Imbedded in the very heart of the Japanese people”; Confucianism represents “The trunk and branches; politics, morality, and education”; and Buddhism represents “The flowers; religious feelings bloom as flowers,” ⁷ . The adoption of Buddhism in the Japanese court during the Suiko period never entailed erasing Japan’s preexisting other spiritualities or practices, and thus, Buddhism eventually came to pair up with Shinto.

In fact, Buddhism answered some questions that Shinto left almost unanswered. Shinto addressed mainly this-earthly concerns: “As the legends of epidemics in the Kojiki show, disease was the cause of much sorrow in their lives, which could be enjoyed only under the condition of good bodily health,” meaning most of their worship before Buddhism were earthly concerns such as good health and good harvests. Shinto did not provide a clear explanation to what happens to humans after their deaths, leaving the Japanese with spiritual comfort mainly for their current lives. Buddhism provided more of a philosophy and spiritual objectives for life and the afterlife; Buddhism has an organized structure in which the benevolence or harm you cause in one life

⁷ Davies, Roger J. 2016. *Japanese Culture: The Religious and Philosophical Foundations*. Oxford: Tuttle Publishing. ProQuest Ebook Central.

dictates how you will be reincarnated for your next life. Humans who meditate and achieve nirvana finally escape samsara, the never-ending cycle of reincarnation and continued suffering. In short, Buddhism provides another mindset beyond daily concerns of this world such as agricultural harvests, and thus provided the Japanese with a spiritual awakening, “and were given a power and new life substance by this newly-arrived religion,”⁸. Kami worship did not disappear by any means, but instead, was complemented by this new faith. It is important to note that the acceptance of Buddhism came about for a few reasons; both a spiritual awakening for the Japanese people thanks to the philosophy and structures involved, but also because of political pressures for Japan to practice the same faith as the other countries in mainland Asia.

The following century, the pairing of the two spiritualities continued. A conclusion was reached that “The Kami were pleased to receive Buddhist sutras as offerings and to hear them recited in worship. As a consequence Buddhist temples were established alongside shrines, ostensibly to satisfy the kami, make them into Buddhist believers, and finally raise them to the level of buddhas,”⁹. These cross-religious relations continued to progress and eventually some even understood Kami to be types of bodhisattvas. Of course, both religions are polytheistic, which can already help with the adoption of the second one. There were other connections, however, in which the two practices complimented each other. Some Kami are also perceived as bodhisattvas or buddhas, and Buddhism and Shinto addressed different concerns within the hearts of the Japanese people (such as how Buddhism provides a final resting place through nirvana)¹⁰.

⁸ Watsuji, Tetsurō, and Umeyo Hirano. “The Reception of Buddhism in the Suiko Period.” *The Eastern Buddhist* 5, no. 1 (1972): 47–54. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44361317>

⁹ Motonori, Ono and Woodard, William P. 1962. *Shinto: The Kami Way*. 1st ed. Rutland Vt: C.E. Tuttle.

¹⁰ Watsuji, Tetsurō, and Umeyo Hirano. “The Reception of Buddhism in the Suiko Period.” *The Eastern Buddhist* 5, no. 1 (1972): 47–54. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44361317>

Violence did occur between Japanese clans during the Suiko Period as a result of the arrival of the new, mainland Asian religion. However, Japan's adoption of Buddhism occurred relatively quickly, with most of the transition occurring during Emperor Yomei's and Empress Suiko's reigns (as well as Prince Shōtoku's regency during her reign). Kami continued to be worshiped by the Japanese people, but following the 6th century, Kami were now worshiped alongside Buddhist shrines. Shinto and Buddhism continue to mutually exist in Japan today, with beliefs and values of both faiths being very prevalent in the culture and everyday life of Japan.

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