

Jinja

Heart of Japan



Kami and Jinja



A “jinja” is a sacred space, the seat of one or more kami.

The many kami are awe-inspiring, standing out from the normal and the everyday, and this is what makes them kami. Different jinja honour different kami, often more than one, in different combinations, and different aspects of the same kami are often emphasised at different jinja. The kami themselves are very diverse: some are figures from the ancient myths of Japan, others are historical figures, and still others are closely associated with natural features such as mountains or rivers.

The oldest jinja were established well over one thousand years ago, and new ones are still being founded today. A jinja exists to enable priests to serve the kami through a daily and annual cycle of rites called “matsuri”, and other people visit to participate in those rites, to make requests of the kami, to give thanks for blessings received, or simply to pay their respects.

You are welcome to join them, whatever your nationality, age, sex, race, or religion.

The place where the kami is present is particularly sacred, and in many cases visitors to the jinja may not enter that area, or sometimes even see it. At many jinja, this is a building called the “honden”, or main sanctuary, but at some jinja the kami inhabits a hill, mountain, island, or waterfall, or an area of woodland in the precincts.

Jinja are as varied as the kami they venerate, and nothing in this booklet is true of every jinja. It describes features common to most jinja, and ways to pay your respects that are acceptable almost everywhere. However, if priests at a particular jinja ask you to do things differently there, then you should follow their instructions.

Shinto Over Time

In the distant past, the people of the Japanese islands saw kami in the natural world around them, and reverence for these kami became part of their daily life. In that society based on rice agriculture and fishing, the power of nature brought great blessings, but could also be a terrible threat, through earthquakes, floods, plagues, typhoons, and volcanoes. People saw the kami at work in both aspects of nature, and revered mountains, great rocks, trees, waterfalls, and other natural phenomena as their dwelling places. Eventually, permanent buildings were constructed at sites of reverence. From early times, people revered their ancestors as kami, and later came to also see people who had made great contributions to the community as kami.

Unlike many religions, then, Shinto has no founder, having arisen and developed organically as the people of Japan interacted with the natural world and other peoples around them.

Reverence for the kami takes the form of matsuri, which reflect the traditional culture of Japan, and particularly the importance of rice cultivation. In spring, the community prays for a good harvest, and in the heat of summer they pray for good health. In autumn, they give thanks for the harvest, and in winter they bid farewell to the old year and welcome the new.

Many of these matsuri are major events for the whole community, with many people gathering to celebrate in the grounds of the jinja while the rites are conducted within. Sometimes, the kami is transferred to a “mikoshi”, in which they are carried around the area in procession, with much shouting and enjoyment.

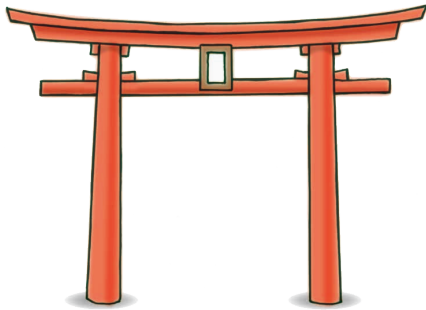


✿ Entering a Jinja

A jinja and its grounds are like the home of the kami. You should treat it with the respect you would show when visiting an important person in their home.

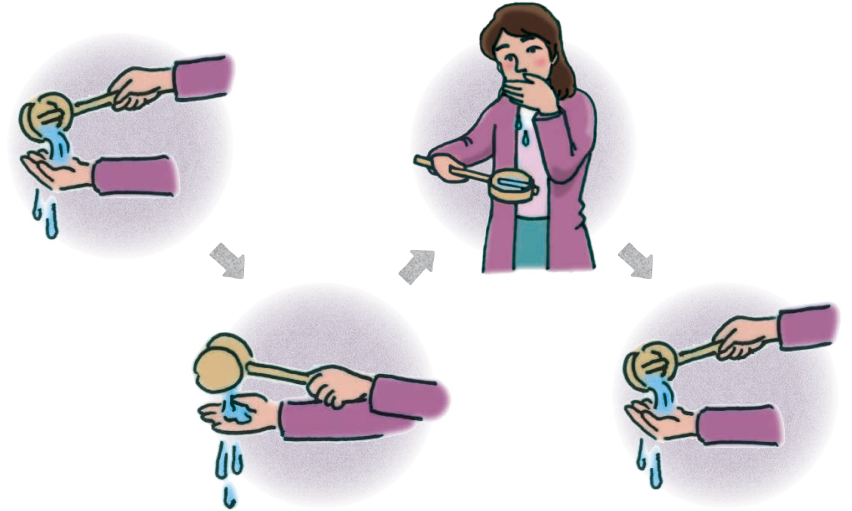
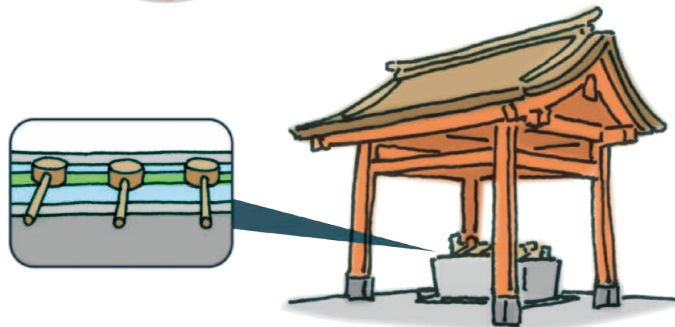
Torii

The entrance to a jinja is marked by a torii. The torii marks the border between the sacred space of the jinja and the everyday world outside, and so many people pause and bow their heads slightly before walking through.



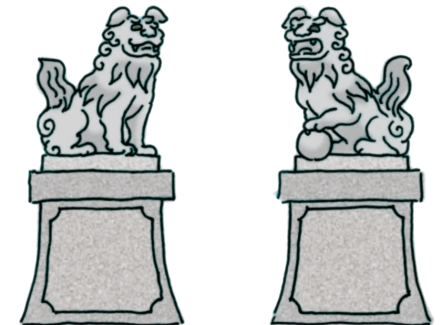
Purification Font

As purity is very important in Shinto, most jinja have a font of water that you should use to cleanse yourself before paying your respects. First, hold the ladle in your right hand, and rinse your left hand. Then, hold it in your left hand, and rinse your right hand. Next, pour a little water into the palm of your left hand, and use that to rinse your mouth. Do not touch the ladle to your mouth, and spit the water out at the base of the font, not into it. Finally, rinse your left hand once more. When you have finished, put the ladle back where you found it.



Koma Inu

Many jinja have a pair of animal statues in the grounds. The most common are mythological creatures called “koma inu”, which look a little like lions. Some jinja have animals particularly associated with their kami, such as foxes, wolves, or monkeys. These statues represent guardians, keeping evil influences out of the jinja.



✿ Paying Your Respects

When visiting a jinja, you should first pay your respects to the kami, before looking around.

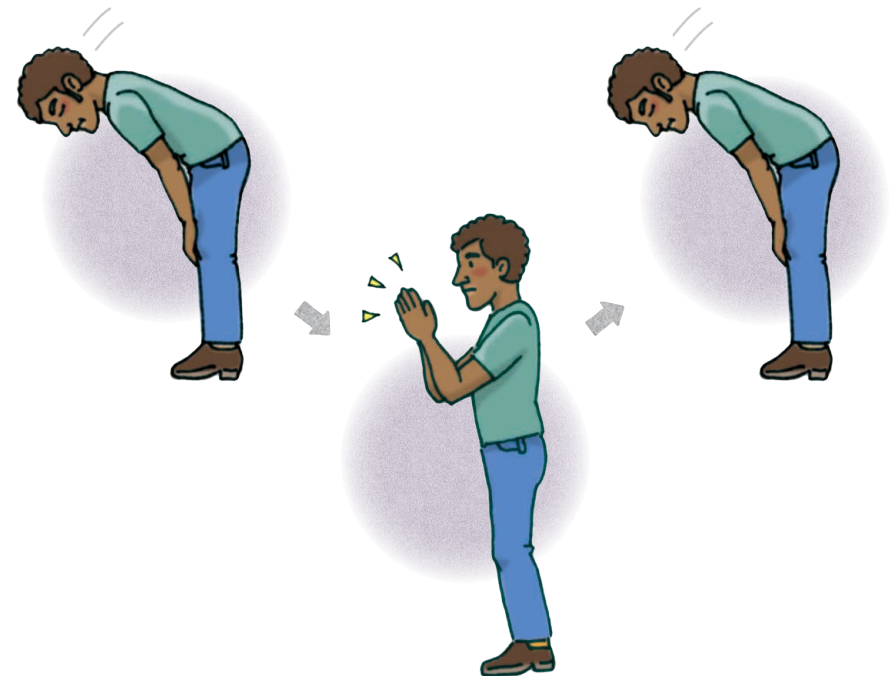
The path from the torii leads to the place where you should do so, normally in front of a building. At a small jinja, this may be the main sanctuary, but at larger jinja it is the prayer hall, or “haiden”. If there is a prayer hall, the main sanctuary is normally behind it. You should not enter the prayer hall without permission, and most people pay their respects from outside.

There are often an offering box and bell rope at the front. The sound of the bell is said to purify you, and offering a small amount shows respect for the kami.



Etiquette

- Stand up straight, facing the prayer hall or sanctuary.
- Put some coins in the offering box, if you wish, and shake the rope to ring the bell if there is one.
- Bow deeply, twice.
- Stand up straight again, and put your hands together in front of your chest.
- Clap twice to show respect.
- Say a quiet prayer if you wish.
- Bow deeply once.



✿ Getting Closer

If you wish to make a particular request of the kami, you may ask at the jinja office for a more formal ceremony, called a gokito, which is held in the prayer hall. If a jinja is staffed, the jinja office is normally close to the prayer hall.

Most priests only speak Japanese, but they may have prepared ways to organise gokito with people who do not.

You must make an offering for a formal gokito. These days, this is most often an offering of cash, which you should give to the priests while arranging the gokito. The amount of the offering depends on the jinja and the gokito, and the staff will indicate an appropriate amount. Many Japanese offer a few thousand yen, or a few tens of thousands on particularly special occasions.

In theory, a gokito can be for anything, but common requests include the following:

Safe travel

Good health

Business success

Success in studies

A happy home

New relationships
(romantic, business, career, etc.)

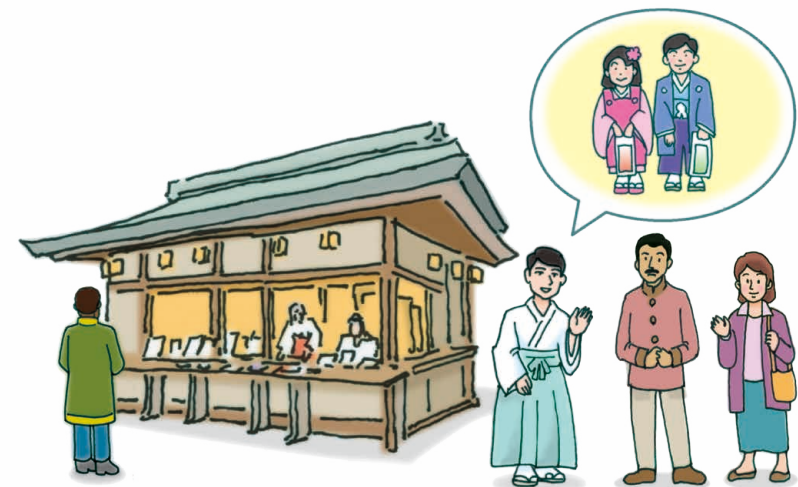
Japanese families often bring new babies to their local jinja, for a ceremony called hatsumiyamairi (“first jinja visit”), or young children, aged three, five, or seven, for a ceremony in autumn called shichi-go-san (“seven-five-three”). You may see these if you visit a jinja.

It is also possible to have a ceremony performed to pay formal respects to the kami without a specific request.

At most jinja, you will have to wait for a while before your gokito: either the priest needs time to prepare, or you need to wait for another group of people to finish.

It is normal to remove your shoes before entering a traditional Japanese building, and most jinja are very traditional. However, there are exceptions, so you should follow the instructions of the priests.

Most jinja would prefer you to be dressed smartly, at least with long sleeves and trousers or skirts, for a gokito. If your clothes are too inappropriate, it may not be possible to have a gokito performed.



Gokito

A gokito follows the same structure as all jinja ceremonies, called matsuri. This is what you can expect.

Purification

In Shinto, it is believed that people pick up impurity in their daily lives, both from things that they do, and things that happen to them, such as illness or natural disasters. Purification, called “oharai”, is therefore a central part of every Shinto ritual. Through this, people are thought to recover their natural standing, and resume an active role in society. Everyone, and everything, must be purified before the matsuri. This is called “oharai” in Japanese. At most jinja, a priest recites a short purification prayer, and then waves an “ohnusa” over the people and offerings involved in the matsuri, as shown in the picture. Some jinja use a branch of an evergreen tree, with the leaves attached. You should bow your head while the priest is purifying you.



Offerings

Offerings are made to the kami as part of the ceremony. They may be placed before the kami during the ceremony, or already be there before it starts. Rice, sake, rice cakes, fish, vegetables, fruit, salt, and water are common offerings.

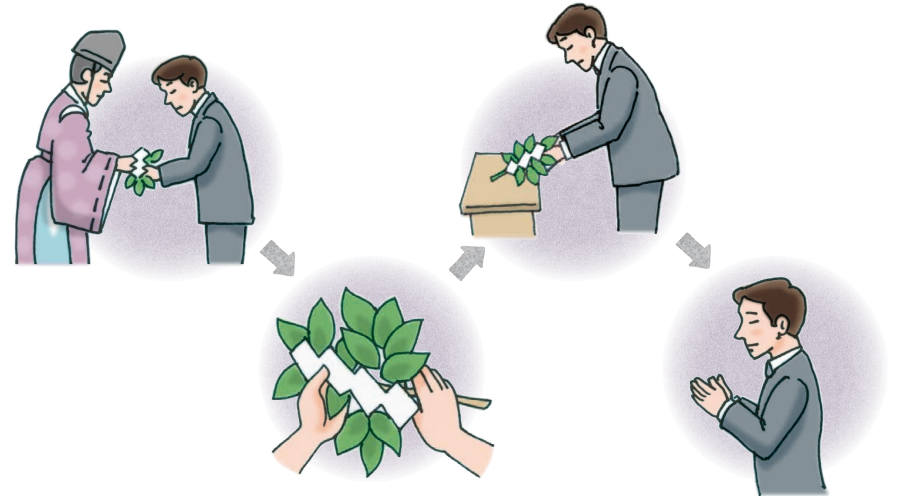
Prayer

The presiding priest goes before the kami and recites a prayer, called a “norito” in Japanese. These prayers are written in ancient Japanese, and convey your request to the kami. Everyone should bow their heads while the norito is being offered.



Reverence

After the norito, everyone pays reverence to the kami. This follows the same etiquette as described earlier, and may also involve offering a small evergreen branch with narrow folded paper tied to it, called a “tamagushi”. First, hold it vertically with the leaves upwards in front of your chest, and silently offer your prayer. When you place the tamagushi on the table, the stem should point away from you, with the leaves towards you. It is common for one member of a group to offer the tamagushi on behalf of everyone, but all members should bow and clap together once it has been offered.



Sacred Dance

At larger jinja, miko, female attendants, may offer sacred dance, called “kagura”, before the reverence. At some jinja, you may be able to request this, or it may be part of the normal ceremony. Smaller jinja, however, usually do not have miko who are able to perform the dances.

✿ Taking It Home

Jinja offer several ways to keep the power of the kami with you. A small offering is almost always required for any of these, and most jinja indicate the appropriate amount.



Ofuda

Ofuda are used to venerate the kami in your own home, and some people say that the kami's spirit resides in them. Physically, they are tablets with the name of the kami or jinja written on, and they come in various sizes.



Amulets (Omamori)

“Omamori” are small amulets, which are also said to contain the spirit of the kami. People normally choose an omamori that matches their request of the kami, and carry it with them.

Omamori are available for the same range of requests as gokito, and if you have a gokito performed many jinja will give you an appropriate omamori after the ceremony.

These take many forms, but most are colourful embroidered bags, which contain a sacred wooden tablet. You are not supposed to open the bags or look inside.

Omamori are appropriate gifts for friends or family who might appreciate the blessings of the kami.



Fortunes (Omikuji)

A lot of visitors to jinja draw Japanese-language fortunes, called omikuji.



Votive Tablets (Ema)

Ema are small wooden tablets used to make requests of the kami. They have a picture on one side and space to write on the other. After writing, you hang the ema up in the jinja grounds. Most jinja have pens available. Unlike the other items here, ema are often left at the jinja.



Goshuin

Many jinja will provide a goshuin as a record of your visit and respects. This is a red stamp on a piece of paper, normally with the jinja's name and the date written by hand in black. Every jinja has a different scarlet seal and the writing is always different, so some people in Japan collect them in special books, called “goshuincho”.

A goshuin is a record of your visit to the jinja, so they are not appropriate gifts.



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Published in March 2020

