

Religion and Aesthetics in Japan

Rebecca Byrd
New Center Elementary School
Sevierville, Tennessee



Torii gate of Ootakayama-jinja Shrine. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/ya7tuqlx>.

This module was developed and utilized for a seventh-grade world history and geography class. It is designed to teach the Tennessee state social studies standards 7.08—"Describe the origins and central features of Shintōism," and 7.10—"Describe how the Heian aristocracy contributed to the development of a Japanese national culture." However, the module could easily be adapted for use in other states in middle school or possibly high school world history, world geography, or world cultures courses.

Estimated module length: Two ninety-minute class periods

Overview

This module is designed to introduce students to Shintō ("The Way of the *Kami* or Gods"), Japan's only major indigenous belief system, and to the Shintō- and especially Buddhist-influenced aesthetic concepts of *mono no aware* and *wabi-sabi*. Most students have little, if any, exposure to Shintō prior to seventh grade. Additionally, students often have difficulty understanding Shintō because it is vastly different from other religious traditions they have

studied. Shintō is an integral part of the geography of Japan because numerous Shintō shrines of varying sizes constitute sacred spaces throughout the nation. Because many shrines were intentionally constructed in beautiful places, studying Shintō offers students an opportunity to understand the relationship between the physical and human characteristics of a place. Studying the aesthetic concepts of *mono no aware* and *wabi-sabi* will also help students grasp the profound influence that not only Shintō but Buddhist thought had on Japanese society, particularly in the Heian period (794-1185 CE) poetic form of *waka*. It is impossible to appreciate much of Japanese traditional visual arts and poetry without an understanding of *mono no aware* and *wabi-sabi*.

Objectives

Students will:

Explore the basic beliefs and practices of Shintō, including the connection between Shintō beliefs and practices and the locations of major shrines.

Define the concepts of *mono no aware* and *wabi-sabi*, and explore their connection to Buddhist thought.

Create a poem using the *waka* form that demonstrates understanding of the concepts of *mono no aware* and *wabi-sabi*.

Prerequisite knowledge

Knowledge of Shintō and familiarity with Japanese culture will be helpful for students but is not required. Students will need knowledge of the basic beliefs of Buddhism, including the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. Familiarity with other forms of syllable-based poetry such as haiku is useful, but not required.

Module introduction

The reading and sample student work for this module appear in both the module narrative and at the end of the module for the convenience of teachers wishing to use all or part of these digital materials.

Class No. 1

Activity 1

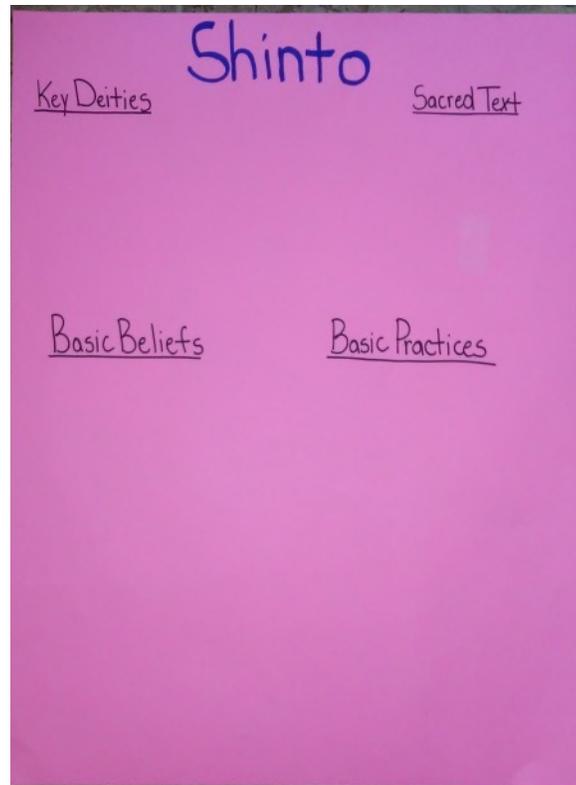
Estimated time: five minutes

Display an image of a *Torii* gate such as the one shown [here](#). Ask students to describe what they see. Allow them to share their observations and encourage them to make connections or inferences about the gate's meaning based on prior knowledge. Conclude the activity by explaining to students that the *Torii* gate is a feature of Shintō, one of Japan's main religious traditions and the only religious tradition that primarily or entirely originated in what is now Japan.

Activity 2

Estimated time: five to ten minutes

Play the three-minute and forty-second video “[Shintō](#)” from Asian Art Museum of San Francisco. Ask students to consider the following questions as they watch the video: What are some key Shintō practices? What role does Shintō play in everyday life in Japan? Allow them to share their observations with the class. Explain that they will be working in groups to further explore the beliefs and practices of Shintō during this lesson.



Shintō lesson worksheet. Source: Photo courtesy of the author. Completed example student worksheets are available at <https://tinyurl.com/y9tkgsne>.

Activity 3

Estimated time: thirty-five to forty-five minutes

Divide students into groups of four or five. Give each group a piece of chart paper and marker. Explain to students that they will be researching several aspects of Shintō, including key deities, sacred texts, basic beliefs, and basic practices. Explain to students that the Merriam-Webster Dictionary definition of “deity” is “divine or sacred god or goddess, or an entity that is divine or sacred.” Review the difference between “beliefs” (unprovable ideas) and “practices” (actions based on beliefs) before students begin their research. Ask students to share examples of beliefs and practices from other religious traditions to check for understanding before continuing. You may want to provide students with an example to help them organize the information on their poster, similar to the one shown above. Students should use the *BBC Religions* page on “[Shintō](#)”

to conduct their research. Although the page is not currently being updated, it is an excellent basic introduction to the belief system that most middle school students can utilize. You may allow students to explore the page on their own or specifically assign them to look at the following sections: “At a Glance,” “Beliefs” subpage, “Kami,” “Is Shintō a Religion?,” “Purity in Shintō,” “Beliefs about the Universe,” “Rites and Rituals” subpage, “Shintō Worship,” “Ethics” subpage, “Ethics in Shintō,” and “Texts” subpage on “Shintō Holy Books.” Student groups will record their findings on their poster.

Activity 4

Estimated time: ten to fifteen minutes

Students should display their posters in the classroom or in a hallway. Students should be given ten minutes to fifteen minutes to view all the posters and revise their posters as necessary.

Activity 5

Estimated time: fifteen minutes

Allow each group to share key concepts from their posters with the class. Encourage each group to share something not shared by a previous group. Discussion should progress naturally, but the key concepts listed below should be covered by the completion of the discussion. Shintō beliefs center on *kami*—spirit beings that can influence the outcome of events in humans’ lives.

Kami are often associated with forces or features of nature such as mountains, springs, rocks, impressive forest groves, waterfalls, and other natural phenomena. Kami can also be mythological deities and deceased people. Many large Shintō shrines are located in rural areas of Japan near sacred natural places that were long ago deemed as kami.

Shintō focuses on understanding how to live in harmony in nature.

Because kami are associated with specific shrines, Shintō is not widely practiced outside of Japan, and Shintō believers do not attempt to convert other people to the religion. Shintō encourages individuals to develop excellence in a skill or art form as a kind of offering to the kami.

Worship can be an individual or group affair and can be conducted at a small home shrine or by visiting one of many thousands of shrines throughout Japan. It is not uncommon at famous shrines to see Japanese tour buses carrying schoolchildren or senior citizens’ organizations to visit and worship as a group at the shrine.

Shintō emphasizes the inherent goodness of humans. Evil actions are considered the work of evil spirits.

Purity, both physical and spiritual, is another important Shintō concept that permeates Japanese culture.

Rituals associated with Shintō worship include purification (washing hands and rinsing the mouth), praying for the kami to intervene in specific aspects of the worshipper's life (eg, students asking for success on exams), and making offerings. Shintō has no specific founder.

Shintō texts use myths to express key concepts. For example, the imperial family is thought to be directly descended from the sun goddess Amaterasu.

Shintō can be practiced in addition to other religious traditions, such as Buddhism. Beginning in the eighth century, Shintō and Buddhism began a long process of syncretism, or blending together. For example, kami were originally thought to be beings of pure spirit with no physical form, but in the eighth century, kami began to be depicted in human form because of the influence of Buddhist art. Today, most Japanese practice a mix of Shintō and Buddhist rituals. For example, weddings and baby christenings are often celebrated at Shintō shrines, while funerals are generally held at Buddhist temples since, traditionally, Shintō beliefs consider death unclean.

Extension activity

When compared to religions that are familiar to most Americans, one of the most important differences in Japanese religious practice (as well as several other cultures, including China, Taiwan, *Việt Nam*, and South Korea) is syncretism. The term syncretism means that unlike believers in monotheistic faiths such as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, East Asians mix together aspects of several belief systems in their religious practices and beliefs. This [Japan Times \(English-language\) newspaper article](#) focuses on the relationship between Shintō and Buddhism, and features impressive supporting images as well.

Author's note on class discussion

During class discussion, students drew some interesting parallels between kami and Greek and Roman gods. Students noted that, like kami, Greek and Roman gods could help humans but could also be mischievous and cause problems for humans. Students were very intrigued by the concept of spiritual purity. They had some practical questions such as “How do they prevent the spread of disease if everyone is drinking from the same water dippers?” Students noted that important moments such as New Year's and weddings are celebrated at shrines. One student wanted to know what Shintō funerals were like. I explained that corpses are considered impure in Shintō, so most Japanese have Buddhist funerals. This led to a great discussion on the blending of Shintō and Buddhism. Finally, students were interested to know if they would be allowed to participate in a Shintō ritual if they were in Japan. This allowed us to discuss the differences between proselytizing faiths such as Christianity and Islam and Shintō. Overall, the discussion allowed students to expand on and clarify their understanding of Shintō, as well as make connections to prior learning about other religious traditions.

If time allows, have students watch the [Asian Art Museum “Shintō” video](#) again. Students will be able to make new observations and connections based on their research and class discussion. The poetry activity to be conducted during Class No. 2 works best if students have a concrete object to base their poems upon. You may want to assign students to bring objects such as a fall leaf or weathered rock. Alternatively, you could provide students with objects or photos such as

a flower past its prime, cherry trees before and after blossoming, or a household item such as a cup or textile that shows signs of wear and age.



Grand Shrine of Izumo. Source: *Encyclopedia Britannica* at <https://tinyurl.com/ya9xrwsh>.

Class No. 2: Aesthetics in Japan

Activity 1: Shintō review

Estimated time: five to ten minutes

Project an image of the Izumo Shrine, such as the one shown [here](#). Ask students to explain aspects of the image in terms of the beliefs and practices of Shintō. Remind students that Shintō was deeply influenced by Buddhist thought. Explain that in this lesson they will be exploring how Buddhist thought contributed to the development of Japanese ideas on aesthetics or the nature of and appreciation of beauty.

Activity 2: Mono no aware

Estimated time: ten to fifteen minutes

Read and discuss the adapted and modified version of Tim Lomas's original blog post. "[Untranslatable Words: Mono No Aware, and the Aesthetics of Impermanence](#)" also includes content from Volumes 1 and 2 of *Sources of East Asian Tradition* and *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Have students write a definition of mono no aware based on the article. Post definition in the classroom for reference later.

Activity 3: Wabi-Sabi

Estimated time: ten to fifteen minutes

Show the [eight-minute and forty-two second video](#) from the *School of Life* on wabi-sabi. Discuss the concept of wabi-sabi with students and have students write a definition of wabi-sabi based on the video. Post the definition in the classroom for reference later. Although the terms are sometimes combined with a hyphen, they are also separate concepts that are yet related. A concise definition of “wabi” is an appreciation of the beauty in simple, austere things or natural phenomena such as one flower or a partially clouded evening moon. A similar definition of “sabi” is appreciation for something that has aged well, perhaps an old oak tree or an older man or woman who looks distinguished in part because of their age.

Teachers should also be aware that contrary to what is asserted in this excellent introductory video, the reasons that the fifteenth-century ruling warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi forced the most famous tea master in Japanese history, Sen Rikyū, (Sen no Rikyū) to commit suicide are disputed by historians.

Activity 4: What is waka poetry?

Estimated time: ten to fifteen minutes

Read the article “[What Is a Waka?](#)” from *Asia for Educators* with students. Discuss the key elements of waka poetry (five lines and thirty-one syllables), and its similarities and differences from the Western poetry with which they are familiar. Note that the waka by Ono no Komachi provides an excellent example of mono no aware.

Activity 5: Writing waka poetry

Estimated time: twenty-five to thirty-five minutes

Students should write a waka based on the objects they brought to class or that you provided to them for the activity. During the Heian period of Japanese history (794–1185 CE), not only the words of a waka but also the paper it was written on and the style and grace of the calligraphy were all considered important. Have students write a rough draft of their waka and then create a final version in their best handwriting. You may want to provide students with construction or scrapbook paper, markers, paint, and other supplies to utilize in creating their final product. If possible, include the object or a photograph of the object near the waka.

Activity 6: Reflection

Estimated time: five to ten minutes

Allow student volunteers to share their waka with the class and explain how it reflects the concepts of mono no aware and wabi- sabi.

Guiding questions

Traditionally, waka were written about some aspect of nature. How does this connect with your understanding of Shintō from the previous lesson?

Waka were very popular during the Heian period. The poetry and literature of this period, including *The Tale of Genji*, reflect the Buddhist understanding of the world as transient or temporary. How does the concept of *mono no aware* reflect the basic beliefs of Buddhism? The aesthetic concept of *wabi-sabi* asks us to embrace the beauty of imperfection and age. How does this concept relate to Shintō's focus on nature? How does *wabi-sabi* relate to the Buddhist concept of impermanence?

Module assessment

The Shintō poster and waka poem serve as formative assessments for this module. There are a number of options for summative assessment if desired. Students could be instructed to write an essay on Shintō based on their group research. Another option is to provide students with an object and ask them to write a paragraph explaining how the object reflects the concepts of *mono no aware* and *wabi-sabi*.

References and resources

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RgQ4eCc38dM&=&t=3s>: This is a video on Shintō by the Asian Art Museum from *YouTube*.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/shinto/>: Another video on Shinto by the *British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)*.

https://www.huffingtonpost.com/tim-lomas/untranslatable-words-mono_b_9292490.html: A *Huffington Post* article from December 6, 2017, by Tim Lomas explores the concept of *mono no aware*: “Untranslatable Words: Mono No Aware, and the Aesthetics of Impermanence.”

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/japanese-aesthetics/>: This is an entry on Japanese aesthetics from the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* by editor Edward N. Zalta.

Wm. Theodore de Bary, ed., *Sources of East Asian Tradition*, 2 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QmHLYhxYVjA>: This link is to “History of Ideas—Wabi-sabi” by *The School of Life* from *YouTube*.

http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/japan_600ce_waka.htm: This link is to “What Is a *Waka*?” by Amy Vladeck Heinrich from Columbia University’s *Asia for Educators*.

Digital Materials for the Module “Religion and Aesthetics in Japan”

Untranslatable Words: Mono No Aware, and the Aesthetics of Impermanence

<https://www.utc.edu/asia-program/docs/modules1/byrd/mononoaware.docx>

Link to sample student Shinto work

<https://tinyurl.com/y9tkgsne>