

China (Shinto)

Practices

Shinto is the indigenous religion of Japan. It is animistic in nature and emphasizes purity as the heart of its understanding of good and evil. Since death is considered to be impure, funerals are conducted by the lay people away from the shrines.¹

Preparation is the key to Shinto funerals. Each stage in a burial is precisely performed according to centuries-old protocols. Four of the most interesting of these protocols are:

- Kichu-fuda

A period of intense mourning, which lasts for one day. Mourners wear solid black and some may carry a rosary. A Shinto priest is needed to perform the rituals of chanting, singing and praying to begin and end this day.

- Koden

Giving of an obituary gift. Friends and family of the deceased give monetary gifts to the family to help with the cost of the funeral. Koden occurs on the same day as Kichu&ndahs;fuda.

- Kotsuage

Gathering of a person’s ashes. Care is taken that no bones are left in the ashes. Some of ashes are placed in an urn that is placed at a shrine for the services of the priest. The urn is then buried.

- Bunkotsu

Some of the deceased ashes are given to the family. The ashes placed in a small urn that is then used at the family's home shrine.²

Wakes are normally held at the family shrine of the deceased and precede the burial of the ashes at a grave site. Mourners wash their hands and mouth prior to entering the wake. Mourners also lay branches of sakaki, a variety of camellia flower on the altar of the family shrine. As part of the wake a portion of spirit of the deceased is transferred to a memorial tablet, this known as sensei sai. The ceremony typically lasts for one hour and may conclude with a small meal, consisting of either sake or dishes without meat, or tea and cakes. The dishes must be either made or bought out side of where the wake is occurring.

Similar to the wake the mourners wash their mouth and hands before entering the funeral area. If a new grave site is being created an earth purification ceremony is first performed to pacify the earth gods. After the grave has been made, another purification ceremony is performed. The area to be purified is marked off with a bamboo rope. One Shinto priest waves a purification wand (ônusa), and another sprinkles salted hot water (ento) over the area.³

Shinto grave sites are often elaborately decorated. A picture of the deceased is placed to the left of the grave marker. Incense is lit at the start of a visit to the grave and flowers are left on weekly visits.⁴

¹ "BBC Religions: Rites of Life: Funerals - Shinto." BBC News. BBC, 16 Sept. 2009. Web. 25 Jan. 2013.
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/shinto/beliefs/purity.shtml>

² "Shinto Funerals." N.p., n.d. Web. 25 Jan. 2013.

http://www.worldclass.net/TeachingGlobally/WorldReligions/shinto_funerals.htm

³ Kenney, Elizabeth. "Shintô Mortuary Rites in Contemporary Japan." Cahiers D'Extrême-Asie 9.1 (1996): 408. Print.

⁴ Norman, Jeffrey. "Shinto Funeral Beliefs and Rituals." EHow. Demand Media, 21 Aug. 2011. Web. 25 Jan. 2013.
http://www.ehow.com/info_11403129_shinto-funeral-beliefs-rituals.html

Deities and Important Concepts

- Amaterasu – Goddess of the sun and of the universe
Prime goddess of the Shinto faith.
- Emma-hoo and Oni
Emma-hoo is the lord of the dead. He judges the male souls of the dead and his sister Oni judges the female souls.
- Shinsōsai
Purely Shinto funerary rites. Created as being distinct from Buddhist funeral rites that were prevalent at the time of their creation.
- Yomi
Land of the dead which lies under the ground. It has a river separating the living from the dead. Yomi is similar to Hades in that it is seen as a gloomy place where the dead lead a shadowy existence.
- Kami
The ancestral beings. A primary goal in Shintoism is to obtain immortality among these ancestral beings. You can think of the Kami as the part of the soul of a person that can experience a deep affinity with the Divine.
- Ujigami
A family spirit. After death a person is considered to become a Ujigami if they were included in a list at birth. The adding of the name at birth, or when someone moves makes them a ujiko or family child and is seen as the person being welcome by the local Kami.

Modern Adaptations

- Have a bowl with water by the entrance to the funeral area. Explain that each person should rinse their mouth and wash their hands to purify themselves.
- Have a separate wake portion of the funeral where a portion of the spirit of the deceased is invited to reside. Give this tablet to the family of the deceased. A photo of the deceased can also be used instead of the tablet.
- Walk to the funeral site in procession. The procession should have (in this order), a guide, a leader, two torch-bearers, two broom-bearers, participants and one person to mark the end of the procession. (NOTE: This is a simplified version of the typical procession. See Shintō Mortuary Rites in Contemporary Japan, pg 418 – 419 for the full procession order)
- Start and end the funeral portion by the officiant bowing and then the attendees bowing.
- Purify the grave site for the urn or cremation urn itself at the start of the funeral asking the ground (or urn) honoring the ground / urn for its part in the ceremony.
- Offer the deceased some of their favorite foods.
- Pray that the deceased becomes a guardian deity and add a title to the deceased name.
- Toward the end of the funeral mark off the grave area with a rope (if you can find one use a bamboo rope). One person uses a purification wand (ônusa), and another sprinkles salted hot water (ento) over the area to purify the grave / cremation urn. Cleansing it of any negativity caused from the death of the person.

Sample Readings

(Number 174, Anonymous)⁵

Does the weaver wait
for autumn so that she

⁵ Picken, Stuart D. B. Sourcebook in Shinto: Selected Documents. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004. pg 28

can span the river of heaven
with a red bridge of maple leaves?

(Number 949, Anonymous)⁶

The dews resting on every leaf are the tears
of your sorrow.
They remind you of sad things
that happened in the years past.

(Number 941, Anonymous)⁷

So sad and so forlorn is this world,
that only tears can console its grief.

(Number 240, by Princess Shikishi)⁸

Yearning for bygone days,
I lie in bed.
To my pillow
comes the scent of orange flowers.

(Number 792, by Fujiwara no Snaeiye)⁹

The mattress where we lay and talked on autumn nights
remains as before.
But the one I loved is gone
like a fleeting dream.

Resources

- Shintō Mortuary Rites in Contemporary Japan
http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescript/article/asia_0766-1177_1996_num_9_1_1124
- Shinto Funeral Beliefs and Rituals | eHow.com
http://www.ehow.com/info_11403129_shinto-funeral-beliefs-rituals.html#ixzz2J1NHbROj
- Life after death – Shintoism
<http://death.findyourfate.com/life-after-death/shinto.html>
- Shinsōsai (Shinto Funeral Rites)
http://k-amc.kokugakuin.ac.jp/DM/detail.do?class_name=col_eos&data_id=23262
- The 20 Steps in a Shinto Funeral
<http://people.opposingviews.com/20-steps-shinto-funeral-2693.html>

⁶ Ibid. pg 30

⁷ Ibid. pg 30

⁸ Ibid. pg 34

⁹ Ibid. pg 35