The Shinto religion does not have any specific founder or date of foundation. Shinto is, however, considered to be the native religion of Japan. Unlike most major religions, Confuscists, as well as Buddhists, have commonly adopted Shinto as a primary or secondary religion. In order to fully understand the complexities of the Shinto religion, one must first gain a thorough understanding for the history of Shinto, as well as its beliefs, traditions, and overall presence in Japanese culture. The evolution of Shinto helps to explain its overall role in Japanese culture.

As noted earlier, Shinto has no initial date of founding. Around third century B.C., the Yayori culture began to develop on the island of Kyushu. Early practices of Shinto were seen in this culture. At this early stage, the term *Shinto* had not yet been coined. By 5th century A.D., the Chinese influence of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism had intertwined into Japanese culture and had adopted Shinto ethical teachings. Out of the three religions, Buddhism played the most significant role in the evolution of Shinto. Buddhists began to incorporate Shinto kami into their religion. Buddhists viewed Shinto kami “as protectors of Buddhism” (RelgionFacts). The Shinto kami play a significant role in traditional Japanese culture, yet, even to those who worship them, kami is very difficult to understand.

In English, the term kami can be translated to god or deity. Japanese worshippers of Shinto argue that this translation is not completely accurate. Kami can be used to describe spirits of deceased beings, as well as animistic spirits. The ancestral spirits represent, “a mixture of both kindly and threatening spirits who inhabit the features of the natural world” (Kami article). Kami can come into close contact with the living during certain transitional periods of life. These periods may be seasonal, as well as significant writ of passages. More vivid details of these transitions will be given when Shinto beliefs are discussed. Kami are not seen as almighty deities. Kami do not live in another human dimension. They are commonly seen in the realm of nature, living in mountains, rivers, and the sky. Most Shinto followers admit having difficulty giving a detailed explanation of Kami. A priest of the Great Izumo Shrine in Shimane describe kami as “exist(ing) in a floating, unstable, changeable, invisible state” (Kami article). In sixth century Buddhism, kami were identified as “Japanese revelations of the Buddhas and Bodhisattavas” (school book). The conjoining of Buddhism and Shinto continued to trouble Shinto traditionalists. Buddhist priests also began manage the Shinto shrines.

By the year 522, the term *Shinto*, meaning “the way of kami”, was used to distinguish Japanese local religion from the foreign introduction of Buddhism. For the next few centuries, Buddhism continued to conjoin with Shinto. Religious schools developed which taught Buddhist and Shinto beliefs together. During the thirteenth century, a new form of Shinto emerged as a reaction to the “Shinto-Buddhist amalgamation” (ReligionFacts). This new form of Shinto, known as Watarai Shinto, appeared in the Japanese city of Ise. Religious scholars debate the role Buddhism had in the development of Watarai Shinto, but it is generally understood that Watarai tradition was “an attempt to interpret Shinto tradition in the light of Buddhist thought” (Watarai article). This movement was significant during the thirteenth century because it attempted to preserve traditional Japanese religion. By the seventeenth century, however, Watarai Shinto diminished, and the religion structure of Japan became more politically influenced.

In 1603, the Tokugawa family emerged in Edo, also known as present day Tokyo, and incorporated Confucianism into the Shinto religion. This religious mixture was commonly known as Neo-Confucianism. It is important to note that this form of Neo-Confucianism is slightly different from Chinese Neo-Confucianism, which incorporated elements of Daoism as well. Although the Tokugawa regime mixed elements of Confucianism into traditional Japanese religion, this feudal dictatorship also played an important role in preserving Shinto. The Tokugawa family had developed isolationist policies to prevent any type of foreign influence, which prevented Christianity from being introduced to Japan. Traditional Shintoists remained unpleased of the Confucius influence to their religion. A second restoration movement of Shinto emerged in reaction to Neo-Confucianism. At the end of the seventeenth century, the school Fukko Shinto was introduced.

Fukko Shinto maintained the belief that “the norms of Shinto should not be sought in Buddhist or Confucian interpretations but in the beliefs and life-attitudes…of the Japanese classics” (RelgionFacts). During this restoration movement a significant Shinto scholar, Motoori Norinaga, helped revive traditional Shinto. He rejected the Buddhist and Confucian teachings of Shinto, and “traced the genuine spirit of Shinto to ancient Japanese myths and the sacred traditions”. Norinaga emphasized the ancient belief of musubi. Musubi can roughly be translated to “creation”. The concept behind musubi is that historical events are constantly reoccurring for eternity. Shintoists that follow musibi believe that there is no final day to the world. Mootori Norinaga’s teachings would have a long-lasting impact on the Shinto doctrine. Shortly after Norinaga’s death, the Tokugawa regime fell and the Meiji period began.

During the Meiji period, Shinto was divided into State Shinto and Sect Shinto. Prior to the Meiiji era, Shrines were widely disorganized and sometimes connected to Buddhist worship. Shortly following the beginning of the Meiiji era, the Constitution of 1889 was written and 110,000 Shinto shrines were taken over by the state. The state named these shrines jinja in order to distinguish them from shrines of Sect Shinto. The government control of Shinto was known as State Shinto. Each shrine created by the state “was dedicated to some local deity, hero, or event” (Religion textbook). The typical state shrine would have an inner and outer shrine. The outer shrine was open to the public; however, the inner shrine was reserved for priests and government officials. As a reaction to the State Shinto movement, various sects of Shinto were formed in the late nineteenth century.

Thirteen sects were established which typically fell into the following five categories: Revival Shinto sects, Confucian sects, Purification sects, Mountain worship sects, and Faith Healing sects. Revival sects focused on nationalism and devotion to the emperor. Following World War II, however, revival sects became more focused on living in peace and harmony. Confucian sects were developed and combined Confucian and Shinto teachings. Purification focused on spiritual purity. Mountain worship sects worshipped the ascetically pleasing elements of nature. It was common for Shintoists within the Mountain sect to go on seasonal pilgrimages through valleys as a form of mountain worship. Finally, Faith Healing sects focused on healing diseases and spiritual salvation. Although Sect Shinto had many elements of traditional Shinto, a majority of even the sect religions incorporated nationalist sentiment into their worship.

During the twentieth century, Shinto supported militant forces. Initially, State Shinto had been created to strengthen Japanese loyalty and patriotism. As Japan continued to build up its military forces prior to World War II, Shinto became a support instrument for the empire’s military. Emperor worship became a common element of State Shinto and students of Shinto schools were required to recite the oath, “Offer yourself courageously to the state” (State Shinto article). Following World War II, State Shinto continued to be a threat to nations around the world.

On December 15, 1945, General Douglas McArthur, along with the General Headquarters of Allied Forces, issued the Shinto Directive. The Shinto Directive abolished the government from operating a national religion. The emperor of Japan was also required to give a statement to the Japanese public that he was not divine. The ending of the Second World War marked another major change to the Shinto religion. For the past three centuries, Shinto had become easily influenced by political interests. With the fall of State Shinto, Shinto had lost its status as an official religion. Shrines owned by the Japanese government changed ownership to private citizens. Shrine membership was no longer nationally required. There is no doubt that the events following World War II made Shinto’s future seem doubtful. Today, however, Shinto still holds roughly three to four million adherent followers, making it the eleventh largest religion in the world.

Although many of the modern Shintoist followers may be Buddhists as well, the Japanese have held onto many of beliefs fabricated into Shinto over the course of its history. Shinto is a difficult religion to define precisely because it resides over a very loosely organized belief structure. Shinto has an endless list of beliefs that the Japanese incorporate into their everyday lives.

Kami is the most important aspect of Shinto religion and was loosely defined during the description of Shinto’s history. Various elements of nature made up the mysterious forces of kami. Cliffs, caves, trees, stones, and animals can all possess kami. Because Shintoists typically worship these different types of kami, Shinto is typically categorized as an animistic religion. Worship of the kami will reveal the makoto, which translates to the truthful way or will. As long as each individual is truthful, the kami will typically answer their prayers and provide protection in their daily lives. If Shinto deities come into contact with one another, they behave cooperatively. For some, kami resemble dead spirits; therefore, many Shintoists hold religious ceremonies to worship the spirits of their ancestors. Although some kami can be seen as threatening by some, it is generally perceived that the kami are kind spirits. This positive view of the kami contributes to the Shintoists positive view of human nature.

Typically, human beings are seen as kami’s child. Kami gives the gift of life; therefore, all life is considered sacred. Shintoists believe individuals should live together in a community and never live in solitude. This group effort by mankind makes humans more productive than they would be individually. Because life is sacred to every Shinto follower, they are required “to live fully each moment of life, making it as worthy as possible” (ReligionFacts). Kami relates to nearly every belief of the Shinto religion. Many of these beliefs originate in ancient Shinto texts such as the Kojiki and Nihongi, which are sacred books that contain “oral traditions, mythology, and ceremonies” (ReligionFacts). A number of religious ceremonies and other Shinto traditions are commonly seen in daily life.

Typical Shinto ceremonies involve purification. Purification is achieved by washing ones hands. The cleansing of the hands symbolically resembles the cleaning of impurities from the human mind. Removing impurities from the mind makes the Shintoist more appealing to the kami and more likely to be protected by it. Shinto families have an altar at their home dedicated to kami and Amatersu, the Japanese sun goddess. Domestic Shinto worship is extremely common in Japanese culture. For domestic worshipers, most houses contain a kami-dana which is an elaborate shelf inside a Shintoist’s home. The shelf typically contains statues of gods that are important to the family, along with literature that may contain mythology that is significant to the family. Offerings such as flowers, incense, food and water are also given to the gods. These offerings are quite similar to Buddhist offerings. For other Shinto followers that are less of domestic worshippers, they may visit the Shinto Shrines.

Shinto Shrines are known as the home of the kami. A torii typically resides in front of the entrance of a shrine. The torii is the universal symbol for Shinto and allows for Shinto shrines to be easily identifiable. Additional torii resides within the shrine and indicate increased levels of holiness. Before passing through the torri, a visitor must conduct the purification ceremony which was discussed earlier. When entering the shrine, a visitor may ask the priest to conduct rites of passage.

The Shinto religion has three significant rites of passage. The first is 30 to 100 days after an infant’s birth. This is the newborns first visit with the kami. When boys are five years old and girls are three or seven, they participate in the Shichi-go-san festival. During this festival, the boys and girls visit a nearby shrine and thank kami for its protection. The final rite of passage is known as Adults’ Day. This celebration is celebrated on January 15th and commemorates Shintoists that have lived for twenty years. This rite of passage celebrates the entrance to adulthood. Rites of passages are not the only festivities of Shinto tradition. Shintoists celebrate annual ceremonies as well.

The first festivity of the year is Shogatsu, also known as the New Year. This celebration takes place between January 1st and January 6th. During this time, families gather together and clean and purify their houses for the kami. On New Year’s Day, families gather together and pray at Shinto Shrines. On the last day of Shogatsu, all of the New Year’s decorations are burned in large bonfires. Several other festivals are held to celebrate different seasons. Haru Matsuri is a celebration of the spring and Niiname-sai is the autumn festival. The autumn festival is an agricultural celebration where the first crops of the autumn harvest are offered to the kami and Amaterasu. Although each of these festivities celebrates different seasons they are generally conducted in the same manner.

First, a purification ritual takes place at the corner of the shrine before participants pass through the tarii into the shrine. Next, the chief priest bows to the altar and opens the door of the sanctuary. Material offerings, such as food and water, are then placed in the shrine. The chief priest recites ancient Shinto prayers. Following the formal rituals, participants of the festivals celebrate with music and dancing. The give symbolic offerings to and then all offerings are taken away. The door of the sanctuary is then closed and the priest will give a short speech. Once the priest is finished with his speech all of the participants have a large feast. The various Shinto festivities are significant to unify all of the different Shinto beliefs.

After conducting an in depth study of the Shinto religion, it is apparent that Shintoists are very tolerant of the various interpretations of their religion. In Japan, a majority of individuals believe in a mixture of Buddhist and Shinto beliefs. Although pure Shintoists are mentioned as individuals strictly following Shinto principles without mixing other religious elements, a pure Shintoist cannot be identified by a specific belief structure. The religion of Shinto appears to be open to countless interpretations regarding the purpose of life, as well as the role that kami have in everyday life. Understanding the historical evolution of Shinto is the most important factor towards understanding the various versions of Shinto that are practiced. Throughout the history of Shinto, Confucian and Buddhist interpretations altered the basis of Shinto itself. Religious scholars’ debate over the role Buddhism had in Shinto. After studying Shinto, however, it is evident that foreign religions influenced Shinto to where it is today. Evidence can be found, for example, in the similarities of offerings that each religion provides to its deities. If various interpretations of Shinto were not allowed, Shinto would have most likely diminished and Buddhism would have become the major religion of Japan. The open-mindedness of Shinto is detrimental to its survival. Ceremonial gatherings serve as the fabric which holds the loosely organized Shinto religion together.