

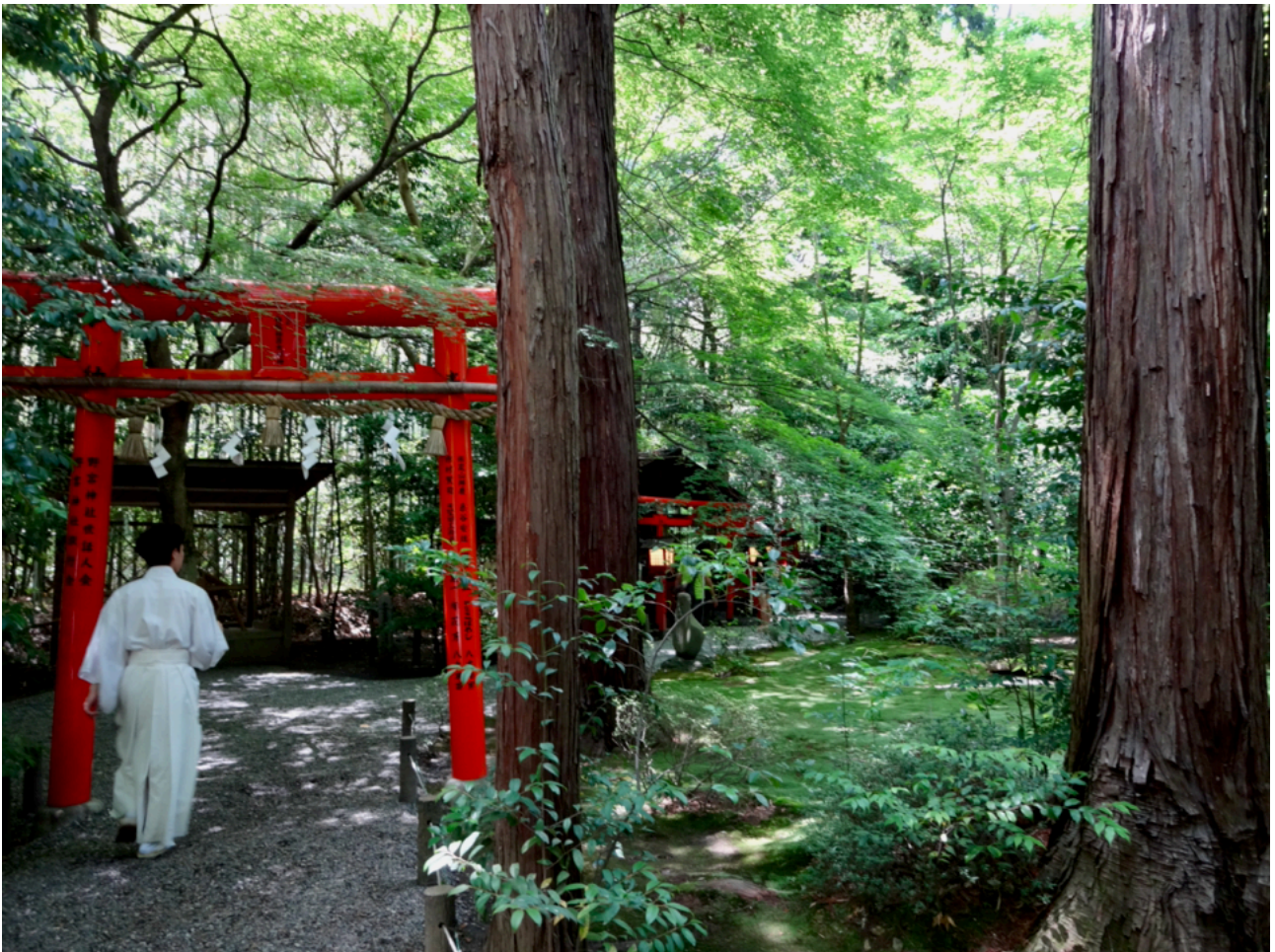
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## Shinto forestry

It is the forests, and not the buildings, that mark the true shrines of Shintoism. The deities are invited to these forests, where they and their environment are protected by the local community, which in turn is protected by the deities.

So although the *chinju no mori* or sacred groves around Shinto shrines are revered as the dwelling place of the *kami* spirits, it is the *kami* which are worshipped, not the trees.

### Background to forests in Japan



Traditionally Japanese villages were traditionally surrounded by rice-paddy, vegetable fields and woodland/grassy areas used for firewood, grazing etc. (*satoyama*). In this way, Japan (although at one time 80% covered by forest) lost almost all its primeval forest cover many centuries ago.

All forests have long been managed by local communities. At times the demands for lumber or charcoal have been severe. Oil, electricity, concrete and plastics only replaced firewood/charcoal as the main energy/building resource after 1945. The *chinju-no-mori* thus developed as part of a comprehensive approach to land management, in which the combination of paddy and mixed woodland still represent the only known, recognized model of a sustainable natural environment in Japan.

This makes it difficult for government to plan future environmental management as more and more farming villages face depopulation and the abandonment of farming altogether, and the *satoyama* areas are left untended.

The most ancient maps indicate the *chinju no mori*, and there is no reason to doubt their traditional significance. They provided oases for the *kami* (and local flora & fauna) whilst the surrounding forests and woodland were exploited as part of the local or national economy. Because even the smallest and most urban shrines must have at least a few trees, to constitute a *chinju no mori*, the shrines have retained their function as natural sanctuaries.

In 2005 ARC sent a team, included Per Rosenberg, then Director of Forestry Issues for WWF International, and Goeran Allard, Head of Forestry for the Visby Diocese of the Swedish Lutheran Church.



Everyone had assumed that the Japanese thirst for imported timber was due to the destruction of forests in Japan, but realized the situation was more complicated. In fact, Japan has a higher percentage of forest (67%) than any other 'modern' nation. Forest management has been a key part of traditional culture and wisdom, but this knowledge and the communities that nourished it are breaking down.

The much cheaper cost of imported timber means that forests in Japan are no longer managed properly, or even managed at all. Whole mountain-sides are left to go wild, or are felled without re-planting. In recent years this has led to extensive landslides and other problems, adding to the plight of Japan's rural economy. The ARC report concluded, however, that used in the right way, forest resources were sustainable.

### **“Kami are everywhere”**

Perhaps Shinto wisdom that 'kami are everywhere' might possibly foster concern not only for *chinju no mori* but also for all the forests within Japan, and overseas too.

Shinto does not have teachings on such issues, mostly because traditionally Shinto has not offered 'teachings' at all. This makes it very different from Buddhism, Christianity and similar doctrinal religions. Shinto arose from a community base, and aims to inspire collaboration and harmony. Moreover, it is not evangelical, and its

rituals and practice are meant only for Japan, not other countries. Shinto wisdom aims not to order or cajole, but to enable individuals to recognise what is right, by themselves, 'from within'.

Thus the *chinju no mori* over the centuries have evoked the mutual relationship between *kami* and the human community: the *kami* protecting the community, and the community protecting the *kami* by preserving the forest habitat: wisdom rooted in traditional practice, rather than doctrine from a sacred text.

Professor Sonoda, of the Jinja Honcho expressed enormous respect for the traditional wisdom of ancient communities all over the world. Their origins are essentially the same as Shinto, and he hoped that people world-wide can re-discover the Shinto-like truths that flourished in different environments and cultures. Thus Professor Sonoda does not 'teach' Shinto instead hoping to 'inspire' people to look into their own history, and discover the 'Shinto' of their own ancestors.



Shinto priests are therefore not 'leaders'. They are essentially ritual experts. Jinja Honcho itself is only an administrative & information service for Japanese Shrines. There are over 80,000 shrines in Japan, and each is independent. There is no single Shinto authority that can issue instructions or definitively clarify doctrine.

Moreover, by law, all public bodies such as local or national government must maintain an entirely secular profile. Thus no conservation programme can attract government support if it is billed as 'Shinto' or 'Buddhist' etc. Nevertheless, Jinja Honcho members are very concerned with environmental problems.

Professor Sonoda has founded the 'Shrine Forest Association.' Members of Jinja Honcho have also been active in a project to afforest an artificial island in Tokyo bay that is used for rubbish disposal: an enterprise with a Shinto inspiration that cannot be advertised as such, since it concerns a public utility.

### Four Keys to understanding how Shinto works with forests

- a) The trees which to some degree or another surround each shrine, are not adjuncts to the shrine. They are the shrine and the buildings only have a meaning and significance because they are in the shrine forest. These forests are not in any sense commercial and are called *Chinju* forests.

*Chinju* means 'protection'. Thus "*Chinju no mori*" means the forest that is protected from human exploitation, and thus offers an undisturbed haven for the *kami*, who in turn protect the people: the sacred union of forest, *kami* and community. Shinto does not venerate trees in general, but only those trees in some way chosen by the *kami*. Most of Japan's largest and oldest trees (some dating back several thousand years) lie within *chinju no mori*, protected because of their sanctity.

b) Shinto tries not to be evangelical. It wants people to sense the divine in the forest, without hectoring them about it. This is different from the conventional Western, secular or religious outlook. As with Professor Sonoda's example, it is about trying to help other faith and cultures discover their own "Shinto style" wisdom of how to traditionally manage their sacred forests or protect their forests in general.

c) Many of us, perhaps because we come from a strong urban background, sense a division between 'nature and culture', and see forests as essentially 'wild'. By contrast, all forests in Japan have been variously 'managed' probably since the ice age. The *Chinju-no-mori* evolved because local communities realised that otherwise they could not avoid disturbing the *kami*.

Just as Inuit have difficulty describing 'snow', because they distinguish so many different varieties, in traditional Japan there was no single definition of 'forest'.

Rather, there were many different kinds, distinguished according to their utility and proximity to settlements. This led to a common ecology across Japan, and explains the remarkably similar '*satoyama*' landscape that meets the eye as soon as one leaves urban surroundings.

Shinto developed as a key part of this ecology. The area encompassed by the Ise Grand Shrines is the clearest example of a Shinto ecosystem.

Shinto developed a model of mixed forest, rather than plantations, which not only ensured a regular supply of natural resources, but also maintained a clear water supply and reliable drainage down to the farmland in the valleys. (Jinja-Honcho also quoted scientific studies that show such mixed woodland reduced CO2 emissions three times more than plantation areas.)

d) Shinto emphasizes the web of mutual relationships that bind us not only to other people, but also with the natural environment. Caring for the *kami* also incorporates the need to manage and protect the forests, which in turn support and protect the villages. Shinto has not always been able to protect the forests but it has been able in time to restore the balance. In Japan, failure to maintain the balance quickly leads to obvious environmental devastation. Unrestrained Japanese logging overseas, which has aroused so much horror and opposition, therefore represents practices that Japanese companies could not for long maintain at home.



*This report is based on notes from a field visit to Shinto forests conducted by ARC with Swedish Lutheran WWF and FSC forestry specialists, hosted by the Jinja Honjo in October 2005.*

***The following was extracted from a paper given by Reverend Kuniaki Kuni, Chairman of the Association of Shinto Shrines, at [Visby's Faith and Forestry Gathering](#).***

Most Shinto shrines are surrounded by forests called *chinju no mori*. For hundreds of years they were protected by the local people who lived in the forests. However, once Japan opened itself to the rest of the world in late 19th century, many Shinto forests were inadvertently destroyed in the name of civilization and enlightenment. Shinto forests continued to be neglected after the Second World War due to changes in shrine regulations and the decline in national morality and religiousness.

Jinja-Honcho receives applications to help manage Shinto shrines from all over Japan. Despite these efforts, the number of shrine forests is in decline.

For the Shinto, purity and righteousness are important factors—preserving the beauty of nature and the purity of heart. However, the decline in religiousness in Japan has led to increased littering in public places. Rubbish can be found on the mountain trail of Mt. Fuji which has become a public issue. I am increasingly realizing the role the Shinto can play to help tackle these issues.

It is important to remember how our ancestors appreciated and recognized nature's blessings. We must reflect on our sense of values since often we place too much emphasis on materialism.

To realize the reduction of CO2 emission prescribed in Kyoto Protocol, and to improve and resolve the world's environmental problems, we must recognize that *each individual plays an essential role*. Also, together with governments and leaders of various fields from around the world, we, religious people, must persevere in our efforts.

Original story: <http://www.arcworld.org/faiths331a.html?pageID=127>

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