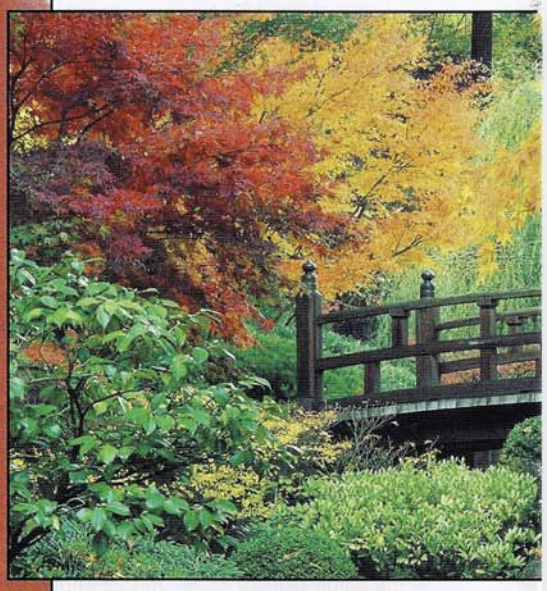
Sympathy with all Creatures

The Green Heart of Shinto

By Aidan Rankin

Shinto is the nature-centred faith of sacred, snow-capped mountains and forests, which sees the Divine in rocks and streams, communing with spirit worlds through twigs of bamboo and the evergreen sakaki tree. Yet it is also the manicured suburban garden and the blades of grass that rise between cracks in city paving stones. It is a faith based around ritual cleansing and purification, but it has no concept of 'sin'. It reveres ancestors, but thinks little about the afterlife, and asks us to live in - and improve - the present.

Shinto is the indigenous spirituality of the Japanese people - this statement expresses the single unifying 'fact' about Shinto, but it tells us everything and nothing about it. For the 'Way of the Gods', as Shinto is often translated, eludes classification because of its multi-layered nature and its notable absence of dogma.

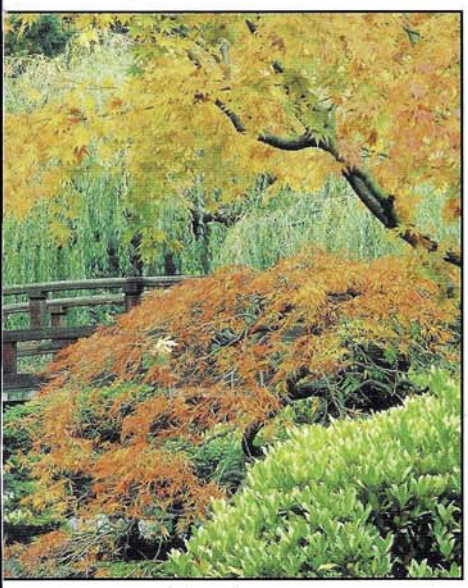


This ancient spiritual pathway has adapted with ease to a modern, highly urbanised society. While it is an organised religious practice, it is more importantly an attitude of mind or a sensibility, a series of spiritual impulses that exist below the level of consciousness, which shape the thoughts and actions of millions of people - including Japan's many Buddhists and agnostics, who still retain a Shinto 'core'.

Shinto can also be seen as a local variant of universal spiritual motifs. I learned about this path from Paul de Leeuw, a Dutch *kannushi* or Shinto Master, whose initiation opens the possibility of a 'universal Shinto' as relevant to Westerners as to Japanese.

Shinto is an unbroken tradition, connecting the remotest, pre-literate antiquity with today's 'information age'. As such, it can help to guide those who seek to revive spiritual paths that have been suppressed for centuries, which is why Shinto's survival should be of interest to shamanic practitioners in the West. Like other ancient spiritual paths, Shinto's intuitions about the universe are borne out increasingly by the conclusions of modern science.

Michio Kaku, the Japanese-American theoretical physicist, begins his book 'Parallel Worlds' by describing his boyhood interest in mythology and the origins of the universe. Of Buddhist parentage, he attended a Christian Sunday school and asked 'Where does God come from?' His teacher was unable to answer, and as the



young Kaku read more, he decided that there were essentially two types of mythological explanation for the origins of the cosmos.

In the first, the known universe arose out of an undifferentiated state of 'chaos', itself the ancient Greek word for an abyss. He gives the example of the Chinese legend of P'an Ku, the creator of the world, who hatched out of a cosmic egg floating on a formless sea.

The second tradition is typified by Buddhism and some Hindu paths, along with Jainism. Here, the universe is infinite, constantly replicating itself and incorporating many levels of existence, of which the highest is enlightenment. These two strands of mythical cosmology can scientifically co-exist.

As Kaku writes: "What is gradually emerging is a grand synthesis of these two opposing mythologies. In this new picture, our universe may be compared to a bubble floating in a much larger 'ocean', with new bubbles forming all the time. According to this theory, universes - like bubbles forming in boiling water - are in continual creation, floating in a much larger arena, the Nirvana of eleven-dimensional hyperspace. A growing number of physicists suggest that our universe did indeed spring forth from a fiery cataclysm, the big bang, but that it also coexists in an eternal ocean of other universes. If Similarlywe are right, big bangs are taking place even as you read this sentence."

Professor Kaku's 'synthesis' is an expression of the Shinto approach. In Shinto, paradoxes need not be resolved, but are celebrated as an essential part of life. Opposite principles exist and interact without conflict. Shinto is a spiritual tradition of both-and rather than either-or; indeed more than both-and, for it acknowledges multiple possibilities. It starts with the intuition that the universe is multi-layered, and that all living systems within it are subtly connected and depend on each other.

There are also 'parallel worlds', realms through which the soul passes after life (or sometimes before and between lives), ranging from the 'High Plain of Heaven' to the 'underworld' of Yomi, to a place of purified souls and boundless riches.

In these worlds, as in ours, there is the possibility of continuous spiritual evolution and the attainment of the status of *kami*, or divine power. At the same time, the souls of the dead (and unborn) continue to live in the known world, in close proximity to us and capable of influencing events. As Hirata Atsutane, the Shinto theoretician, wrote in 1812:

"The realm of the dead is not in any one particular place in the visible world, but being a realm of profoundness and dimness and separated from the present world, it cannot be seen. ... The actions of men can be perceived from the realm of the dead, but from the visible world it is not possible to see this realm of darkness. People of this world ... go to the realm of dimness when they are dead, and their souls become *kami*, differing in the degree of excellence, virtue and strength according to the individual."

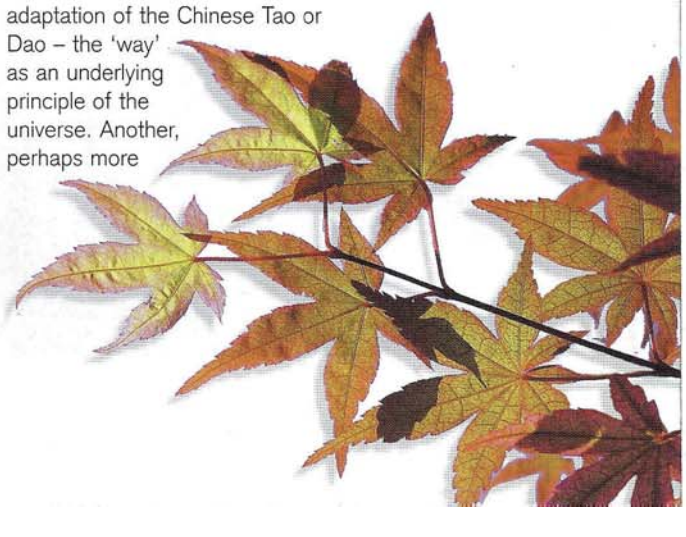
The spirit-world is a world of 'dimness', whereas ours is the world of light. This is an approach very different from Western and Indic spirituality, but resembling indigenous and shamanic traditions in many parts of the world. The worlds of the divine and the worlds of the dead are closely aligned and sometimes identical. They are sacred not because they are better or even simply 'nicer', but because they are mysterious and unseen.

The ancestral spirit has a duty to 'continue to work for the improvement and peace of the world'. At the same time, individuals and communities have the duty to respect that spirit and the unseen forces it represents. It is the task of the *kannushi* to find the connecting points between the parallel worlds and induce the altered consciousness that enables humans to reach beyond our usual limitations and catch glimpses of the divine.

In the islands of Okinawa, south of Japan, female shamans survive and they are widely seen as a continuation of the oldest form of Shinto worship. Today a small but growing minority of kannushi are women.

THE WAY OF THE KAMI

Like most other indigenous traditions, Shinto spirituality originally had no name. Instead, it was a series of intuitions and practices, associated with family, village or clan. It was a spiritual disposition, an attitude of mind, rather than a unified idea. It was the impact of Buddhism, an import from China, that compelled the native tradition to acquire a name and a distinctive identity. This is why the *Kojiki* (Record of Ancient Matters) and the *Nihongi* (Chronicles of Japan) were composed in 712 and 720 CE respectively, to enshrine the Japanese *shinwa* or founding myths, literally 'tales about the *kami*'. The term 'Shinto' means 'Way of the Kami', derived from the character 'Shin', synonymous with Kami and 'To', which is an adaptation of the Chinese Tao or Dao – the 'way' as an underlying principle of the universe. Another, perhaps more



authentic, name for native Japanese spirituality is Kami-no-michi, which means the same as Shinto. The Kojiki and the Nihongi should not be seen as canons of Shinto thought, with the authority of the Bible or Talmud. They are better described as starting points for the imagination, which is encouraged and viewed as a spiritual tool.

Kami are sometimes gods, but even they cannot be pinned down by Western definitions of this term. Some *kami*, for example the sun-goddess Amaterasu, are represented in super-human form, as divinities which cherish humanity and the natural world, and to which we look for guidance. But most *kami* are nature spirits, associated with landscapes and sacred places. Forests have *kami*, and so do individual trees. Rocks, streams and mountains have *kami*, but so today do cities, apartment blocks, offices and factories. Nations and peoples have *kami*, which are akin both to patron saints and folk souls. Families have household *kami*, similar to the *lares* or 'household gods' of ancient Rome and sometimes identical to ancestral spirits. There are *kami* with animal associations, for instance the fox is the messenger of Inari, a popular *kami* who presides over the rice harvest but today is also associated with business and production. Many workplaces contain his shrines which are often adorned with large stone fox statues. In Shinto, unlike some other shamanic traditions of working with animal powers, it is not so much the *kannushi* as the *kami* themselves that shape-shift continuously.

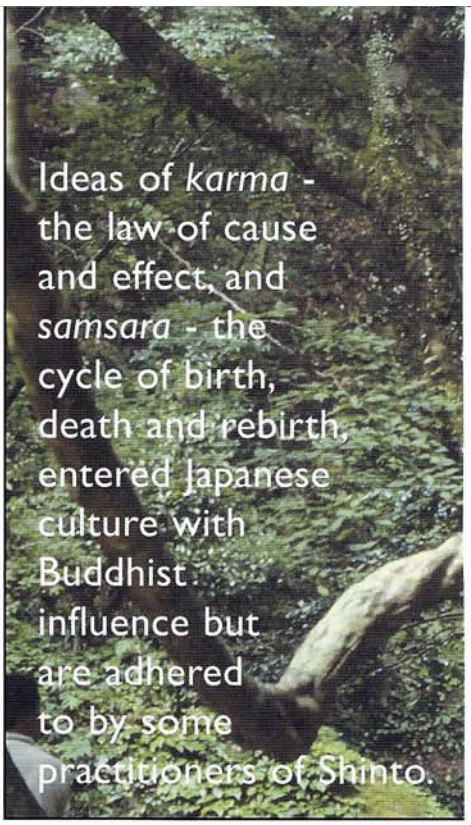
In this way the adaptability of Shinto ensures its continuing relevance. *Kami* evolve, change shape and proliferate like the living systems they mirror.

When *kami* take possession of a human body - a relatively common occurrence - it is almost invariably the body of a woman or a child.

UNIFYING ESSENCE

Despite the multiplicity of spirits and deities, Shinto is not only polytheistic. For *kami* is also a divine essence, pervading the universe, within every human being and every living system. It is a force, spiritual, psychological and environmental, that can resemble *mana* in Pacific Island cultures. *Kami* is unity-in-diversity, simultaneously many and one, permanence and flux. Life is *kami* and so true worship is the celebration of life.

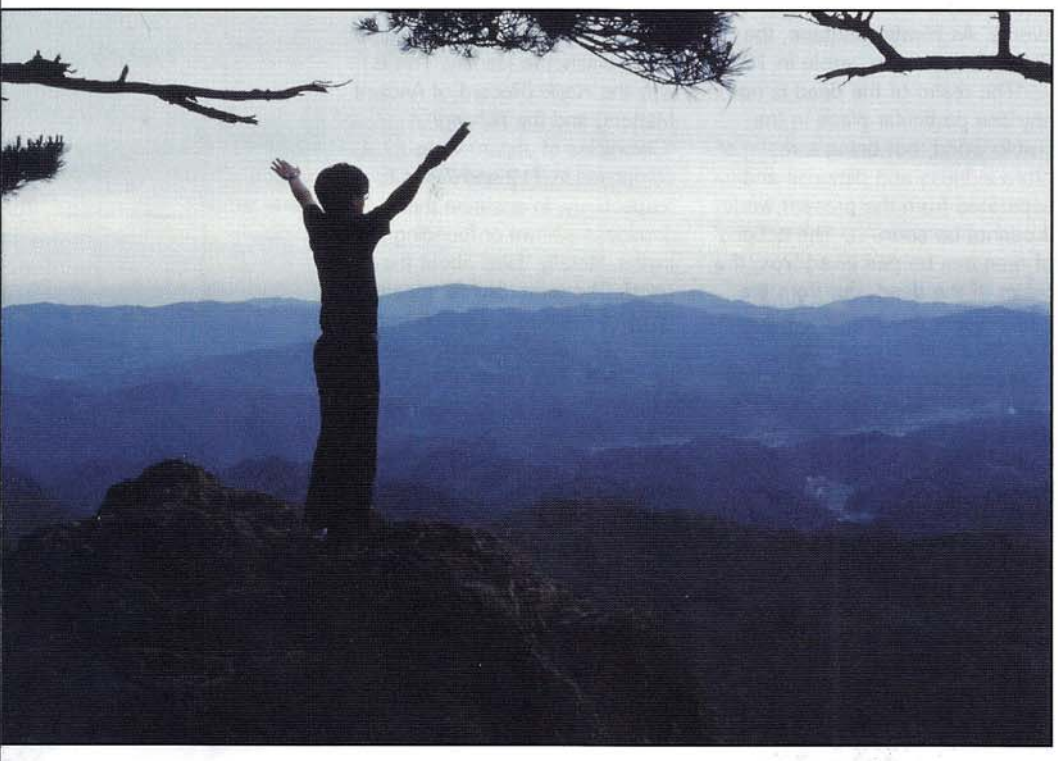
The life-enhancing aspect of Shinto is reflected in the central role of the sun goddess. The sun is the generator of vital energy, the nurturing mother of all life. Shinto, therefore, is at heart a matriarchal tradition. True power and strength are identified with the feminine principle, which is also the principle



Ideas of *karma* - the law of cause and effect, and *samsara* - the cycle of birth, death and rebirth, entered Japanese culture with Buddhist influence but are adhered to by some practitioners of Shinto.

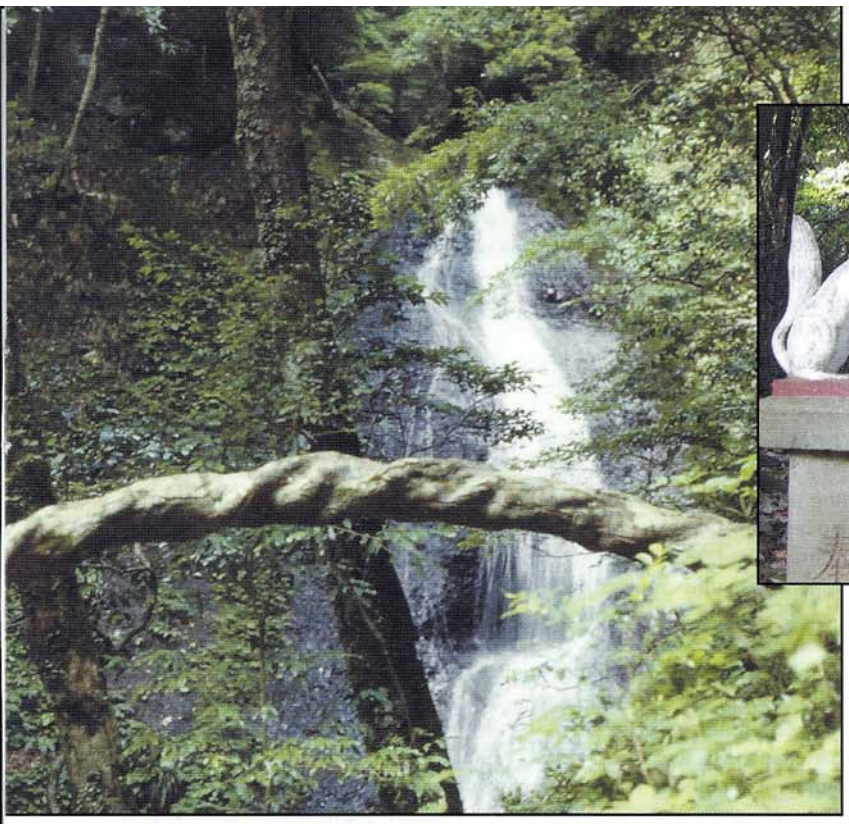
of life. As it developed over the centuries, Shinto acquired the same patriarchal flavour as many organised religious bodies. Some ascribe this to Buddhist influence, others to wider changes in economic and social relationships that favoured male hegemony. Indeed the role of the *miko*, the traditional female attendants at Shinto shrines, might be a survival of a prehistoric female-centred spiritual system.

Kami can assume human form and all humans are held to have the potential to become *kami*. Humans are also the descendants of *kami*. At the beginning of the universe, a large number of deities evolved organically out of undifferentiated chaos. Eventually two principal *kami* emerged, Izanagi (Male Who Invites) and Izanami (Female Who Invites). They stood on the bridge of heaven, dipped a sacred sword into the sea and from the objects within it



Left: 'Many are the mountains of Yamato, and I stand on the summit to view the land; a splendid land.'

(From Manyoshu, the oldest collection of Shinto poems)



Left: Shimenawa (sacred rope) demarcates trees and a waterfall in an area where kami reside

Above: Foxes are sacred to Inari, kami of rice and business success. Here, they guard one of his many shrines

sculpted the islands of Japan. Izanami later dies while giving birth to the *kami* of fire; her consort follows her to the underworld where he finds her in a maggot-infested state of decay and she attempts to drag him with her into the sphere of death. Izanagi escapes and, after a prolonged struggle, defeats his wife and asserts the supremacy of the life-principle. Bathing ritually to cleanse himself of deathly influences, he gives birth miraculously to multiple *kami*, including Susanoo, the wind god, and Amaterasu, who emerges out of his left eye. Amaterasu's direct descendants include Jimmu Tenno, the first Emperor of all Japan, who ascended the throne in around 660 BCE.

RECURRING THEMES

From this legend emerge several recurring themes in Japanese spirituality.

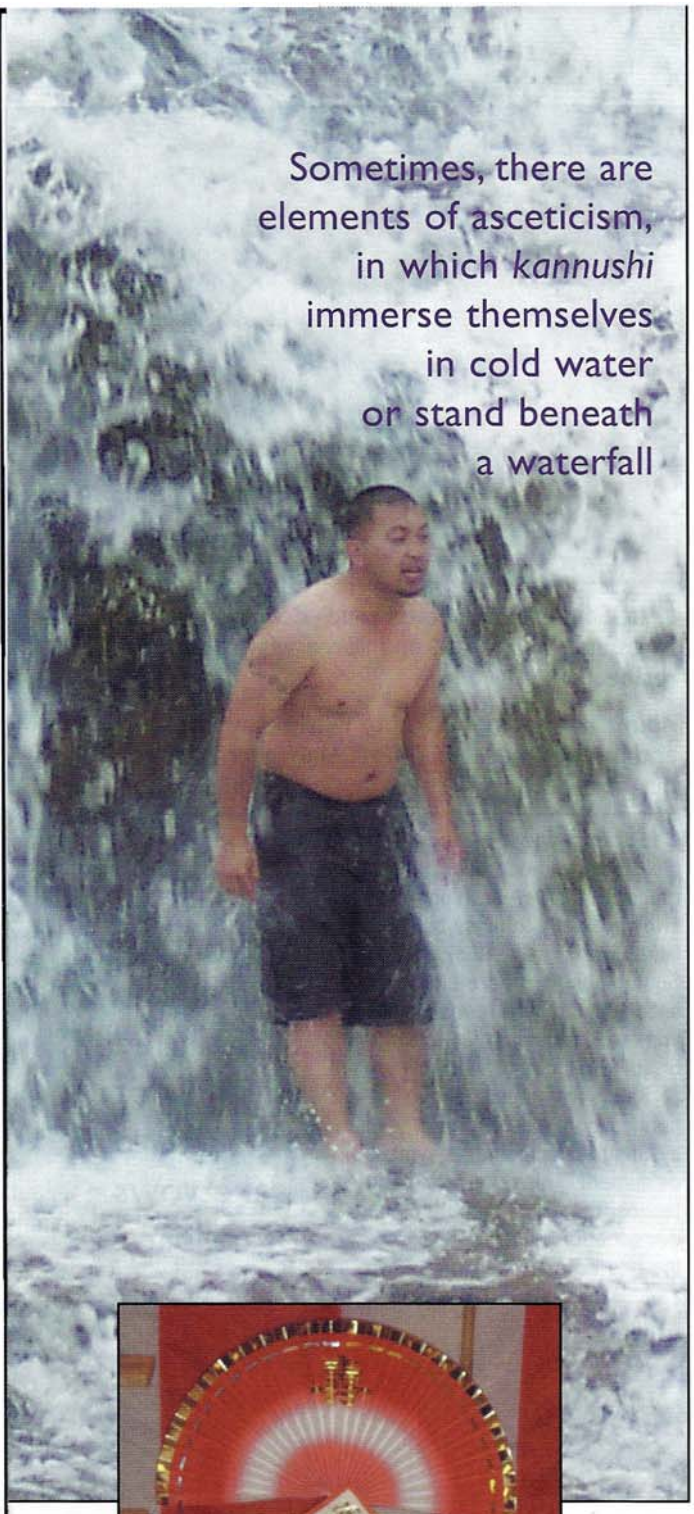
One of these is that death does not represent something inherently more desirable, or the prospect of salvation. While spiritual development can continue after death in a parallel world, life and human reality are to be held onto, valued and made better. Spirituality is that which makes us better appreciate our gifts as human beings, whilst altered states of consciousness deepen our understanding of reality.

Another theme is cleansing. In Shinto, spiritual purity is associated with physical cleanliness, and is expressed in the rituals termed *misogi*, which range from hand-washing before invoking *kami*, to mass bathing in lakes, rivers or the sea. Sometimes, there are elements of asceticism, in which *kannushi* immerse themselves in cold water or stand beneath a waterfall.

Salt is also much used in purification rituals. Blood is feared by Shinto devotees as a symbol of defilement. This reflects menstrual taboos, but at the same time is evidence for a horror of violence at the heart of Shinto.

Masters of either gender can be married and do not have to take vows of celibacy.

Right: Purification ceremony in Germany by Dutch kannushi Paul de Leeuw



Sometimes, there are elements of asceticism, in which *kannushi* immerse themselves in cold water or stand beneath a waterfall

The Shinto devotee strives for *kannagara*, or 'flow with the *kami*', an idea similar to the Daoist concept of *wu wei*, or action through non-action. *Kannagara* is acting only in harmony with nature's laws, living creatively within natural limits and avoiding disruption of the rhythm of life.

REACHING BEYOND JAPAN

The creation myth and the role of the sun goddess are both ambiguous in an important sense. Izanagi and Izanami are historically regarded as the creators of Japan. Yet the legend can also be interpreted to show them fashioning the entire world, and all lands, out of the primeval sea. likewise, it has been simultaneously asserted that Amaterasu is the ancestor of the Imperial Family and the entire Japanese people. But it is equally possible to regard her as the ancestor of all of humanity. This opens the further possibility of a universal Shinto consciousness, or at least a spirituality that resonates outside Japan.

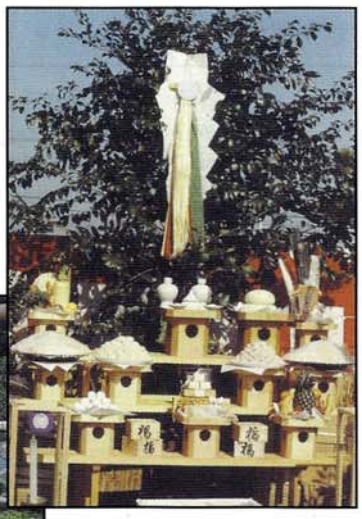
With this in mind, some Shinto Masters, such as Motohisa Yamakage, have been able to pass on their traditional knowledge to foreign pupils. This has led to the founding of the Japanese Dutch Shinzen Foundation in Amsterdam, which seeks to create a Shinto relevant to Europeans, without compromising its essence or severing it from its Japanese roots. And Japan's Tsubaki Jinja (shrine) has a flourishing offshoot on the West Coast of America at Granite Falls, Washington.

These developments are important for a spiritual tradition that has been associated with militarism and imperial aggression. From the 1930s until the end of the Second World War, Shinto imagery was misused by the regime in Japan to justify the occupation of neighbouring countries and reinforce an ideology of racial superiority - much as the Nazis misused ancient Germanic images. Tokyo's Yasukuni Shrine to dead warriors remains a cause of controversy as it can be interpreted as honouring men accused of war crimes.

These are issues which no thoughtful practitioner of Shinto can avoid. But to blame Shinto as a whole for its manipulation by a few is as irrational as blaming the whole of Christianity for the crusades. Although far from unique in its tradition of racial exclusivity and identification with a specific territory, the Way of the Kami is also part of an advanced industrial society and an inter-dependent world. This fact, paradoxically, encourages modern Shinto to revisit its most ancient roots - as a path of tolerance, peace and *mono no aware*, or 'sympathy with all creatures'.

ORGANIC GROWTH

These ancient insights into the relationship between humanity and nature predate the science of ecology and are part of the significant Shinto concept of musubi, which is a form of organic growth that affects all of creation. *Musubi* is evolution and adaptation, but it is also continuity and consistency. It is about self-realisation and self-development, but through co-operation, with fellow humans, other species and



Left: Traditional new year offering, designed by Chief Executive Akira Oshima of the Hotel Okura, Amsterdam

Below: Part of the Yamakage Shinto shrine at Aichi, Japan

Right: Traditional offering for Setsubun (Lunar New Year), Yamakage Shinto Shrine, Kireigu, Japan

the whole of *Dai Shizen* (Great Nature). Thus a society cannot exist without unification and harmony among all things on this earth: mountains, rivers, the sun, rain, animals and plants, not to mention the co-operation between people.

Furthermore, change is a positive force only when it is *organic* change, based on the well-being of the whole - the whole man or woman, the whole community, the whole people and by extension all of the natural world. Disruptive change, based on the conquest of one part of the whole by another, creates social and psychological disharmony and ecological crisis.

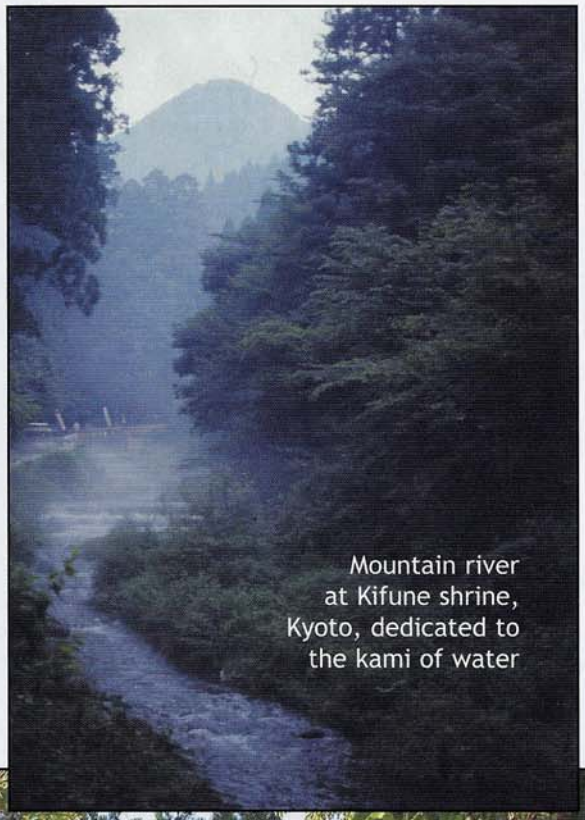
Economic growth, for example, generates social dysfunction, inequality and environmental degradation when it becomes an end in itself and takes precedence over human (or animal) welfare and our deepest spiritual needs.

Musubi is also the life energy that fills the universe and exists in each one of us, giving us the potential to create. Protecting the planet is part of the celebration of life, and is perhaps the most important message that Shinto can convey. In this each of us is an agent of social transformation as well as the keeper of an ancient flame.

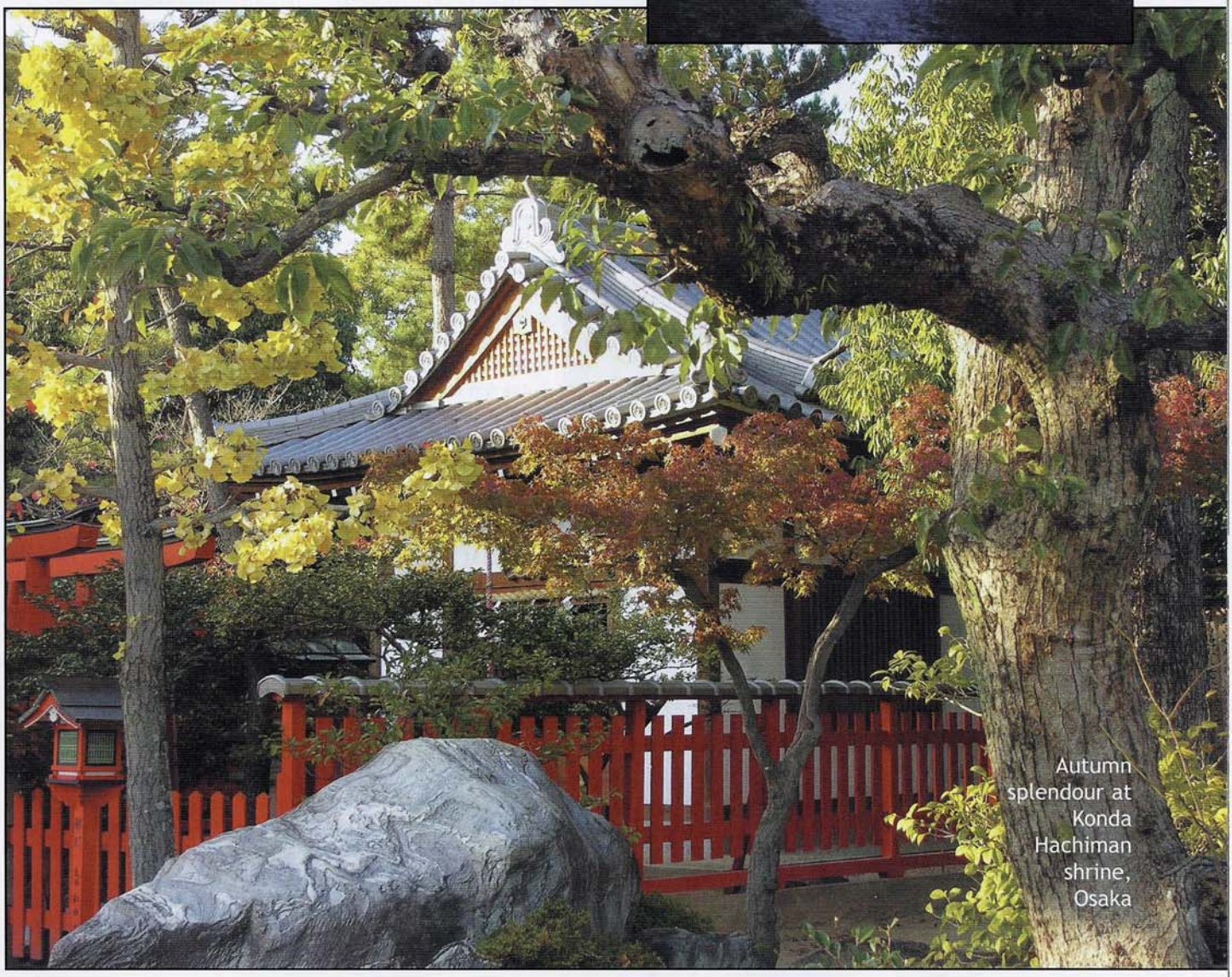
Kodansha tell us that 'The Essence of Shinto' edited in English by Paul de Leeuw and Aidan Rankin, will be published by Kodansha International, Tokyo, in March 2007.

Aidan Rankin's book 'The Jain Path: Ancient Wisdom for the West' is published by O Books (Winchester/Washington, 2006). www.o-books.net

For further information about Shinto in Europe, visit the Japanese Dutch Shinzen Foundation website: www.shinto.nl



Mountain river at Kifune shrine, Kyoto, dedicated to the kami of water



Autumn splendour at Konda Hachiman shrine, Osaka