

JAPANESE PANTHEON

The Japanese gods and goddesses are called "kami". Kami means "highly placed being". The Japanese give the rank of kami to natural items such as mountains, rivers, ancient trees, and certain stones, as well as to animals and great human beings. Kami have human-type bodies and human qualities and defects. Like humans, kami are driven by feelings such as love, hatred, and jealousy. However, even though kami have these human qualities, they are very powerful and have control over nature. There are heavenly and earthly kami: the heavenly kami are somehow superior to their earthly counterparts. However, those who live in heaven do not know what is happening on earth and in the nether world. In order to know about the conditions in these places, they have to send messengers. Some of the most important kami are listed below:

AJI-SUKI-TAKA-HI-KONE was one of several thunder gods. He was born noisy and grew up even noisier, and so they had to carry him up and down a ladder to quiet him. That is why you can hear him coming and going.

AMA-NO-UZUME was the fertility goddess.

AMATERASU was the sun goddess, ruler of the heavens.

AMATSU MIKABOSHI was the god of evil.

BENZAITEN was the goddess of love, and one of the gods of happiness. Benzaiten rides a dragon while playing a stringed instrument.

BISHAMON was the god of both happiness and war. Bishamon protects men from disease and demons. Bishamon was often portrayed wearing a wheel of fire like a halo, which some see as the Wheel of Fate.

CHIMATA-NO-KAMI was the god of crossroads, highways and footpaths. Originally a phallic god, his phallic symbol was placed at crossroads.

HO-MASUBI was the fire god. His birth killed the creator goddess Izanami. In one version of the creation, his father, the creator god Izanagi, was so enraged with grief that he killed the baby. From his blood came eight gods, and from the body came eight mountain gods.

IZANAGI and IZANAMI were the creator gods sent down from heaven to create the earth. The other gods and goddesses are their descendants, but when the god of fire was born he burned his mother to death. In certain versions of the creation story, Izanami became old and ugly as she descended to the underworld. Her husband, Izanagi, followed her to bring her back, but she forbade him to look at her. Izanagi looked anyway and this made Izanami so angry that she tried to imprison him in the underworld. Pursued by Izanami's anger, Izanagi escaped and sealed the entrance to the underworld with a boulder. Enraged, Izanami vowed to kill a thousand of Izanagi's subjects a day, and Izanagi vowed to create fifteen hundred a day. In this way Izanami became the goddess of death and Izanagi the lord of life.

KAWA-NO-KAMI was the god of the rivers. Larger rivers have their own gods, but all waterways are under Kawa-No-Kami's authority.

NAI-NO-KAMI was the god of earthquakes. A late addition to the Japanese pantheon, Nai-No-Kami was introduced in the seventh century AD.

NINIGI was the grandson god of Amaterasu, sent to rule the earth, the ancestor of all the Japanese emperors.

O-KUNI-NUSHI was the god of sorcery and medicine, and of the unseen world of spirits and magic.

SENGEN-SAMA was the goddess of the sacred mountain of Fujiyama. Worshippers greet the rising sun at her shrine located at the top of the mountain.

SHINE-TSU-HIKO was the god of the wind. Shine-Tsu-Hiko fills up the empty space between earth and heaven, and with his wife, Shina-To-Be, he holds up the earth.

SUSA-NO-WO was the god of storms, snakes and farming. He was Amaterasu's brother and greatest enemy. From the moment he was born, he was a troublemaker. For his bad deeds Susa-No-Wo was punished by the other gods and he was banished to live as a mortal on earth.

