

The Japanese were not the original occupants of the islands that now comprise Japan. Mongoloid peoples crossed the Korea Strait and invaded these islands during the second and first centuries B.C. and brought their Shinto religion with them. This religion included the worship of nature, ancestors, and heroes.

The Japanese did not record their religious beliefs for hundreds of years. By then, the influence of China on Japanese culture was widespread. The year A.D. 552 marks the beginning of the great Chinese influence on Japan in the areas of religion, literature, and art. However, it was not until the early eighth century that the Japanese recorded anything of their religion.

The *Kojiki* (*Records of Ancient Matters*), written in A.D. 712, and the *Nihon Shoki* (*Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest Times to A.D. 697*), written in 720, are the two major sources of Japanese mythology, including the myth of Amaterasu. They were written at a time when the Japanese accepted their traditional myths as fact. The authors of these books made an effort to minimize the Chinese and Indian influences on their earliest religious beliefs.

The Amaterasu myth is part of the Shinto religious tradition, which assumes that every aspect of nature contains a divine spirit. Amaterasu Omikami is the principal Japanese deity. She is the Great Goddess or Mother Goddess, who, in her role as sun goddess, is responsible for fertility. She is also the ruler of the gods and the universe. Moreover, she has the personality and skill to remain in power. In her multiple divine roles, Amaterasu reflects the important role of women in early Japanese life, where they were rulers, seers, and warriors.

The myth of Amaterasu reflects the Shinto interest in fertility and rituals associated with it. The myth explains the separation between the sun and the moon, the origin of food on earth, and the beginning of agriculture and the silkworm industry. As is the case with most cultures, the Japanese gods are anthropomorphic in that they are human in appearance, thought, speech, and deed.

In many other cultures, two different deities are responsible for the shining of the sun and for fertility. However, this myth reflects the logical connection that exists between the two. Without the sun, no plants would grow; and without plants, human beings would starve for lack of food. The gods would also starve, since they eat the

same food that humans do, either directly or in the form of sacrifices offered to them. Thus, when Amaterasu locks herself in the cave, her action brings the ultimate catastrophe upon both gods and humans.

Presumably, as long as Amaterasu was treated with respect, the sun would continue to shine and human beings would prosper. This optimistic view of nature was supported by the abundance of plant life, wild animals, and fish in Japan at the time the myth was created.