

Past and Present Beliefs

Do you have an item that you consider lucky? Perhaps it's a certain shirt you wear on game day or a certain pen you use to take tests. What is the story behind the item? If you do have a good-luck item, you have something in common with many Japanese people.

For example Japanese often carry small items called *omamori*—which means “protection”—for good luck. Omamori are typically small objects in a fabric casing. Japanese people believe that omamori may protect them from harm, help them pass a test, or even allow them to find true love. Omamori are physical representations of the gods and goddesses from Japanese mythology. They are a source of protection, which is based on a combination of Shintō, Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian beliefs in the powers of the gods.

The gods and goddesses of Japanese mythology are believed to be responsible for the creation of Japan. The Japanese have various myths that explain their origins. The earliest myths surround the creation of Japan. The oldest spiritual practice in Japan, Shintōism, believes that spirits inhabit all things in nature. Rocks, trees, streams, mountains, and other natural features are all respected in this religion. The spirits are known as *kami*. Japanese myths often feature elements of the natural world.

Over time Korean and Chinese beliefs and cultures influenced Japan, and elements of these different cultures found their way into Japanese myths. The first myths were written down in 712 CE. These written stories included the history of the gods and goddesses, the explanation for the creation of the world, and the story of the emperor. According to the stories, the first emperor was a descendant of a sun goddess, Amaterasu.

Origins of Japan

The story of Japan's creation begins with two young gods, Izanagi (male) and Izanami (female), who were playing in the ocean with a large spear made of jewels. They stirred the waters and lifted the spear out of the water. The droplets formed the islands of Japan. Izanami died while birthing the god of fire, Kagutsuchi. Izanagi went to visit her in the underworld. It is when he came back from the underworld and rinsed his



body with pure waters that Amaterasu, the goddess of the sun, was born from his left eye. She went to reside in the heavens. The moon god, Tsukiyomi, was born from his right eye.

Another god, Susanoo, emerged from his nose. Susanoo was the god of storms. He fought with Amaterasu like an annoying little brother. He made a mess of her palace, threw a dead horse into her sewing room, and destroyed her rice fields. Amaterasu was so angry with her little brother god that she went into hiding in a cave. She did not realize that Susanoo only bothered her because he was not happy with the storms and the misery he caused.

When the sun goddess went into hiding, it was as if the lights went out in the world. The world was dark and sad. All the other gods and goddesses tried to lure Amaterasu out of her hiding place. Finally one did a silly dance that brought her from her hiding spot. When she saw her reflection in a mirror that another god had left for her, her depression lifted and she beamed sunlight into the world again.



Omamori can be purchased at Shinto shrines, like this one on Miyajima Island in Japan.

For causing so much trouble, Susanoo was banished from the heavens. He traveled around feeling angry and lonely. When he came upon an eight-headed dragon, he killed it in a fierce battle. He found a beautiful sword in its tail that he presented to Amaterasu as a token of his loyalty. They made up and both continued to reign in the heavens. Both Amaterasu and Susanoo are still worshipped in temples throughout Japan.

Amaterasu sent down her grandson, Ninigi, to rule the people of Japan. She gave him the sword, the mirror, and some jewels, which became the imperial treasures. These treasures are still thought to be in the possession of the current emperor of Japan, although no one has ever seen them. The first human emperor, Jimmu Tenno, is said to be the descendant of Amaterasu through

Ninigi. According to tradition, Jimmu Tenno became the first ruler of Japan in 660 BCE. For many centuries in Japan, the emperor was considered to be a direct descendant of the gods because of this myth.

Carry Good Luck

The gods and goddesses of these creation stories are still honored by Japanese people today. There are temples across Japan to honor different characters in the creation stories. Many modern Japanese people know the myths and legends of their past. They are passed on through families from generation to generation. Although many Japanese people will say that they do not believe in spirits or the creation stories, some are still superstitious.

Over a thousand years ago, Japanese soldiers carried miniature swords and Buddhist sculptures into battle. These objects represented the protection of the gods who created Japan. They hoped these items would protect them from enemy soldiers, as well as from the demons and spirits that are a part of Japanese mythology. Today many people of all ages in Japan carry the miniature charms, *omamori*.

The *omamori* in Japan reflect the rich folk traditions that incorporate ancient Shinto beliefs into other religious practices. The *omamori* can protect people from *oni*, demons or goblins that can ruin a person's day or even his life. If you want to imagine an *oni*, they have sharp claws, fangs, and a big grin. They like to wear tiger skins and scare people.

Some *omamori* are purchased in Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples throughout Japan. The *omamori* are often made of jade or precious materials. Individuals also create and sell *omamori* with materials such as dried seahorses or plastic.

Japan's modern culture still reflects myths and folklore from the past. Current interest in mythological characters can be seen in cartoons and comics such as anime and manga. These stories use current trends mixed with traditional stories to engage audiences. They carry on the history of mythology while also honoring the rich traditions and legends of Japanese culture.

After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

- 1.** Why do people carry omamori?
 - A.** to hold during prayer
 - B.** to invite spirits into the home
 - C.** to serve as souvenirs from the temples
 - D.** to ward off evil spirits that cause bad luck

- 2.** Which statement best describes Japanese emperors according to mythology?
 - A.** They came from Izanagi's nose.
 - B.** They are descendants of the oni.
 - C.** They are descendants of Amaterasu.
 - D.** Water droplets from a spear created them.

- 3.** Why did people in ancient cultures develop creation myths?
 - A.** to prevent wars
 - B.** to prove their superiority
 - C.** to explain their existence in the world
 - D.** to earn profits from the sale of good luck charms

- 4.** Many cultures use myths to explain the natural world. How are myths important in the lives of modern-day Japanese people? Use details and evidence from the passage to support your answer.