

Materials Needed:

- Computer with internet access
- Notebook or digital document
- Pen or pencil

Exploring the Myths of Ancient Japan

Welcome! Today, we're diving into the fascinating world of Japanese mythology. These ancient stories are not just entertaining; they helped shape Japan's culture, traditions, and even its landscape (in belief, at least!). Many of these myths are tied to Shinto, Japan's indigenous religion, which focuses on kami (spirits or gods) found in nature and ancestors.

Activity 1: The Birth of Japan

Let's start at the beginning! The central creation myth involves two divine beings, Izanagi (He-Who-Invites) and Izanami (She-Who-Invites).

1. Read or watch a summary of the story of Izanagi and Izanami creating the islands of Japan. A good starting point is searching online for "Izanagi and Izanami creation myth summary".
2. In your notebook, answer these questions:
 - Who tasked Izanagi and Izanami with creating the land?
 - What tool did they use?
 - What was the first island (or entity) they created incorrectly, and why?
 - How did they eventually succeed in creating the islands of Japan?
 - What tragic event eventually separated Izanagi and Izanami? (Hint: It involves the god of fire).

Activity 2: Sibling Rivalry - Sun and Storm

After Izanami's descent to Yomi (the underworld), Izanagi purified himself, and from this purification, several important kami were born, including Amaterasu Omikami (the Sun Goddess) and Susanoo-no-Mikoto (the Storm God).

1. Research the relationship between Amaterasu and Susanoo. Focus on the story of Susanoo's rampage and Amaterasu hiding in the Ama-no-Iwato (Heavenly Rock Cave).
2. Answer these questions in your notebook:
 - Why was Amaterasu considered so important? (Think about what the sun provides).
 - What kind of actions did Susanoo take that upset Amaterasu?
 - What happened to the world when Amaterasu hid in the cave?
 - How did the other gods eventually lure Amaterasu out?
 - What does this story tell us about the perceived importance of harmony and the consequences of disruptive behavior in early Japanese society?

Activity 3: Myth, Emperors, and Shinto

Japanese mythology is deeply connected to the concept of the Emperor. Amaterasu is considered the ancestress of the Japanese imperial family. Shinto shrines across Japan are often dedicated to kami featured in these myths.

1. Think about the story of Amaterasu. How might claiming descent from the Sun Goddess have benefited the ruling Yamato clan in ancient Japan?
2. Research one famous Shinto shrine (e.g., Ise Grand Shrine, Izumo Taisha) and identify which major kami it is primarily associated with. Write down the shrine name and its associated kami.

Activity 4: Your Myth Quest!

There are countless fascinating figures and stories in Japanese mythology beyond the creation myths!

1. Choose ONE of the following figures/stories (or find another that interests you!):
 - Yamato Takeru (a legendary prince)
 - Okuninushi (a descendant of Susanoo, ruler of the unseen world)
 - Ninigi-no-Mikoto (Amaterasu's grandson, sent to rule Japan)
 - The story of the 'Hare of Inaba'
 - Common mythical creatures like Kitsune (foxes) or Tengu (bird-like goblins)
2. Do some brief online research about your chosen topic.
3. In your notebook, write a short paragraph (4-5 sentences) summarizing the key aspects of the figure or story you researched. What makes them interesting?

Conclusion:

Today you've explored the foundations of Japanese mythology, met some key gods and goddesses, and seen how these stories connect to Japanese culture and history. These myths provided explanations for the world's creation, natural phenomena, and social order, leaving a lasting legacy still visible in Japan today. Great work exploring the world of the kami!