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The Emperor of Japan: Symbol and Reality – The True Meaning of Tradition**

The Constitution of the Empire of Japan, commonly known as the Meiji Constitution, was in force from November 1890 until May 1947. Though it stipulated freedom of worship, such freedom existed only in principle; in actuality, various religions were always subject to pressure and even oppression. Christians, for example, were often placed in the position of having to choose between the emperor of Japan or the God of Christianity.



When the emperor had been made into the supreme deity of Japan, the very concept of freedom of religion was like a painting of a rice cake: nice to look at, but without nutritional value. Nor was the discrepancy between principle and reality confined to religion. Because the basis of the emperor's divinity was posited to lie in Japan's mythical past, historical research by scholars and history education in schools were restricted. In fact, freedom of expression, of thought, and of belief were all devoid of substance. I am not talking about the distant past. All Japanese lived under such constraints only a few decades ago. The present Constitution of Japan, adopted after World War II, was drafted with this history in mind. The preamble declares that "sovereign power resides with the people." Article 1 reiterates this principle, stating that the emperor is only a symbolic figure who derives his position from the will of the people, "with whom resides sovereign power." And Article 4 makes it clear that the emperor has no "powers related to government." The Constitution also upholds the principle of the separation of religion and state, guaranteeing genuine freedom of worship.



On the grounds that the initial draft of the Constitution was the work of the US occupation forces, some people protest that it was forced on Japan. We must not forget, however, that though a few men in positions of power were unhappy with this document, the vast majority of the Japanese people welcomed it.

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** First published in *Echoes of Peace* No. 31, October 1990, and with the kind permission of its editor reprinted in *Japanese Religions* Vol. 25 (Nos. 1&2) 2000: 83-87. Footnotes were added by the Editor of the present volume. The historical background of this article is that Emperor Hirohito (also called Shōwa Emperor, r. 1926-1989) passed away in January 1989, and subsequently his son Akihito assumed the throne; his official enthronement ceremony took place in November 1990.

In thrall to the past

In November this year [1990], ceremonies marking the new emperor's enthronement are to take place. Naturally, since his enthronement is based on his position under the present Constitution, the ceremonies should be in keeping with this status. But apparently the major ceremonies – the Sokui no rei 即位の礼 (Enthronement Ceremony) and the Daijō-sai 大嘗祭 (Great Festival of First Fruits) – will be almost identical with those carried out under the defunct Meiji Constitution. As a Christian who has lived through the age of the “divine emperor,” I am compelled to question this.

Of course Christians do not refuse to recognize kings, emperors, and other secular rulers. As a matter of fact, at present quite a few countries where Christianity is the dominant religion or even the state religion are monarchies. The problem for Christians is not the institution of monarchy; the problem is whether the ruler, monarch or president, is considered to be divine.

In today's world, poised on the verge of the twenty-first century, most monarchs have little to do with politics. The lifestyle of royalty is converging more and more with that of ordinary citizens; members of the royal family go shopping casually, and people are free to stroll by the palace. This is true of most countries, but not Japan, where there is no sign that such a trend is even possible. This anomaly is, I believe, the legacy of the deified emperor of the Meiji Constitution.

Last spring [1990] the emperor was to attend a tree-planting ceremony in Nagasaki Prefecture, on the island of Kyushu. But the site was near a pig farm. The local government reportedly spent over ¥ 7 million [approx. US \$70,000] in deodorizing measures to ensure that the emperor would be spared the smell of the farm's 3,500 pigs. I could relate many more strange episodes of this kind. But the strangest of all has to do with the enthronement ceremonies scheduled in November [1990]. I suppose it can be argued that a country rolling in money can spend it on lavish ceremonies if it likes. But to budget more than ¥ 8 billion on ceremonies redolent of prewar Japan in an age when the people are supposed to be sovereign does seem extreme.

Sweden is a monarchy, but during the reign of the previous king it decided to do away with the traditional coronation ceremony. Sweden did not have to amend its constitution in order to take such a progressive step; all that was needed was the monarch's will and the government's decisiveness. That Japan, despite having replaced its prewar Constitution, is planning ceremonies that will duplicate those held under the old Constitution seems to negate the very meaning of constitutional amendment.

Spurious traditions

The survival of every royal family rests on respect for tradition. In fact, this is one of the salient features of royalty. But to allow respect for tradition to degenerate into rigid adherence to tradition for its own sake leads to historical anachronism. In the Meiji era (1868-1912) Japan's imperial family abandoned many traditions without a second thought. The Buddhist funerals and memorial services to pray for ancestors that had been customary in the imperial house for centuries were supplanted by Shinto rites.¹ Nor was this the traditional form of Shinto; it was such a radical reinterpretation of Shinto that it was really a new religion. But because this new Shinto was declared to be the original form for ideological reasons, its rites were by definition "traditional."

Thanks to such reasoning, the concept of tradition in Japan has been distorted since Meiji times. Let us examine this distortion in relation to the Daijō-sai, a Shinto ceremony. The government argues that the Daijō-sai must be retained because it is "an imperial tradition." But what tradition, precisely, are we talking about? This rite dates back to the second half of the seventh century, but was suspended for some 220 years in premodern times. Moreover, when it did take place, usually this was in the autumn of the year following the enthronement ceremony itself, though sometimes there were longer delays. In the case of the emperor Meiji (r. 1866-1912), for example, there was a three-year gap. But the next two emperors, Taishō (r. 1912-26) and Shōwa (known during his lifetime as Hirohito; r. 1926-89), conducted the Daijō-sai immediately after the enthronement ceremony. The government calls this new practice "traditional." Through most of the history of the Daijō-sai the emperor's month-long purification preceding the rite itself was an extremely important part of the entire process. But since the time of the emperor Taishō the purification period has been abbreviated to three days. This new practice, too, the government says is traditional.

In the Daijō-sai, the emperor offers the gods rice grown in two special paddies, the *yuki* 悠紀 field and the *suki* 主基 field. From the early tenth century onward one of these fields was located in the province of Ōmi (present-day Shiga Prefecture), the other in the province of Tamba (part of present-day Kyoto Prefecture). The exact site of each field was determined by a form of divination in which a tortoise shell was heated and the resulting cracks in the shell were deciphered. In still earlier times, however, the two fields could be chosen from among a number of regions. On the basis of this archaic practice, since the time of the emperor Meiji the *yuki* and *suki* fields have been selected from among all prefectures of Japan. This method is now apparently called "traditional" as well.

1. The Buddhist memorial tablets (*ihai* 位牌) of previous emperors, for example, subsequently were housed in Sennyū-ji, a Buddhist temple complex in Kyoto. Prof. Yuki organized one of the annual seminars on this topic at Sennyū-ji.

I have pointed out various anomalies relating to the Daijō-sai only to explain why it is that I cannot shake off the suspicion that, in the name of “respect for tradition,” the government decides what it wants to do and then labels this “traditional.” To force through various practices on the grounds that they are traditional is extremely problematic.

Above I wrote that rigid adherence to tradition results in historical anachronism. There is, however, one area – marriage and the family – in which the traditional practices of the imperial family have been repudiated. For a very long period it was customary for the emperor to have a number of concubines. As recently as 1868, members of the Genrō-in (Chamber of Elders) stated openly – and approvingly – in a meeting of that advisory body that the concubine system was the reason the imperial line had endured so long. Concubinage was still widely accepted as the basis of the imperial family. In fact, one criticism of Christianity was its insistence on monogamy. But this ancient tradition disappeared with the emperor Taishō, in part because of the indirect influence of Christianity. Indeed, it could be said that Christianity has contributed to the welfare of the imperial family.

Restoring the emperor's humanity

While the change in marriage customs was a major reform, the trend with regard to the emperor as a human being has been retrograde since the Meiji era and remains problematic. In ancient times, the emperor Shōmu (r. 724- 49), a pious Buddhist, called himself “the servant of the Three Treasures,”² an epithet that suggests that he was an earnest seeker of truth and humble enough to prostrate himself before that which is absolute and ultimate. And many emperors through the ages showed their humanity by composing love poems. One can tell that blood flowed through their bodies.

The Meiji Constitution, however, transformed the emperor into an unfeeling absolute deity devoid of human qualities. The emperor, a human being, was elevated to a plane on which he vied for supremacy with the God of religions like Christianity and Islam. This was not at all the traditional image of the emperor.

The emperor's metamorphosis into an unfeeling absolute deity did incalculable harm to the Japanese people. Because he was absolute, every word of his was sacred. If the principal of an elementary school made a single mistake in reciting the Imperial Rescript on Education³ at school ceremonies, he had to resign. There are even stories of principals who committed suicide when the emperor's photograph (which hung in every school) was destroyed by fire. It was the belief in the emperor's absolute divinity that enabled Japan to invade other countries.

2. The Three Treasures of Buddhism are the Buddha, his teachings (*dharmā*), and the community of believers (*sangha*).

In a declaration on January 1, 1946, Emperor Shōwa formally repudiated his divinity, stating that he was not an *arahito-gami* 現人神, or god in human form, such as those of myth and legend. But this was not a true “declaration of humanity.” After 20 years of behaving as an unfeeling god, it must have been all but impossible for the emperor suddenly to revert to humanity. Now, however, we have a new emperor, Akihito. His accession presents an ideal opportunity to restore the imperial family to human status. It is my deepest wish that enthronement ceremonies devised under the Meiji Constitution to make the emperor into an unfeeling absolute deity be abandoned and that the emperor conduct himself according to Japan's present Constitution.

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3. Promulgated in 1890, the Imperial Rescript on Education (*Kyōiku chokugo* 教育勅語) articulated the goals of education in Japan. It affirmed Confucian values and the sovereignty of the emperor on the one hand, and the need for modernization on the other. It was distributed to every school in Japan; school principals were expected to read the Rescript to the student body, and students studied and memorized the text.