

Official Documents

A Staff Study on Japan's National Holidays prepared by Dr. W. K. Bunce, Chief, Religions and Cultural Resources Division, CIE, SCAP.

GENERAL HEADQUARTERS SUPREME COMMANDER FOR THE ALLIED POWERS

Civil Information and Education Section

27 May 1948

MEMORANDUM FOR THE CHIEF OF STAFF :

SUBJECT : Abolition of Certain Japanese National Holidays

THE PROBLEM PRESENTED

To determine whether certain Japanese national holidays which have their origin and significance in State Shinto mythology, doctrines, rites, practices, ceremonies, and observances should be abolished.

FACTS BEARING ON THE PROBLEM

1. Scope of the Problem

a. The present Japanese national holidays commemorate historical events or figures regarded by the pre-war government as of paramount significance in the history of the nation. They are all products of the modern period, having been revived or instituted as national holidays after the Meiji Restoration of 1868. They therefore reflect the sentiments of an ultra-nationalistic era, and can be instrumental in perpetuating and enhancing certain ideas and principles which have been

repudiated by the present Japanese government.

b. Article xx of the new Constitution guarantees religious freedom and prohibits religious organizations from receiving privileges from the State or exercising any political authority. It provides further that no person shall be compelled to participate in any religious celebration. Nevertheless, most of the national holidays are Shinto festivals celebrated with Shinto rites at the Imperial sanctuaries in the palace and in Shinto shrines throughout the land, and to the nation at large are primarily 'divine affairs' observed with celebrations closely related to worship. Freedom of religion and implementation of the directive abolishing governmental sponsorship and perpetuation of Shinto (SCAPIN 448) would seem to require the selection of new holidays which are not traditional festivals of the Shinto religion.

2. Historical Background

a. In early Japan the Imperial Court celebrated various festivals and gala days, prescribed the behavior of government officials on such occasions, and issued decrees and ordinances regarding popular observance of anniversaries, mourning days, festivals, and other celebrations of a semi-religious nature. Such orders, however, had little influence outside court circles, so that there were no holidays observed by the people as a whole.

b. In the turbulent middle ages, the prestige of the Imperial Court reached such a low ebb that even some of the most important and traditional festivals were not observed officially.

c. In the more stable Tokugawa period, five Buddhist feast days were generally observed as annual holidays, but the structure of feudal society rendered the actual observance of such occasions largely dependent on the personal opinions of local chieftains. Thus in pre-Meiji Japan, though there were many traditional festivals and holidays observed throughout the

year, there were none established by law as recurring national holidays.

d. The Restoration of 1868 and the re-establishment of imperial authority resulted in the institution of national holidays established by law. The Meiji government issued a series of Cabinet ordinances designating certain days as national holidays, and shortly thereafter dropped certain days from the list and added others. These changes reflected the ideological vacillations which characterized the first years of the Meiji era and provided an accurate record with which to trace the rise of Shinto influence in official circles. During this period Buddhism was under attack by the government and Shinto was on the verge of becoming the State cult.

e. In 1868 the government designated the birthday of the emperor as a national holiday. In 1870 a Cabinet ordinance established eight additional holidays. This list included four of the five traditional Buddhist feast days which had been popularly observed in the Tokugawa period but included no festivals of purely Shinto origin. Then, in 1872, the enthronement day of Emperor Jimmu, the mythological founder of the nation, was added to the list. This was the first appearance among the new national holidays of a day associated solely with Shinto mythology. Finally, in 1873, the government first disestablished all the holidays associated with Buddhism and then issued a new list of eight holidays, all of which were to be celebrated with official Shinto rites. Five years later, in 1878, the Vernal and Autumnal Imperial Ancestral Spirits Festivals were added. Since then, except for a change occurring in connection with the death of Emperor Taisho and the addition of Emperor Meiji's birthday as a permanent holiday, no other national holidays have been designated.

f. The Meiji government classified the holidays as festival days (*sai-jitsu*) and gala days (*shuku-jitsu*). No real distinction, aside from the titles, can be made between the festival days,

of which there are seven, and the gala days, of which there are four, but the terms "*sai*" and "*shuku*" both have always had and still have a definite Shinto significance. The character for "*sai*" can be read "*matsuri*," meaning "religious festival," and "*matsuru*," meaning "to perform a religious rite." The term "*matsuri*" is reserved exclusively for Shinto ceremonies. The character for "*shuku*" can be read "*nori*," meaning "Shinto prayer," and "*noru*," meaning "to pray." Thus, standard dictionaries define the words "*saijitsu*" and "*shukujitsu*" as "national holiday, religious feast day, festival day," indicating that outside of context no distinction can be made between their religious significance and their secular connotations. This peculiar use of religious terms in connection with the names of the Japanese national holidays is unquestionably due not only to the actual religious significance of these holidays but also to a linguistic survival from the early days of Japanese history when no real distinction was made between the affairs of state and religious rites. The slogan "*Saisei-Itchi*," now banned, represented an attempt to restore the ancient ideology of the unity of politics and religion which is to some extent perpetuated by use of the terms "*sai*" and "*shuku*" in titles of national holidays.

g. Holidays in Japan are celebrated by the people in much the same manner as in other countries. Government offices, public buildings, and most business concerns are closed; the national flag is displayed from public buildings and private houses; athletic meets and other programs are scheduled. The primary difference between such celebrations and those of most other nations is that before and up to the surrender the government systematically utilized the holidays for propaganda purposes. Special ceremonies were held at all government schools; Shinto rites were conducted by the emperor in the Imperial palace sanctuaries and by priests in the state-supported Shinto shrines. Holidays generally furnished occasions for

flights of oratory on Japan's divine origin and manifest destiny. During the war years special holiday celebrations were concocted by militarists and ultra-nationalists to stir patriotic enthusiasm to a fever pitch.

3. Nature of the National Holidays

The nature of the national holidays served the purpose of the super-nationalists admirably. A brief examination of their significance will show that they were clearly designed to encourage deification of the emperor, extreme reverence for the imperial ancestors, excessive pride in the more dubious accomplishments of the nation, and absurd conceptions of history based on the mythology of the Shinto religion. Sufficient proof of the close connection between Shinto ideology and the national holidays may be found in the fact that the directive abolishing governmental sponsorship and perpetuation of Shinto (SCAPIN 448) automatically nullified the most important sections of the Imperial Household Regulations concerning official celebration of the national holidays. It should be noted that on five of the eleven holidays an imperial messenger is sent to worship at important Shinto shrines in behalf of the emperor, and that in the Imperial Household Regulations Concerning Shinto Ceremonies eight of the holidays are listed as major Shinto festivals and two as minor festivals. The present national holidays are listed below with comments on their origin and significance.

3. Festival Days

Genshi-sai — 3 January. Known as the "Festival of Origin," this holiday commemorates the mythological origin of the imperial throne and imperial prestige through a mandate given by the Sun Goddess. It thus represents a form of ancestor worship, is based entirely on Shinto doctrine, and perpetuates the conception that the Japanese are descended from the gods

and are therefore superior to other peoples. Official celebrations on this day are of a purely Shinto nature. It first became a holiday in 1873, having been proposed and named by the Jingi-kan (Shrine Board).

Shunki-Kōrei-sai — 21 March. Although not officially designated a national holiday until 1878, the Vernal Imperial Ancestral Spirits Festival is a festival of great antiquity, being based upon records in the *Nihon Shoki* that Emperor Jimmu paid respects to his imperial ancestors in a special ceremony in 53 B. C. Worship of ancestral spirits has almost always been observed in both the spring and fall, and therefore *Shūki-Kōrei-sai*, the Autumnal Imperial Ancestral Spirits Festival, was instituted as a counterpart of *Shunki-Kōrei-sai*. These two days are celebrated officially with Shinto rites, and on these holidays, the emperor and the people at large worship the spirits of the imperial ancestors, chiefly that of Emperor Jimmu. As seasonal holidays, these two festivals have come to be regarded by the people, especially the rural population as a spring feast symbolizing hope and new life and an autumnal feast symbolizing thanksgiving for the rewards of work well done.

Jimmu Tennō-sai — 3 April. This holiday commemorates the death of Emperor Jimmu and owes its origin to the ancient custom of holding festivals for the worship of imperial ancestral spirits. It was designated a national holiday in 1873, and is officially observed with Shinto rites, ritual of ceremonies having been established by the Jingi-kan. An imperial messenger is despatched to worship at Emperor Jimmu's mausoleum at Unebi. The history of Emperor Jimmu is based entirely on Shinto mythology, and this holiday has served to propagandize the divine origin and destiny of the Japanese race.

Shūki-Kōrei-sai — 21 September. This Autumnal Imperial Ancestral Spirits Festival is a counterpart of *Shunki-Kōrei-sai* celebrated on 21 March.

Kanname-sai — 17 October. There is no agreement as to the origin of this Festival of First Fruits, but it is based on Shinto myths describing celebrations engaged in by the Sun Goddess after she had harvested a fine crop of rice. It can therefore be regarded as a sort of Shinto Thanksgiving. It was originally observed only by Ise Shrine and the Imperial Court, and during the 15th and 16th centuries was not celebrated at all for a period of 170 years, but in 1873 was made a national holiday. The significance of the holiday is purely Shintoistic, and it is not celebrated widely by the people at large. Its importance lies in the playing up of the connection between the imperial family and the Sun Goddess, and on this festival day an imperial messenger is sent to worship at the Inner Shrine of Ise.

Niname-sai — 23 November. This is a harvest festival of great antiquity, having its origin in Shinto mythology describing the harvest festival rites performed by the Sun Goddess. It has been celebrated ever since the earliest days of Japanese history, with the exception of a 220-year period in the 15th to 17th centuries, and first became a national holiday in 1873. Its Shinto significance is very similar to that of *Kanname-sai* celebrated on 17 October. In official ceremonies in the Imperial Palace sanctuaries, the emperor offers sacred food to Shinto deities and then partakes of it himself, thus partaking of divinity, and this custom is observed by priests in all shrines throughout the nation. To the devout, therefore, the celebrations have the double meaning of thanksgiving and communion. To the people at large, *Kanname-sai* marks the beginning of the harvest season, and *Niname-sai* its close.

Taishō Tennō-sai — 25 December. This holiday carries on the old tradition of commemorating the death of the preceding emperor with mourning. The custom fell into disuse with the decline of imperial prestige but was revived by the Meiji government, when a holiday commemorating the death of

Emperor Kōmei was instituted in 1873. The present holiday in memory of Emperor Taisho was substituted for *Kōmei Tennō-sai* in 1927. It is officially celebrated with Shinto rites. An imperial messenger is sent to worship at the mausoleum of Emperor Taisho at Yokoyama, and Shinto rites of oblation and offerings are conducted in the Imperial Palace sanctuaries, attended by the emperor.

b. Gala Days.

Shinnen Enkai — 5 January. The Imperial Court New Year's functions formerly closed with a banquet on 5 January to which Princes and Princesses of the Blood, Ministers of State, foreign diplomatic representatives, and numerous other dignitaries were customarily invited. Throughout the country banquets were held by government officials and private groups to wind up the festivities of the New Year holiday season. No divine rites were held on this day, but the banquet was sometimes interpreted as the traditional feast after a Shinto festival. *Shinnen Enkai* first became a national holiday in 1873. Since the surrender, it has not been celebrated widely, but remains as one of the national holidays.

Kigen-setsu — 11 February. This holiday commemorates the enthronement of Emperor Jimmu, which is considered to have been the founding of the nation. Prior to the Meiji era the first enthronement was not commemorated and the date had not been established, but in 1872 the Meiji government instituted a holiday called "*Gosokui-jitsu*" to commemorate the occasion. In 1873 the name was changed to *Kigen-setsu*. After much debate among historians over the ancient calendar system, it was decided that Emperor Jimmu had ascended the throne in 660 B. C. since the *Nihon Shoki* states it was "the first day of the feminine month of metal and dragon in the masculine year of metal and cock." This day fell on 11 February in 1874, so 11 February was selected as a fixed date

for annual celebration. *Kigen-setsu* is observed primarily with Shinto rites, and an imperial messenger is sent to worship at Kashiwara Shrine. This holiday, based entirely on Shinto mythology, has been an occasion for propagandizing the divine origin and superiority of the Japanese race. Due to its official recognition of historical absurdities, it has served as a stumbling block to honest research into the early history of the Japanese people.

Tenchō-setsu — 29 April. The custom of celebrating the emperor's birthday dates back to the 8th century. In the middle ages, when imperial prestige was on the wane, the emperor's birthday was not considered a very important occasion outside of court circles, but in 1868 the Meiji government established the emperor's birthday as the first of the national holidays. There have always been Shinto rites performed in connection with *Tenchō-setsu*, and in the modern era it has unquestionably been utilized as a means of promoting militarism and emperor worship, but there is not necessarily inherent in the day anything which might hinder liberal and democratic trends.

Meiji-setsu — 3 November. This holiday commemorates the birthday of Emperor Meiji and first became a national holiday in 1927. Official celebrations include Shinto rites at the Imperial Palace sanctuaries and ceremonies at Meiji Shrine attended by an imperial messenger. *Meiji-setsu* commemorates not only the emperor's birthday but also the achievements of Japan in the Meiji era, and has been a favorite occasion for acclaiming the glorious expansion of the empire under the divine guidance of one of the most remarkable emperors in Japanese history.

c. New Year's Day

While New Year's Day is not officially listed as a national holiday, it may be considered a national holiday in a class by itself. No government offices are open from 26 December to

3 January inclusive, and popular celebration of the season generally extends from 1 to 5 January. Thus, New Year's Day is always a holiday, but is not established as a festival or gala day by law.

4. Attitude of Japanese Government.

The desirability of abolishing some of the existing national holidays and substituting others more in keeping with the spirit of the new Japan was suggested to the Prime Minister's secretary in the summer of 1947. The Katayama Cabinet was quite receptive and proposed to abolish the present list by Cabinet order. The task of drawing up a new list was referred to the Ministry of Education. Almost immediately, however, the whole question was taken up by the cultural committees of the House of Councillors and the House of Representatives for study and drafting of a bill. Progress was satisfactory until the fall of the Katayama Cabinet. Since that time the lower house committee has shown a disposition to retain certain undesirable Shinto terminology in relation to otherwise relatively unobjectionable days, and to retain objectionable days under other names. The crux of the matter is the committee's evident desire to retain *Kigen-setsu* (11 February), the day most intimately connected with aggressive Shinto nationalism. Objection to this day is not based on its mythological origin, but rather on the fact that it accords official recognition to an ultra-nationalistic concept banned by SCAPIN 448 and contrary to general Occupation objectives. Public opinion polls have shown that a large majority of the people favor retention of *Kigen-setsu*, and this is the principal argument raised in its support. But the polls also show that this support comes largely from the conservative rural and uneducated groups and are more an evidence of the effectiveness of past ultra-nationalistic indoctrination than a guide for the future. Many intellectuals believe *Kigen-setsu* has no place on a schedule of

national holidays.

CONCLUSIONS

A study of the history and significance of the present Japanese national holidays reveals that most of them were created to further the aggressive nationalistic doctrines of State Shinto, such as deification of the emperor, extreme reverence for imperial ancestors, and belief in the divine origin and manifest destiny of the Japanese race. They provide official recognition of historical absurdities based on Shinto mythology and thus serve to perpetuate and enhance certain ideas and principles which have been repudiated in the new Japanese Constitution. Ten of the eleven holidays are officially celebrated with Shinto rites and are observed by the Japanese people primarily as Shinto festivals and gala days with celebrations closely related to worship. Continued observance of these holidays would not only violate the principle of religious freedom but would also constitute a violation of the directive abolishing governmental sponsorship and perpetuation of Shinto (SCAPIN 448). Nevertheless, in discussions regarding the establishment of new holidays, the Japanese Government has shown a disposition to retain as many as possible of the present undesirable holidays, either by use of the same dates or by use of slightly altered titles which retain their original significance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. It is recommended that the Japanese Government be directed to abolish those national holidays which have their origin and significance in State Shinto mythology, doctrines, practices, rites, ceremonies, and observances, and to avoid retention of certain undesirable Shinto terminology in the naming of new holidays.

2. It is further recommended that the Japanese Government be encouraged and guided in the selection of new national

National Holidays

holidays more in keeping with democratic ideals.

D. R. NUGENT
Lt. Col., USMC
Chief, C I & E Section