

# The Emperor of Japan : A Historical Study in Religious Symbolism

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Scholars of modern Japanese history agree that the emperor-system served as the key principle of social and political unification from the very beginning of the Meiji period. Freed from the authority and symbols of the Tokugawa regime, Meiji Restoration leaders chose the emperor-system as the principle by which to rule the nation and increase its wealth and military strength. But why did they choose this principle? And why was their strategy successful?

In general, there appear to have been three elements that made possible the success of the strategy to unify and govern the people by means of the emperor: (1) the homogeneity of the structure of community, including common acceptance of the ethical values of loyalty and filial piety, (2) the educational system comprised of the schools, the army, and religious institutions, together with ideological control enforced by police power, and (3) the power of the emperor as a religious symbol that combined indigenous popular religion and officially sponsored national Shinto.

In this study I propose to focus on the third element: the meaning of the emperor as a religious symbol for the common people. Their attitude toward the emperor is an important element in the structure of Japanese feeling and belief. I think I can show that this feeling or attitude gave to the new government a high degree of support from all strata of Japanese society.

But before exploring the religiously symbolic meaning of the emperor for the Japanese people, it is necessary to lay a foundation by outlining the history of the Japanese

emperor-system.

### ORIGIN AND HISTORY OF THE EMPEROR-SYSTEM

One important problem in the study of Japanese history is the question as to how far back the emperor-system can be traced. No generally accepted theory exists, but we can identify for successive periods distinctive cultural elements and institutions that relate to this question.

#### ENVOYS AND POLITICAL MYTHS

*Chinese sources.* In the first century B.C., Japan appeared in literature for the first time. In the *Han shu* [History of the Han dynasty], it is written that the land of the "Wajin" (the Japanese people) was divided into more than a hundred realms and periodically sent gifts to China (Inoue 1973, p. 28). The *Hou han shu* [History of the Later Han dynasty] says that these numerous realms were amalgamated into thirty, and about twenty years ago, a gold seal was found and identified as a gift from the Han emperor to the king of Na, one of these thirty tribal kingdoms. The realms mentioned in the Chinese documents are the earliest known socio-political entities in the Kyushu area.

According to the *Wei chih* [History of the kingdom of Wei] written during the first half of the third century A.D., these thirty realms fought among themselves for many years, but eventually were unified into a single realm called Yamatai (comprehending only a portion of what is now called Japan) and led by a female ruler, Himiko (or Pimiko). The *Wei chih* record has it that Yamatai sent envoys to Wei. According to this document, Himiko was a shamanic medium. It was the shamanic authority of Himiko that unified the realm, though it was her younger brother who actually administered the state. After Himiko's death, the realm split up again, only to be reunified under the shamanic power of a young queen named Toyo (Inoue 1973, p. 34).

In all probability Yamatai, as a realm formed through the amalgamation of previously independent tribal kingdoms, had rival counterparts elsewhere in Japan. The realm that eventually came to dominate the others, the realm of Yamato, greatly extended its power about the time of the turn from the fourth to the fifth century, and about the middle of the sixth century it succeeded in unifying the whole country. Whether Yamatai and Yamato were one and the same is unclear. It is clear, however, that Yamato was the base for the ancestors of today's emperor.

*Earliest Japanese literature.* The oldest examples of literature in Japan, the *Kojiki* [Record of ancient matters] and the *Nihon shoki* [Chronicles of Japan], were written by government order at the beginning of the eighth century. They are political myths that tell of how Yamato, with the emperor at its center, conquered other realms. In mythological terms, they tell of how the heavenly kami (*amatsukami*), with the sun goddess Amaterasu Ōmikami at their center, brought the earthly kami (*kunitsukami*) under control. These *kunitsukami* are thought to be the kami of the early tribal kingdoms, the deities of primitive Shinto.

#### VICISSITUDES IN THE EXERCISE OF POWER

*From tandem to single rule.* Early imperial rule, like that of Himiko and her brother, appears to have involved a male and a female, the woman being a shaman who bore the title *saigū* (Hori 1973, pp. 124-125). Thus the Empress Jingū is described as entering a state of divine possession when the Emperor Chūai played the *koto* (a Japanese harp) and in that state uttered words of political advice (Philippi 1968, p. 257). A similar model is suggested by the Empress Suiko and her nephew, the Prince Regent Shōtoku.<sup>1</sup>

In the mid-fifth century the emperor, ceasing to depend on the religious authority of a woman, took charge of both

politics and religion. He strictly observed a number of taboos and came to be regarded as sacred. In the *Sui shu*, a seventh-century history of the Sui dynasty, the life of the emperor is described on the basis of information gathered from Japanese envoys.

The king of Wa [Japan] sent envoys to Ch'ang-an. The emperor of China had his officials question them as to Japanese customs. The envoys answered that the king of Wa considers the heaven his elder brother and the sun his younger brother. He gets up before sunrise and performs his *matsurigoto* (politico-religious) obligations. After sunrise, he stops and entrusts his responsibilities to his brother, the sun (Wakamori 1973, p. 72).

This description, however fragmentary, is reminiscent of the ancient kings Frazer describes as bound by numerous taboos and by the obligation to perform numerous rituals for the wellbeing of the people (Frazer 1955, pp. 1-17).

The religious authority of the emperor inhered in his being regarded as a descendant of Amaterasu Ōmikami, the sun goddess, and even as one who could control the sun. For an agricultural people, the sun, on which good harvests depended, was the most important thing in all nature. After the technique of rice cultivation through irrigation was adopted (about 200 B.C.), primitive Shinto gave a central place to agricultural rituals having to do with rice. Many of its kami were agricultural deities. More important for present purposes, the kingdom of Yamato built on this primitive faith and consolidated the religious authority of the emperor by making him the chief priest of Shinto, the one who controlled the sun and the production of rice.

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1. The system of tandem rule, in which a king placed a kinswoman beside him and at least formally looked to her for advice, obtained in Okinawa until the fifteenth century (Miyagi 1972, p. 75; cf. Hori 1968, pp. 191-192).

The Taika Reforms, dating from A.D. 645, imply a situation in which the emperor, with a power at once political and religious, had brought the various clans under his control and established an overarching emperor-system. The myths collated in the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* were written down in order to strengthen the religious foundation of this system.

By the Taihō Code of 701, the rituals of the imperial household were institutionalized as affairs of state, and the main shrines throughout the country were placed under the direct control of the imperial court. More specifically, they were organized hierarchically under the Grand Shrine of Ise, the shrine dedicated to Amaterasu Ōmikami as the ancestral forebear of the imperial line.

The latter half of the seventh century and the early part of the eighth constitute, then, the period during which the emperor-system was brought to completion through institutionalizing the religious authority of the emperor in every major shrine throughout Japan. This system, moreover, was accepted by the people (Yamaori 1975, p. 64). From this time on, the emperor no longer needed to buttress his authority with the power of a shamaness. He became a complete authority in his own right.

*Fading into insubstantiality.* By as early as the mid-ninth century, however, the political authority of the emperor had already begun to wane. Real political power fell first into the hands of the Fujiwara nobles, then, in the late twelfth century, into the hands of samurai. This state of affairs continued, brief exceptions notwithstanding, until the Meiji Restoration of 1868.

Seven hundred years of samurai rule made the emperor fade away almost completely from the world of political affairs. When Admiral Perry of the United States demanded that Japan open its doors to foreign trade, he thought that

the Tokugawa shogun was the king of Japan and did not realize that an emperor also existed (Hayashi 1973, p. 92). Even Itō Hirobumi, one of the leaders of the Meiji Restoration and the central figure in the establishment of the Meiji Constitution, confessed in a letter to his foster-father that until he studied under Yoshida Shōin, he did not know of the existence of the emperor (Hayashi 1973, p. 158). As for the common people at the time of the Meiji Restoration, for them the existence of the emperor, if known of at all, had no political meaning whatever.

### THE EMPEROR AS A RELIGIOUS SYMBOL

The central question of this study, restated, is this: how did the religious symbolism of the emperor facilitate the "restoration" of the emperor-system at the beginning of the Meiji era?

In a political sense, the emperor meant nothing to the people. As a religious symbol, however, the emperor appears to have remained alive in popular memory. In order to demonstrate that their attitude toward and feelings about the emperor became an important element in establishing Japan as a modern nation, I propose to examine people's attitudes toward the emperor in historical perspective, even though not everything to be treated will fall neatly into historical periods.

#### THE ANCIENT NATION

*Two layers of thought and feeling.* Tokugawa period Koku-gaku ("National Learning") scholars of the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* provided leaders of the Meiji Restoration with a ready-made ideology. Just as Itō Jinsai and Ogyū Sorai, interpreting Confucian ideas, criticized the society of their day by idealizing a mythical state of affairs in ancient China, so Kamo Mabuchi, Motoori Norinaga, and Hirata Atsutane considered the mythical "age of the gods" attributed to ancient Japan

as the period of an ideal society (Watsuji 1962, pp. 219, 227-228). It seems, however, that the myths recorded in the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* no more represented eighth-century people's feelings about the emperor than Kokugaku thought represented those of the common people of the Tokugawa period. Any generally shared myth, to be sure, contains a popular understanding of history and existence (Eliade 1963, p. 12). The *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*, however, were compiled in accordance with the political goals of the Yamato realm; from the outset they never belonged to the common people. For these people, the first emperors probably symbolized political, more than religious, power. Only gradually did he become for them a religious symbol.

In order to establish themselves politically, the early emperors, it seems, unified allied tribal realms by unifying their religions. We lack documents that would permit an adequate study of this age. Popular tradition, however, provides some material for study. Yanagita Kunio drew an analogy between the rituals of the imperial court and those of small village shrines (1963, p. 503). Similarly, Origuchi Shinobu thought that the original form of Shinto was preserved in the rituals of the court and in those of small, not large, village shrines (1956b, pp. 405-407). What he meant by "the original form of Shinto" was primitive Shinto.

*Rituals and rice.* Primitive Shinto can be characterized as animism or belief in spirits generally referred to as *tama*. Ritual elements having to do with spirits constitute the most important part of both imperial and village-level rites. Origuchi even ventured the view that belief in *tama* antedated belief in kami (1955b, p. 261). Ancestor worship, which Yanagita studied as characteristic of popular religion, rested on belief in the spirits of the ancestors. It appears, therefore, that spirit-belief has stood at the center of Japanese religiosity from primitive times to the present day.

How, then, did this belief in spirits affect people's attitude toward the emperor?

*Tama* can be thought of as a kind of mana. The belief apparently was that *tama* were not innate to man or natural objects, but entered from outside (Origuchi 1956a, p. 224). With the spread of rice agriculture, rice-planting rituals began to assume a central position in Shinto; particularly emphasized was the relationship between the rice plant and its *tama*. People seem to have thought that the spirit of their land entered the rice plants and brought them health, wealth, long life, and other blessings. It was by unifying the rice-crop rituals that the Yamato realm succeeded in unifying the people (Watsuji 1962, p. 67). Traces of this ritual unification long persisted in the imperial court rite called *kannamesai*. This was a rite in which the first grains of the autumn rice harvest from throughout the nation were offered to the imperial court and to the Grand Shrine of Ise. To offer the first fruits to the emperor and his ancestors meant, in other words, to offer the spirit of the land that dwelt in the rice – an act that symbolized absolute obedience to the emperor (Origuchi 1955a, p. 184).

One of the most important annual events in the imperial court is another rice-crop ritual, the *niinamesai*. In this ritual the emperor offers to Amaterasu Ōmikami the rice harvested that autumn and at the same time requests a fresh, new *tama* to make itself present. (This ritual is also called *mitamafuri*, which means “to strengthen *tama*.”) Held toward the end of the agricultural year when the rice-plant *tama* is supposedly weak, this ritual is intended both to strengthen it and to invite a strong, new *tama* into the rice (Origuchi 1955a, p. 184).<sup>2</sup> The people likewise hold harvest festivals in their villages to offer the first fruits of the rice

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2. Origuchi's interpretation of New Year's events has much in common with Eliade's.



to their local tutelary kami (*ujigami*) and to obtain a new *tama*. In ancient times the fact that the emperor and the common people alike carried out rituals having to do with the rice-plant spirit created the impression that the emperor, in addition to being a kingly figure, was also the chief priest of the nation. Even more, because the spirit that the emperor welcomed in this rite was deemed not only the spirit of the rice but also the spirit of the nation, it became, according to Origuchi, the basis of the common people's acknowledgment of the emperor as sacred (1955a, pp. 197, 217).

*The emperor-spirit.* The sacredness of the emperor derives not from his person or lineage, however indispensable they may be, but from a spirit that enters him from without. This spiritual investiture is discussed by Origuchi.

In the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*, the emperor's body is written of as *sumemima*. *Sume* means "sacred" and *mima* "a physical body." A *sumemima* is a sacred vessel into which a *tama* enters . . . . In the chapter on the Emperor Bitatsu in the *Nihon shoki*, the term *tennō rei* ("emperor-spirit") occurs. This is a spirit which is the source of the emperor's authority and enters into him from outside. In other words, it is because *mana* (the emperor-spirit) enters his *sumemima* that the emperor acquires sacredness. This emperor-spirit is called *mi'itsu* (Origuchi 1956a, p. 229).

At the center of the *mitamafuri* ritual to strengthen the emperor-spirit is an action in which the emperor covers himself with a blanket called the *matoko ōsuma*. According to one myth (Aston 1956, I, p. 86), this is the blanket Ninigi no Mikoto, Amaterasu Ōmikami's grandson, was wrapped in when he descended from heaven to rule Japan. This blanket, in other words, was held to be full of the emperor-

spirit. By wrapping himself in it, the emperor could obtain a new incursion of sacredness (Origuchi 1955a, pp. 196, 206).

The *mitamafuri* ritual was repeated annually. The same ritual, when performed in connection with an emperor's accession to the throne, is called the *daijōsai*. After the death of the preceding emperor, the heir to the throne prepares himself for his new position in a sacred chamber of the imperial court where he ritually purifies himself and observes many taboos. For example, the emperor-to-be does not expose himself to the sun. Tradition has it that if he were exposed to the sun during this period of ritual separation, the sun would ruin the emperor-spirit (Origuchi 1955a, p. 194; cf. Frazer 1955, p. 4). The prince covers himself with the mana-laden blanket, and when he removes it, he becomes the emperor.

At one time it was believed that by wearing this blanket, the emperor became one with Amaterasu Ōmikami (Murakami 1974, p. 129). The emperor in the flesh had limitations, but the emperor-spirit was eternal and unchangeable.

*Buddhism.* When Buddhism was introduced into Japan, it too was used as a means through which to unify the nation. The Emperor Shōmu, for example, enlisted the services of the popular Buddhist holy man Gyōki (d. 749) to obtain funds and skilled labor for building the great image of the Buddha in the Tōdaiji temple at Nara. He intended to make this temple the head of a nationwide network of *kokubunji* or provincial temples. As this example shows, the real aim of the imperial court in promoting Buddhism was to foster unity through developing a national Buddhism centered ostensibly in an imposing temple in the capital, but actually in the patron and sponsor of the whole enterprise: the emperor himself.<sup>3</sup>

The fact that the emperor sought to make use of Buddhism

to unify the nation does not mean that the Shinto-based feelings of the people toward the emperor dropped out of the picture. Just as Buddhism was welcomed with increasing warmth the more it accommodated itself to Shinto ideas (Hori 1968, p. 199), so the religious justification of the emperor's authority took shape not by eliminating the Shinto outlook but by grafting Buddhism onto it.

THE FUJIWARA REGENCY (9TH-11TH CENTURIES)

Among the noble clans of the ancient nation, the Fujiwara clan became the most powerful. Through furnishing daughters as empresses or imperial concubines, through wealth gained from its many estates, and through adroit use of top government posts, particularly the post of regent, the Fujiwaras had secured political power and consolidated their oligarchy by about the middle of the ninth century.

*Goryō shinkō*. During the Fujiwara period, a qualitative change took place in how the emperor was perceived. Having lost political power, he came to be regarded by the nobility as human – an attitude manifested in the tenth-century *Ise monogatari* [Tales of Ise] and in the eleventh-century *Genji monogatari* [The tale of Genji].

In addition, this period witnessed the beginnings of a religious phenomenon that later influenced common people's attitude toward the emperor. This was the phenomenon known in Japanese as *goryō shinkō*: the belief in powerful and often vengeful spirits of dead emperors, members of the imperial family, highly placed nobles, etc., people who die tragically and in their rage afflict people with calamities such as plague, earthquake, and famine.

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3. Prince Regent Shōtoku, correctly understanding the essence of Buddhism, averred that "the world is a lie, only Buddhism is true." Among imperial power-holders, however, he was exceptional. Cf. Ienaga 1973, pp. 35-36.

This *goryō shinkō* phenomenon was widespread and large-scale. Belief in the spirits of the dead had existed since pre-historic times, but about the end of the eighth century, it assumed unprecedented prominence. In 785 Crown Prince Sawara was implicated in a plot to assassinate Fujiwara Tanetsugu. He was banished to Awaji (part of what is now Hyōgo Prefecture), but in protest he refused to take any food and died en route. That year and the next, an epidemic swept the capital, causing even the new crown prince to suffer. For many years people believed that this and other afflictions were caused by Prince Sawara's harboring of a grudge. After trying other measures, in the year 800 the imperial court, supported by the Fujiwaras, apologized to the spirit of the dead prince, bestowed on him the title of emperor, and thus sought to mollify him (Hori 1973, pp. 151-152; for a different version, see Kitagawa 1966, p. 47, n. 2).

The most famous case of *goryō shinkō* is one associated with the spirit of Sugawara Michizane, Minister of the Right under Emperor Daigo. Sugawara lost out in a political battle against the Fujiwaras, was exiled to Kyushu, and died there in 903. In the summer of that year, there was a thunderstorm over the capital almost every day. In 923 the crown prince suddenly died. In 930 the imperial palace was struck by lightning, several court officials involved in the intrigue against Sugawara died of shock, and the emperor himself died the same year. In 942 a shamaness possessed by Sugawara's spirit announced that he had willed these disasters, and in 955 the possessed child of a Shinto priest proclaimed that Sugawara's spirit had become the kami of disasters and chief kami of the thunder-demons. In consequence the imperial court gave him the divine title Tenjin and dedicated to his spirit a shrine named Kitano Jinja, which still stands in Kyoto today (Hori 1968, p. 115; Watsuji 1962, pp. 84-86).

This *goryō* belief could never have arisen had there not been a widespread feeling that disasters were attributable to the malevolence of a spirit. The chief disasters were epidemics that struck as cities developed. As society changed, the form of the belief in spirits also changed. Particularly important here is the widely accepted idea that the spirit of an emperor, not to mention members of the imperial family and the nobility, could inflict suffering on great numbers of people. This appears to be the shadow side of the people's belief in the benevolent power of the emperor-spirit.

*Four types of faith.* Miyata Noboru, following up on a study by Yanagita Kunio (1962), investigated the Japanese custom of reverencing a person as a kami. Analyzing both popular traditions and historical materials, he classified such reverence, whether for a living person or for a dead person's spirit, into four types.

The first is that in which one who holds political power is reverenced as a kami. Shiba Kōkan, an eighteenth-century artist, wrote contemptuously about this kind of faith:

Farmers are indeed foolish. They think that the landlord is not a man but a kami. They believe that if they once offer reverence to this kami, they will be able to live safely and happily the rest of their lives. Therefore, when the landlord comes to them, they venerate him with rosary in hand (1928, p. 404).

Kami representative of this type of faith would include Toyokuni Daimyōjin, the apotheosis of Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Tōshō Daigongen, the apotheosis of Tokugawa Ieyasu.

The second type is one in which reverence is offered to someone who fell prey to an incurable disease and just before dying vowed that "whoever worships me from this

time forth will never suffer from this disease" (Miyata 1970, p. 29). This type is one manifestation of a tendency characteristic of popular faith in Japan from early times to the present day, the tendency to pursue immediate worldly interests (*goriyaku*).

Third is what Miyata calls the "messiah type." It is connected with faith in the bodhisattva known as Maitreya (Jps., Miroku). This faith involves a certain messianism because Maitreya is believed in as one who will come and save people in an eschatological time. Toward the end of the Tokugawa period a number of *shugenja* or mountain ascetics killed themselves, and their bodies were mummified in anticipation of the coming of Maitreya. People venerated such mummies as kami (Miyata 1970, pp.34-38).

The fourth type is characterized by worship of a dead person's spirit in order to pacify it and thus avert calamity, as in *goryō shinkō*. At the beginning, *goryō* faith was directed only to the spirits of members of the imperial family and the nobility. In time, however, it also came to be directed to the spirits of defeated warriors, mountain ascetics, *hijiri* ("holy men"), shamanesses, etc. After the middle of the Tokugawa period, people also regarded as *goryō* the spirits of the executed leaders of farmers' revolts (Miyata 1970, p. 26).

A change in sociopolitical structure led, it appears, to this change in the range of people whose spirits might qualify as *goryō*. As warriors acquired political power, the emperor faded from view. From the fourteenth century to the nineteenth, ordinary people had only vague notions about the emperor, nothing substantial enough to make him an object of faith.

#### THE AGE OF SAMURAI RULE (1185-1868)

*A new ideology.* During the time of the Fujiwara regency, the emperor had no political power whatever, but his ex-

istence did have a political meaning. The Fujiwaras acted only as the emperor's regents. They never tried to usurp his position. It is entirely probable that the Fujiwara clan believed literally the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* myths that supported the emperor's authority. They lacked an independent ideology that might have enabled them to break through this mythic frame. In this sense the Fujiwara reGENCY marked a continuation of the emperor-system of the ancient nation.

The seizure of political power by the samurai class meant the appearance of a new ideology. Theirs was an ideology of power. In order to rule the entire country, the samurai reduced the emperor to the role of a figurehead. In this they were not altogether different from the Fujiwaras, but for them the figure of the emperor had a different meaning. They exercised political power not as representatives who acknowledged the emperor's mythical authority, but as warriors who relied solely on force of arms. For the Fujiwaras, the emperor was the source of the authority they exercised in his name. For the samurai, military might was the basis of their authority. The figurehead emperor was important only as a pawn who might from time to time prove useful in the ongoing struggles for power.

*Secluding the emperor.* Because it would have been dangerous for them had the emperor become more than a figurehead, the samurai limited his freedom and income. Moreover, they secluded him in an isolated court (Benedict 1967, p. 29). As a result, ordinary people lost even the awareness of his existence.<sup>4</sup>

The policy of secluding the emperor reached its furthest limit during the Tokugawa period. The Tokugawa shogunate ruled that "the emperor should devote himself entirely to literature and the arts and to study." In this way the government separated the emperor completely from politics.

As to financial support, the Tokugawa shogunate gave the imperial family and the nobility domains worth a sum total of only 10,000 *koku* of grain (1 *koku* equals about 5 bushels or 180 liters). This supplied about the same revenue as the domain of the lowest daimyo. The domains of the shogun, in contrast, amounted to 7,000,000 *koku* and covered approximately one-fourth of the nation. In addition the shogunate controlled all the daimyo. Compared to the shogunate, the imperial family had next to nothing. For some two hundred years, the imperial court could not even perform the *daijōsai* or enthronement ritual – a state of affairs that continued until the fifth shogunate provided funds for this observance (Watsuji 1962, p. 158).

*The real emperor and the legendary emperor.* After nearly 700 years of samurai rule, including 250 years of stricter Tokugawa rule, what effects did the policy of secluding the emperor have on the attitudes of people toward the emperor as of the time of the Meiji Restoration?

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4. The first in a collection of droll tales written down about the beginning of the seventeenth century goes like this:

Once upon a time, there was a shogun's man whose name was Hōchaku. One day he went to the imperial court and knocked on the gate with his spear, intending to order the men in the court to permit him to pitch camp there. The court officers came out and said, "This is where the *dairi sama* (a circumlocution for the emperor) lives. This is no place for the likes of you to make free use of. Go away!" Hōchaku replied, "We are planning to use your place as our camp. If there are reasons we should not do so, the *teishu* (master of the house) should come out and explain them" (Mutō 1970, p.4).

The author of this story, possibly a noble, was laughing not at Hōchaku's rudeness but at his ignorance of the emperor. When Hōchaku heard the title *dairi*, he thought it was the name of the household head, so he called the emperor by the ordinary role-name *teishu* or "master of the house." This episode tells us something of the contemporary relationship between the emperor and the common people.



In order to deal with this question, I propose to introduce two sets of material. One is a statement about people's reactions toward the Emperor Meiji<sup>5</sup> when he made a tour of inspection in 1881, the other an interview with an old fisherman.

Reactions to the Emperor Meiji's public tour are summed up in the words of Kinoshita Naoe (1869-1937), a writer concerned with social problems and trends:

Old people, it seems, felt miserable on seeing the emperor make a tour of inspection. They firmly believed that "the emperor (*tenshi sama*) is a living kami." They also believed that if they looked at the emperor, they would go blind. . . . One old man seriously thought that the tour of inspection by the emperor might be an attestation of a decline in the dignity of the *tenshi sama* (1968, pp. 68-69).

From this it appears that people regarded the emperor as a living kami and were filled with feelings both of awe and of affection.

The interview with the old fisherman, born in 1861, was conducted by the well-known sociologist Tsurumi Shunsuke. Thinking of the time of the Meiji Restoration, this old man recalled what he had heard from his grandmother and quoted her as saying:

"I hear that the ruler has changed from the *tenka sama* (shogun) to the *tennō sama* (emperor). I wonder what kind of person the emperor is. I imagine that he wears a gold crown and gold-brocaded robe with trailing sleeves like the rulers we see in *kyōgen* (a type of dramatic performance). The shogun imposed a tax on farm land. When the emperor begins to reign, this tax system will be changed. He

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5. The Meiji period emperor, while alive, bore the name Mutsuhito. "Emperor Meiji" is his posthumous title.

might go so far as to tax every room in every house”  
(Tsurumi 1963, pp.272-273).

Here it appears that this old man’s grandmother knew of the emperor only through drama. The emperor himself had no reality or relationship to her life.

By conflating these materials, we can draw two inferences. One is that the Tokugawa government, despite its policy of keeping the emperor secluded, could not abolish the memory of the emperor from people’s minds. The other is that people’s feelings toward the emperor were shaped not by direct or indirect relationship with the emperor himself, but by an image of the emperor created by a public entertainment medium, namely, drama. It also appears, particularly in the first case, that the people regarded the emperor as a religious symbol.

*Media of emperor-symbolism.* Because of his seclusion, the Tokugawa period emperor became a shadowy existence devoid of reality so far as the daily life of the common people was concerned. This very circumstance, however, appears to have strengthened the power of the emperor as a religious symbol. What gave meaning to the religious symbolism of the emperor during the age of samurai rule were faith in the emperor-spirit, the image of the emperor as the chief priest of the rice rituals, and the belief in *goryō* – all of which took shape in the periods of the ancient nation and of the Fujiwara regency. How, then, did people perpetuate the religious symbolism of the emperor during the centuries in which he was kept in seclusion? Two ways can be suggested.

One way was that of popular tradition. Legends about the emperor, many of which are repeated even today, and village shrines dedicated to some emperor who died tragically – these became media through which people kept

the emperor as a religious symbol alive in memory.

The other way was the art of public entertainment. Here one is struck by the ironically appropriate congruence between the fact that the Tokugawa shogunate forced the emperor to devote himself solely to study, to literature, and to the arts, and the fact that at the time of the Meiji Restoration commoners could visualize the emperor only by referring to one of the arts, namely, drama.

*Literature and attitudes.* As mentioned above, the eighth-century *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* had nothing to do with the common people. They were meaningful only to the nobility. The same can be said of the imperial court literature from the time of the Fujiwara regency, literature classically represented by the *Genji monogatari*.

Watsuji Tetsurō, in his “Sonnō shisō to sono dentō” [The idea of reverence for the emperor and its tradition], analyzes reverence for the emperor as it appears in literary works from the time of the ancient nation through the Tokugawa period. He provides materials that enable study of the relationship between people’s feelings toward the emperor and the arts of literature and public entertainment. He does not, however, draw any distinction between the meaning that literature and public entertainment had for the socially and intellectually elite and the meaning they had for the common people. He simply lumps everything together under the category of reverence for the emperor. In reality, however, the attitudes toward the emperor held by Kokugaku scholars of the Tokugawa period and those of ordinary people of that time are too different to draw under a single rubric. Using the materials Watsuji studied, I should like, therefore, to consider the nature of the role played by literature and public entertainment in shaping the attitudes of common people toward the emperor.

The first type of literature that can be considered as part

of the legacy of the common people is the type represented by the war chronicles (*senki mono*) that appeared soon after the beginning of the age of samurai rule. Including the *Hogen monogatari*, *Heiji monogatari*, *Heike monogatari*, and *Taiheiki*, these chronicles depict samurai who appear as heroes. They also express unconditional respect for the dignity of the emperor. In the *Heike monogatari*, for example, Taira no Shigemori criticizes Taira no Kiyomori for acting like a dictator:

“Our country has carried out its political administration with the emperor, the descendant of Amaterasu Ōmikami, as its head. Is it not discourteous to the emperor, therefore, that the person occupying the political post of Premier is in armor?” (Watsuji 1962, p. 100).

“It is contrary to the will of Amaterasu Ōmikami to overthrow the retired emperor and forget the great blessings (*on*) of the past. Japan is a nation of kami. The kami reject such disrespect” (Watsuji 1962, p. 100).

In the *Heike monogatari*, then, the respect due an emperor (or retired emperor) and the respect due the will of the kami are treated as identical.

In another incident from the same book, Kiso no Yoshinaka, a barbarous warrior, defeats his enemy and is about to enter the capital. The emperor, at this juncture, tries to go to the Grand Shrine of Ise. Here, in other words, the author intends to say that the status of the emperor is sacred and that whenever the nation faces a crisis, he goes to Ise (Watsuji 1962, pp. 101-102).

The *Taiheiki* also helped establish the emperor as a religious symbol. The *Taiheiki* is a war chronicle about the Emperor Godaigo who sought to do away with samurai rule and restore power to the imperial court. In this story, whenever Emperor Godaigo gets into a scrape, the kami

and buddhas perform miracles to protect and rescue him. Thus Kusunoki Masashige, who supports the emperor, is enabled to defeat an enemy contingent of 300,000 soldiers with a mere 500 men. The message is unmistakable: the emperor and those who support him are always victorious, and right is on their side.

*Blind minstrels.* War chronicles were communicated to the common people through public performances where they were sung aloud to the gathered villagers by *biwa hōshi*, itinerant blind monks of low degree who sang to the accompaniment of the *biwa* or Japanese lute. *Biwa hōshi* singing constituted a form of public entertainment, and the war chronicle songs were immensely popular. Enjoying images of battles, heroes, dramatic rescues, and the like, people came to sense something of the Buddhist concept of *mujō* (“impermanence,” “transience,” “perishability”), which in popular understanding meant that the prosperous would certainly be brought low. Through such songs they also unconsciously came to accept the status of the emperor as sacred. He had been so from the beginning of the nation and remained so even though rendered politically powerless by the samurai.

*Noh songs.* Another art form through which the emperor-symbol was transmitted to the common people was the *yōkyoku*, a type of Noh song. *Yōkyoku* attained popularity during a period when the shogunate, as a result of the debilitating Ōnin War (1467-77), had lost control of the country. One noteworthy incident took place in 1503. In that year the Emperor Gokashiwabara called on the Ashikaga government to pay the expenses for his enthronement ceremony, but the government refused, saying that because the emperor was no longer the ruler, it was not necessary for him to ascend the throne – and this at a time

when the government itself could no longer unify the nation (Matsuura 1974, pp. 63-64). It was under such circumstances that *yōkyoku* spread among the people.

Many of these songs were about an emperor. Watsuji pays particular attention to this feature. He points out that there are numerous songs about emperors in *waki nō mono*, the *yōkyoku* presented at the beginning of Noh plays. These *yōkyoku* portray a peaceful land united under the emperor – the reverse of the state of affairs under the samurai. In the song “Yumi yahata,” for example, one finds words later taken up into the present Japanese national anthem:

The world ruled by the emperor  
continues for thousands of years,  
continues until the people  
become like a rock  
covered with moss.  
The emperor rules the nation completely.  
His people respect him.  
The barrier gates never close (Watsuji 1962,  
p. 130).

In reality there were barrier stations at fief borders and endless local wars. But in the world of Noh, people saw visions of a nation unified under the sacred emperor.

*A critique.* Watsuji thinks that the common people of the uneasy century following the Ōnin War held a common view as to the sacredness of the emperor.

It is said that the authority of the emperor during the age of warring states fell to its lowest point. This is true in the world of nobles and samurai, but not in the world of the common people. On the Noh stage the common people continuously saw servants of the emperor and messengers from the emperor. They heard songs praising the relation-

ship between the emperor and the kami, and other songs extolling his blessings. For the common people, then, everything idealistic was associated with the imperial house and all spiritual glory shone on the imperial family. Therefore the emperor's authority never collapsed during this period (Watsuji 1962, p. 139).

Watsuji's analysis contains both correct and inadequate ideas. He thinks that the idea of reverence for the emperor spread widely among the common people during this age, which is true. One proof of the correctness of this idea is that increasing numbers of common people made pilgrimages to the Grand Shrine of Ise at a time when visits by samurai and nobles were diminishing and when the changing tides of war made such trips extremely perilous (Watsuji 1962, p. 150). Behind this pilgrimage phenomenon stood a historical fact: the Grand Shrine of Ise, in financial difficulty due to the wars, sent out *onshi* (low-ranking Shinto priests) who traveled the length and breadth of the country, distributed shrine amulets and almanacs, offered prayers, received donations, and organized village-level voluntary religious associations that went or sent representatives to Ise (Hori 1971, pp. 176-206).

The inadequacy of Watsuji's analysis stems from the fact that he confuses popular faith in the emperor-image transmitted through literature and public entertainment with respect for the actual emperor secluded in the imperial court. The emperor's seclusion meant that the common people had no knowledge of the emperor in concreto (cf. Mutō 1970, p. 4). The emperor they knew of was a figure symbolic of peaceful unity and redolent of the sacral. The emperor-image communicated by the *onshi* was that of a kami who would free them from their sufferings and bring them happiness. This combination of factors – the seclusion of the real emperor, and the enhancement of the

emperor-image through literature, song, and drama on the one hand and through the mission work of the itinerant *onshi* on the other – made the religious symbolism of the emperor stronger than ever before.<sup>6</sup>

*Human kami.* Since ancient times, the majority of the common people of Japan made their living as farmers, and their main crop was rice. They lived in villages near their fields, and the need to cooperate in daily work, in sharing irrigation water, in community rituals and the like made these villages almost closed societies. The people living in them had a strong sense of community consciousness. Marriage between people of the same community was frequent. As a result, these closed societies were to some extent kinship societies as well. The communal object of faith was the *ujigami*, the patron kami of a kinship group or locality. Until the time of the Meiji Restoration, little change took place in the nature of life at the village level.

How did it happen, then, that outsiders like the *onshi* came to be accepted in village after village?

Many Japanese legends recount what happened when an outsider, referred to as a *marebito* or *marōdo*, visited a village and encountered the villagers (Miyata 1970, p. 74). In general the tendency was to treat such a person as an honored guest. Wakamori and Hori both saw in this tendency evidence of belief in a kami who would come from

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6. One socioreligious phenomenon that appears to have resulted from the work of the *onshi* and can be taken as a measure of their effectiveness is the *okage mairi*. *Okage mairi* was an orgiastic kind of behavior in which people, mainly commoners, temporarily walked off their jobs, left their homes, and walked, singing and dancing, to Ise. This occurred five times during the Tokugawa period (1650, 1705, 1771, 1830, and 1867). During a fifty-day period in 1705, more than 3.6 million people worshiped at the Grand Shrine of Ise. When one considers that the total population of Japan at that time was approximately 30 million, the magnitude of this phenomenon becomes evident (Watsuji 1962, p. 150).



“beyond” to visit the village. Wakamori called this kami *marōdo-gami* and characterized it as follows:

People thought that *marōdo-gami* had no fixed residence, but visited villages in time of need to give blessings. This kami sometimes had a messianic character (1973, p. 68).

Hori drew attention to the relationship between belief in human kami and attitudes toward religious itinerants. He made an analytical distinction between two types of belief system, the *ujigami* (local tutelary kami) type and the *hito-gami* (human kami) type, maintaining that the latter was an important link with extra-village culture and a basis for optimistic expectations of blessings to be brought by religious travelers (1951, pp. 251-258; cf. Hori 1968, pp. 30-38).

The connection between belief in travelers from outside who might be visiting kami and attitudes toward the emperor becomes apparent when it is seen that legends have grown up about some emperors depicting them in effect as *marōdo-gami*. Miyata has collected a number of such legends about the Emperor Antoku (r. 1180-83) and the Emperor Godaigo (r. 1318-39) (1970, pp. 62-75). Both had tragic destinies, and in legend both traveled and visited many villages. The Ise *onshi* and other religious wanderers were regarded by villagers not only as people who might be kami themselves but also as people who might usher in *marōdo-gami*. The *marōdo-gami* associated with the *onshi* would doubtless have been the emperor. This idea of blessings to come from visitors from without, who might be or portend the kami-emperor, appears to have played an important contributory role in strengthening belief in the emperor as a religious symbol during the Tokugawa period.<sup>7</sup>

## THE MODERN NATION AND EMPEROR-SYSTEM (1868-1945)

*Paterfamilias ideology.* With the end of the shogunate and the restoration of the emperor to a position of public prominence, the reorganizing nation soon achieved clarity as to its goal and the means needed to achieve it. The goal, as a slogan of the time had it, was the creation of “a rich country and a strong military” (*fukoku kyōhei*). The means was to utilize Western science and technology. In order to do so, sociopolitical changes were instituted that were little less than revolutionary. In addition to these changes, a strong ideology was needed, an ideology that could unify people and stimulate them to devote their energies to the building up of the new nation. The ideology used was that of the *kazoku kokka*, the nation as a family or household.

The nation-as-a-family ideology was an organic conception according to which the imperial family was deemed the head family and all others branch families (Ishida 1974a, p. 23). People were taught that the loyalty (*chū*) due the emperor was identical with the filial piety (*kō*) due their parents — though in context this meant that in cases of a conflict of loyalties the former took priority. The emperor stood, therefore, not only as the unifying principle of the nation but also as the unifying principle of people’s emotions

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7. The playwright Chikamatsu, in a satire entitled “Sagami nyūdō senbiki inu” [The monk Sagami and a thousand dogs] (1714), tells of an imperial prince imprisoned on a certain mountain not far from a village. He spends his days reading sutras, praying, and writing poetry that he gives to the village girls who call on him. One girl, who is demented (but for that very reason more closely in touch with the spirit world than ordinary mortals), says: “The prince of this mountain is like a kami. If you are suffering from sickness and get a piece of paper on which he has written a poem after praying, you will be cured” (Miyata 1974, p. 119). The prince’s paper was supposed to contain power to exorcise spirits and cure people of muteness, deafness, and all diseases. By extension, the common people, Chikamatsu implies, regarded the emperor as possessing a similar power. Whether they in fact held this view is not clear, but we can say that such a view would by no means be inconsistent with their faith in the power of the emperor-spirit.

and behavior (Ishida 1955, p. 13). According to a study of the political structure of modern Japan, the nation-as-a-family ideology was adopted not at the time of the restoration but twenty years later, and the immediate occasion for doing so was to suppress the emergent socialist movement and draw in those with negative attitudes about national unification (Ishida 1974a, p. 25).

*Dissemination through institutionalization.* In order to establish the nation-as-a-family ideology among the people, the government adopted a series of measures. The Constitution of 1889 stated its fundamental principle in two articles:

Article 1. The Empire of Japan shall be reigned over and governed by a line of Emperors unbroken for ages eternal.

Article 3. The Emperor is sacred and inviolable.

In 1890 the government, in the name of the emperor, enacted the Imperial Rescript on Education. It emphasized the Confucian virtues of loyalty and filial piety as well as the sacredness of the emperor. In the same year the government promulgated the initial version of its Civil Code,<sup>8</sup> in the formulation of which Confucian virtues played an important role. In 1891 the government distributed to each school a copy of the Imperial Rescript on Education, a photograph of the emperor, and another photograph of the empress. It required each school to keep them in a safe

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8. Intended for enactment in 1893, the initial version elicited a significant debate between proponents who upheld its individualism and opponents who demanded revision in the name of the nation-as-a-family concept that gave greater power to family heads and underlined the authority of the emperor. The latter won out, and the revised Civil Code, promulgated in 1896 and put into effect in 1898, continued in force until the end of World War II.

place, to display the pictures and read the Rescript on stated occasions, and to have teachers and students alike pay them homage. Each school also had to include in its curriculum a class in moral training (*shūshin*). Particularly after the revised textbook came into use (1911), students received moral training squarely based on the nation-as-a-family ideology (Ishida 1955, pp. 7-8). In 1900 the government passed the Police Regulation Law and thereby empowered itself to suppress views and movements that opposed the nation-as-a-family ideology.

Unification of the people in accordance with this ideology amounted to extending the Confucian ideology of the Tokugawa period samurai throughout all levels of Japanese society. To some extent the Confucian virtues of loyalty and filial piety had already been popularized during the feudal period (Bellah 1957, p. 183). At that time, however, the object of loyalty was the head of a community or fief, not the shogun and much less the emperor. What Ishida speaks of as "the people's negativity toward national unification" stemmed from this particularism. In order to break through this bent toward local loyalty and unify people throughout the nation, Meiji government leaders made deliberate use of the symbol of the emperor.

*The imperial tour.* The most important way through which the government fostered devotion to the emperor among the common people was the imperial tour. In contrast to the Tokugawa period when emperors made only three tours in 265 years, the emperor made 102 tours during the 45 years of the Meiji era, and 70 of these tours took place before the promulgation of the Meiji Constitution (Haga 1974, p. 101). After the Imperial Rescript on Education had been distributed to each school, the number of tours diminished (Haga 1974, p. 107). It appears, therefore, that the government's national unification policy depended heavily on the

tour device until the nation-as-a-family ideology had become firmly established.

People reacted to the emperor's tours in different ways. One account indicates that they were not particularly interested.

When the emperor passed through the farm villages, a few villagers wanted to see him and offer him reverence. Most, however, remained standing in their rice fields with a spade or sickle under their arms, or sat around on the grass or on stones. One woman suckled her baby while watching the emperor's procession. A man in dirty clothes taking a nap was waked by a village official who said to him, "The emperor will pass through here soon. Let's go out and pay our respects." The man went outside rubbing sleep from his eyes. It was a funny sight (Haga 1974, p. 99).

Most accounts, however, portray the people as welcoming the emperor with enthusiasm.

After the emperor's procession passed, the people were allowed into the street. Those who had been bowing from both sides of the street tumbled over one another in their eagerness to snatch up the pebbles with which the road was surfaced. They believed that these pebbles on which the emperor had walked would bring well-being to their families and abundant harvests (Kinoshita 1968, pp. 76-78).

This was in 1881. Of particular importance in this account is the fact that the common people regarded the emperor as a mana-laden being whose presence would bring them worldly benefits. This point will call for further consideration below.

In some areas the people's way of receiving the emperor showed explicitly that they regarded him as a kami. A contemporary account says of one area:

The people built an altar of planed wood in front of one of their houses. They welcomed the emperor by offering a rice cake and cleansed rice on the altar (Kodama 1934, p. 174).

Elsewhere they welcomed him by presenting him with offerings of various grains: rice, millet, and the like (Kodama 1934, p. 81). This way of welcoming the emperor is identical with the way the common people have long welcomed the ancestral spirits and the rice-field kami to their villages. They received the emperor as a *marōdo-gami*, a kami whose visit they hoped would bring them bumper crops and happiness.

It is noteworthy, moreover, that what they offered the emperor was grain, particularly rice. Despite the long centuries of samurai rule during which the emperor was a virtual prisoner, the common people even of the Meiji era preserved the memory that the proper way to offer veneration to the emperor was with gifts appropriate to the chief priest of the rice rituals.

*Contrast between faith and ideology.* Some records of the emperor's tours show that people enshrined places where he rested or venerated things he touched. When he toured the Tōhoku district in 1876, for example, at one point he got into a boat. The owner, using wood from this boat, built a model of it, erected a small shrine in his garden, installed the model in the shrine, and venerated it. Later, fearing that it might rot, he burned the model, piled a mound of earth over the ashes, and venerated this mound as sacred (Miyata 1970, p. 54). This example suggests the generalization that people regarded the emperor-spirit as remaining in things even after the emperor himself had returned to the imperial court. They revered these things even after the emperor's death. In the Meiji era their faith

in the emperor-spirit remained strong.

Prior to the Meiji Restoration, the emperor was, to the common people, a religious symbol associated with utopian visions but devoid of concreteness. During the early part of the Meiji era, the imperial tours gave substance to their notions of the emperor. From the standpoint of government policy, the function of the imperial tours was to unify the nation by taking advantage of people's faith in the emperor as a religious symbol. To a certain degree this policy was successful. The tours drew people to the emperor and strengthened belief in his sacredness. This faith, however, was not sufficient to mobilize them for rapid, nationwide modernization. On the foundation of popular faith in the emperor as imbued with a beneficent and powerful spirit, the government erected and institutionalized the nation-as-a-family ideology. The tours quickened belief in the emperor, and this in turn increased receptivity to the official ideology.

In order to develop "a rich country and a strong military," successive governments undertook imperialistic annexation and invasion. This policy led to a conflict of interests between Japan and Western powers, some of which were equally imperialistic, and eventually to World War II. In general the Japanese people, as a matter of *honne* (true feeling), hated the war. But as a matter of *tatemae* (the principles one avows in public), they cooperated in the war effort in order to save their families from criticism and distress.<sup>9</sup> They lacked a principle that might have enabled them to resist the nation-as-a-family ideology.

What drove the Japanese people into totalitarianism and World War II was not their sense of reverence for the em-

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9. Cf. Inagaki 1975, pp. 97-122. From wartime police records, Inagaki published numerous scribbled notes and anonymous letters showing how people really felt about the war and the emperor.

peror, but the nation-as-a-family ideology. One characteristic of the religiosity of the common people is an expectation of tangible benefits. They are unlikely to sacrifice their lives for faith alone. They adhere to faith only as long as it serves their worldly interests. The same holds true of their attitude toward the emperor. They have consistently venerated him as a mana-laden kami, one whose presence would bring them happiness through health, good harvests, and a harmoniously ordered society. As with other kami, the people would have broken off their relationship with the emperor if they had regarded him as the cause of their wartime sufferings. The faith-dimension is no different from other dimensions of Japanese society: great emphasis falls on performance on behalf of the collectivity (cf. Bellah 1957, p. 5).

The fact that the people did not cut their ties with the emperor even in the midst of their wartime sufferings was due not only to the strict controls exercised by the Home Ministry through its police force but also to the primarily particularistic orientation of Japanese society (Bellah 1957, pp. 5, 13). This orientation prevented them from discovering any viable alternative to an emperor-centered nation.

#### AFTER WORLD WAR II

*The emperor's disavowal.* On 1 January 1956, the first New Year's Day after Japan's defeat in World War II, Emperor Hirohito issued the now-famous rescript in which he declared:

The ties between us and our people have always stood on mutual trust and affection. They do not depend on mere legends and myths. They are not predicated on the fanciful idea that the emperor is an *akitsumikami* ("a kami in human appearance"), or that the Japanese people are superior to other peoples and destined to rule the world (Japanese text



in Tamaru 1973, p. 256; a slightly different English text in Woodard 1972, p. 316).

By this declaration the emperor disavowed, for himself and for all Japanese people, the myths, legends, and institutionalized ideology that had held him up as a living kami. Despite the pre-1945 inculcation of this ideology through the educational system and the mass media, it seems that few people really believed all they were told to believe about the emperor and their relationship to him (Katō 1974, p. 211). Defeat in war and the emperor's disavowal of living kami status freed people from feeling that in public they had better express belief in the emperor as a matter of prudence. More important than their external expressions, however, are their real feelings about the emperor. How, if at all, did these feelings change after 1945?

*The postwar tours.* Not long after the end of the war, Emperor Hirohito made tours that took him to every section of Japan. Since these tours followed his disavowal of living kami status, people did not prepare for him or welcome him as they had the Emperor Meiji. Moreover, it is altogether likely that the Occupation officials, not to mention the intellectuals around the emperor, would have frowned on any reception or presentation of gifts implying faith in the emperor as a kami. In the immediate postwar situation of anomie, however, the emperor's tours did much to unify people for the establishment of a new Japan.

Except for the period of the ancient nation when the emperor exercised political power, the emperor's role has varied in accordance with the wishes of political power holders. The role assigned Emperor Hirohito after World War II was no exception. He did not undertake these tours on his own initiative. They were for a political purpose by power holders who sought to turn to good account the

meaning of the emperor-symbol to the people. The power holders in this case were the leaders of the Allied Occupation, predominantly of the United States, and Japanese officials desirous of increasing power through cooperating with them.

*Democratization of the imperial image.* The postwar emperor-image has been largely democratized by the mass media. Minami has identified five categories under which this democratization has taken place: (1) the human emperor (the newspapers printed photographs of the smiling emperor with his family and even published his bodily dimensions), (2) the scientist (great emphasis was placed on the emperor's interest in marine biology), (3) the peace-lover, (4) the man of simple lifestyle, and (5) the close relationship between the imperial family and the United States (represented by the relationship between the crown prince and his English-language tutor) (Minami 1974, pp. 191-193).

The climax in the democratization of the imperial image took place in 1959 when the crown prince married the daughter of a flour-company president. This marriage, moreover, was widely publicized as a marriage based on love as opposed to a more traditional arranged marriage. All this points in the direction of an image of the emperor and his family that makes them "just like us."

This way of treating the emperor in the mass media continues to the present day. Weekly magazines intended primarily for women feature a photograph and brief article on the imperial family in almost every issue. The democratization of the imperial image through the mass media has almost completely succeeded (cf. Ishida 1974b, p. 227).

*Who benefits and how?* As Matsushita points out, the mass

media of Japan do not provide people with a spread of opinions from which they may make their own choice. They tend to present only one opinion as worthy (Matsushita 1974, p. 283; cf. Ishida 1974b, p. 227). Furthermore, behind the mass media stand the combines of monopolistic capital. The manner in which the imperial image is presented is controlled, then, by the real power holders of present-day Japan: the monopoly capitalists.

I think that democratizing the imperial image was the only feasible way that the emperor could retain his position after a war that brought death and misery to millions. The disappearance of the nation-as-a-family ideology, the collapse of the extended family system and the powers that resided in the head of the household, the rapid decrease in the agricultural population as people crowded into the cities — this chain of circumstances has undercut the image of the emperor as the chief priest of a national agricultural community and deprived him of any further reason for existence. People have become largely indifferent to spiritual concerns. Their faith in the emperor-spirit has waned. The people of the postwar period are interested in “my home-ism”: building a prosperous and harmonious home life, getting their children a good education and a good job, and generally devoting themselves to pragmatic concerns. The emperor they can accept is an emperor who symbolizes “my home-ism.” The people in power still want to maintain the emperor despite the immense change they have made in his public image.

What benefit does the emperor bring to the holders of power? The answer to this question is the same as it would have been in the Meiji era. The most important function of the emperor is symbolic: he unifies the people. In present-day Japan there appears to be no symbol other than the emperor-symbol that can unify the people. The power holders want to maintain this strong symbol in order to

make use of it as occasion demands.

*Loyalty to the emperor today.* The democratization of the imperial image carried out in the mass media by the monopoly capitalists has succeeded in large measure, but cannot overcome a fundamental contradiction. To democratize the emperor completely would mean to abolish the meaning of the emperor-symbol.

Those in power, by democratizing his image, try to present the emperor as friendly and close to the people. As if to confirm this contradiction, however, they also control the mass media in such a way as to perpetuate the idea of the emperor as sacred. Whenever a scene of the emperor participating in some event is televised, there are always certain formalities: people display an attitude of profound respect; those to whom the emperor speaks make a deferential bow — but we cannot hear what the emperor says. We hear only solemn music. Only when he reads a prepared message is the emperor's voice heard. In a variety of ways the controllers of the media communicate the message that the emperor is different from ordinary people. For example, when the emperor attended a luncheon in San Francisco during his most recent visit to the United States, news cameramen were prohibited from taking pictures of him eating — as if such shots would impugn his dignity or make him seem too human. Again, cartoonists and comedians lampoon other public figures at will, but to make the emperor or the imperial family cartoon figures or the butt of political satire is strictly taboo. Because of this suggestion of difference and distance, people maintain in their subconscious a feeling that the emperor is somehow sacred after all.

Today, however, the Japanese people have in themselves no basis for retaining the emperor-symbol. It has survived only because of the deliberate efforts of those who control

the mass media. If the Japan Communist Party were to win political power through the elective process tomorrow, the bulk of the population would abandon both the emperor and the emperor-symbol without a moment's hesitation. They will not fight or risk their lives to protest the abolition of the emperor-system. The emperor-symbol simply does not mean that much to people today. Except when buttressed by an institutionalized ideology, perhaps it never did.

### CONCLUSION

Throughout Japanese history political power holders and cultural elites have treated the emperor as a symbol of the politico-cultural unity of the nation. For the common people, however, the emperor has been a religious symbol related to this-worldly interests. With regard to the latter, Yoshimoto correctly characterizes the idea that the emperor symbolizes the unity of the Japanese nation, people, and culture as a "common fantasy" (1974, pp. 322-328; see also Yoshimoto 1972). In order to protect the emperor-symbol from misuse by the holders of power, it is important for contemporary Japanese people to break out of this "common fantasy." The socioeconomic foundations that once supported belief in the emperor as a beneficent kami-figure are now non-existent. The conditions are ripe for turning away from this fantasy.

According to a public opinion poll of a decade ago, more than eighty percent of the Japanese people support the emperor-system. Even in the Communist Party of Japan, some twelve percent are emperor-system supporters (Mishima 1969, p. 53). This support does not mean, I think, that the people of Japan regard the emperor as necessary to their existence. It means, rather, that they lack the sense of principled autonomy that would enable them to reject the emperor. As long as they lack this principled autonomy,

they will be at the mercy of political leaders who will twist the emperor-symbol into any form that suits their convenience.

Nakamura once pointed out that one characteristic of the Japanese people is that they find their orientation not in universal principles but in dedication to a specific authoritative individual. Buddhism began as a universal way of enlightenment, but in Japan it was transformed into devotion to sect founders (Nakamura 1964, pp. 449-454). Shinran, formulator of the most powerful logic of negation in the history of Japanese Buddhist thought (Ienaga 1973, pp. 94-96), worshiped not only the truth believed in by Prince Regent Shōtoku, the father of Japanese Buddhism, but also the prince himself (Tokoro 1973, pp. 74-75). Moreover, after Shinran's death, adherents of the sect he founded, the Jōdo Shinshū, made him the object of their worship.

A relationship of devotion to a specific individual is more important than allegiance to universal teachings – this characteristic of Japanese thought and behavior comes into view in many groups (Nakane 1970, pp. 8-22). The implied particularistic tendency means that the Japanese ideal is a harmonious life in which individuals are completely absorbed into their groups (Bellah 1974, p. 399). This traditional characteristic remains unchanged today.

In the past the emperor-symbol functioned on behalf of the harmonious unification of groups and communities. Today, however, the socioeconomic conditions that underlay that function have disappeared. Nonetheless, the particularistic orientation remains. As long as particularism continues to be taken as the standard of behavior and of the ideal society, the emperor-symbol will continue to be important, and the emperor, supported by media controllers who stand to benefit by the use to which they put this symbolic figure, will survive.

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