

The role of the Emperor in Japan

— How the Emperor came to be deified —

Keiichi SUGANUMA

Up to the end of World War II, the Japanese believed that their emperor's ancestry could be traced back to Japanese mythology, which belief caused fanatic nationalism with the emperor as its nucleus.

The *Kojiki* ('An Ancient History'), which was produced by Ono Yasumaro in 712 A.D. by recording the narratives told by Hieta-no-Are, and the *Nihonshoki* ('The Chronicles of Japan'), an authorized history compiled in 720 A.D. by an editorial committee presided over by Prince Toneri, are the two oldest histories of Japan. In these two histories myths and legends handed down from earlier times are recorded together with some historical facts with a view to explaining that the Japanese emperor was the descendant of a god. The foundation of Japan is described in the *Kojiki* as follows:

The universe was quite chaotic at its beginning (just in the same way as "The Book of Genesis" in the *Old Testament* describes), and the world gradually came to be created out of the chaos. In the chaotic cosmos heaven and earth were gradually divided, but the earth was still formless and mud and sand covered it. God Izanagi-no-mikoto and Goddess Izanami-no-mikoto were ordered by their heavenly superiors to stand on a floating bridge in the heaven and stir the briny water below with a spear; they did this, and lo! when they lifted the spear, the briny water dripped from its tip and gradually solidified, thus forming an island called Onogorojima ('an island formed of itself'), the location of which is still a closed book.

The god and the goddess descended upon the island, copulated and gave birth to a number of gods and goddesses as well as eight islands which were to be the islands of Japan proper. Izanami, however, was burnt to death when she bore the god of fire. After that Izanagi gave birth to Amaterasu-o-mikami out of his left eye, Tsukiyomi-no-mikoto out of his right eye, and Susano-no-mikoto out of his nose. Izanagi assigned Amaterasu to govern the gods' country called Takama-ga-hara ('Heavenly Plain'), Tsukiyomi to rule the world of night, and Susano to control the sea. Susano, who was ill-behaved and outrageous by nature, earnestly desired to remain in Takama-ga-hara with his sister, but Amaterasu was afraid that he intended to usurp her throne. After many trials to confirm his sincerity, however, she eventually allowed him to stay in heaven out of her sisterly love. Susano was too overjoyed to be well-behaved and began to run amuck. For instance, he scattered excrement about the sacred place where the first annual rice crop was tasted and threw a skinned beast into another sanctum. The goddess was furious about his vandalism and savagery and shut herself up in Ama-no-iwato (the Heavenly Grotto). She was also the Sun-Goddess, so the universe at once fell into thick darkness. All the gods and goddesses got flustered and held a conference as to what should be done: they decided that they should carouse in front of the grotto, singing and dancing, and that if the Goddess peeped out of the door to see what the fuss was all about, Tajikarao-no-mikoto, a god who had Herculean strength, should thrust his hands into the chink, open the door, and take out the Goddess. Their scheme worked well and the universe became as light as ever.

Consequently, it was decided that Susano should be banished from the Heavenly Country to Japan. He came to live in the Izumo District (Shimane Prefecture), where, legends say, he did some gallant deeds. For

The role of the Emperor in Japan (K. SUGANUMA)

instance, he slew an eight-headed dragon, which had long persecuted the Kushi-inada Family, took a sword out of its tail, and then married Kushi-inada-hime (Princess Marvellous Rice Field), the daughter of the family. Thus he became the progenitor of the ruling family of the district. Meanwhile, Amaterasu commanded her grandson Ninigi-no-mikoto to descend to the land of Japan to reign over the country. Ninigi descended on Mount Takachiho in the Huga district, Kyushu, carrying the Three Sacred Regalia entrusted to him by Amaterasu, viz. Yata-no-kagami (the Sacred Mirror), Kusanagi-no-tsurugi (the Grass-Mowing Sword) and Yasakani-no-magatama (the Comma-Shaped Bead). It is said that Yata-no-kagami and Yasakani-no-magatama were the ornaments which gods hung on the trees when they caroused in front of the Heavenly Grotto where Amaterasu shut herself up, and that Kusanagi-no-tsurugi was the very sword Susano had pulled out of the serpent's tail and presented to Amaterasu. The *Kojiki* says that when Prince Yamatotakeru-no-mikoto, prince of the 12th emperor Keiko, went on the expedition against the Kumaso tribe in Kyushu (little is known about the tribe except that they were antagonistic to the Imperial Court), they set fire to the grass surrounding the prince's army, and that the prince mowed the grass with the sword, thus saving himself and his men. Hence the name. It is said that the Sacred Mirror and the Grass-Mowing Sword had been lost in the course of events and were remade in later years, but that the Comma-Shaped Bead is original. These Three Regalia are even today the symbols of the Japanese Imperial Throne and are inherited on accession to the throne.

Jimmu, the first emperor of Japan, is said to be a great-grandson of Ninigi. Historical records show that in the second or third century an emperor called Sujin reigned over Japan, and he is supposed to have been the tenth emperor. We, however, have no trace of a state or states having

existed before Sujin's time. It therefore is very doubtful whether Sujin was the tenth emperor or not, and we might think that Sujin was in fact the first emperor. At any rate, Article 1 of the pre-war Japanese Constitution, which was proclaimed in 1889, ran: 'Japan is ruled over by the emperors of unbroken lineage.' (The present emperor is supposed to be the 125th.)

As I have stated in the above, before the end of World War II most Japanese believed that the emperor was the direct descendant of Amaterasu and Japan was safely guarded by gods. Even the state textbook of Japan's history intended for school children began with Amaterasu and Ninigi. The following historical events seemed to have strengthened the belief that Japan was a divine country.

For centuries the Mongolians had been leading a nomadic life on the northern steppes of China. Khubilai Kahn (reigned 1202-27), a grandson of Genghis Kahn, established a vast empire which included the greater part of Asia and part of Europe. This empire was composed of four states, viz, East Asia, Central Asia, West Asia and East Europe, and Khubilai named East Asia, his home state, Yuan (Gen). Among the Europeans who visited Yuan during that time was Marco Polo (c.1254-1324), a Venetian traveller, who mentioned Japan in his *Book of Marco Polo* as a Gold Country and stimulated Khubilai's curiosity about Japan. After conquering Kokuryo in Korea and moving his capital to Daito (Beijing), Khubilai sent a mission to Japan in 1268, demanding its subjugation to him. Hereupon Japanese warriors (samurais) prepared for war and reinforced the defence of the coast of Northern Kyushu. In 1274 the allied forces of Yuan and Kokuryo invaded both Tsushima Island and Iki Island and then attacked Northern Kyushu. It is said that the forces numbered about 30,000 and their ships about 900. Japanese warriors fought fiercely to repulse the invaders but, overwhelmed by their tactics and firearms, they had to withdraw, leaving

The role of the Emperor in Japan (K. SUGANUMA)

their enemies to land on the shore. The allied forces got back to their ships as a preliminary step, when a storm rose and sank many of their ships: thus they were compelled to return to their home country.

The next year Yuan sent another mission to Japan making the same demand, which was rejected again. In 1281 Yuan attacked Japan for the second time with an army of 140,000 strong in more than 4,000 ships. They even brought with them horses and cows as well as farming tools, since they intended to occupy Japan at that time. Yet, strong resistance made by Japanese samurais failed their landing on Kyushu; battles continued for more than two months, and again a terrible storm sent many of the invaders' ships to the bottom, putting their forces to rout.

Those two wars at once remind us of the fact that in 1588 the English fleet defeated the Invincible Armada of Spain with the aid of furious storms. Unlike the English, however, Japanese people were quite convinced that the two storms were caused by winds the gods sent to save Japan from emergencies and that in case of a national emergency gods would always rescue the country by sending divine winds ('kamikaze'). The term 'kamikaze' ('kami'=gods, 'kaze'=winds) thus came into being. True, some Japanese nationalists earnestly advocated this belief, but scientific-minded people scorned it as a mere product of self-deception. In order to heighten the morale of Japanese during World War II, however, Japanese leaders, both military and civil, endeavoured to inspire into the Japanese the belief that their fatherland was patronized by gods and that it would never be defeated. As the war was not going in Japan's favour, Japanese military authorities had to introduce the 'kamikaze' pilot as the substitute for the divine wind. An American dictionary defines 'kamikaze' as 'a suicide attack by a Japanese airplane pilot in World War II'. Young pilots plunged their airplanes into American warships never to return: they took the place of

'kamikaze' which did not come.

Some Japanese 'intelligentsia', who assumed very critical attitudes towards such irrational assertions, suffered serious persecution from the nationalists. What was done in the name of the emperor was beyond criticism, however absurd it might be. Especially in military circles superiors forced their subordinates to obey their commands without any objection, insisting that their orders should be regarded as those of the emperor. It was a taboo to discuss the national structure and the Imperial system. This fact thwarted the proper objective study of Japan's history.

Only those who know how the Japanese emperor came to assume divinity will be able to understand the significance of the role Emperor Showa played at the termination of the War. Up until then he had seldom made decisions in national policy and had entrusted the affairs of state to the Cabinet and the Privy Council, but for this once he made up his mind to direct the course Japan should take: it was the emperor himself that decided to accept the Potsdam ultimatum at the Imperial Conference. In the circumstances only the Imperial decision could bring the war to an end.

Emperor Showa took it upon himself to persuade the Japanese into accepting unconditional surrender, and his recorded speech was prepared to be broadcast by radio. Unfortunately when the speech was broadcast on August 15, 1945, its recording was very much distorted, and most Japanese could hardly catch the words of the speech. Some went so far as to believe that the emperor was saying Japan would never be defeated and that he expected each Japanese to stick to the war to the last. When it dawned upon the people that Japan had surrendered to the Allied Forces, they were thrown into great confusion. Some nationalists, especially some young military officers, cried out that Japanese should resist the enemies to the death, while most people did not know what to do and did nothing but cry

The role of the Emperor in Japan (K. SUGANUMA)

and weep bitterly.

It was in January, 1946, that Emperor Showa declared himself to be a mere human being and not a divinity. In 1947 the Japanese Constitution was rewritten, and the emperor became a mere symbol of Japan.

In the Allied Far East Tribunal Court which was set up after the War, Emperor Showa was not accused of being a war criminal. This, I understand, was owing to the fear of some Allied Nations' leaders that to accuse him of being a war-criminal would antagonize the Japanese people because of their deep-rooted reverence for the emperor.

Emperor Showa died on January 7, 1989, after a reign of sixty-three years, and in recent years controversies about the Imperial system have begun to be threshed out among some Japanese. But I am not sure what will become of the system in the future.

There seem to have been three influences upon the formation of Japanese mentality, viz. Shintoism (the Way of the Gods), Buddhism, and Confucianism. Generally speaking, Japanese people are somewhat irreligious though most of them proclaim themselves to be Buddhists: wedding ceremonies are usually performed at Shinto shrines, (recently young couples often incline to perform the ceremonies at Christian churches despite their being non-Christian), while funeral services are conducted with Buddhist rites very often. Indeed their religious attitudes do not seem to be all of a piece. Where Japanese people are concerned, however, their reverence for their forefathers, their patriotism, their solidarity, etc. have doubtlessly been founded upon the belief that Japanese are members of the same Family with the Emperor as its Patriarch.

This is not the place to discuss the influences of both Buddhism and Confucianism upon the formation of Japanese mentality. The world is changing very rapidly, and so is Japan, and the most radical change in

Japan, I think, is that of the sense of value. I cannot foresee what Japan will be like in the twenty-first century. However, the knowledge that Japanese history has revolved around the Imperial system will be of much use in understanding Japan and Japanese people.

July 15, 1995

本稿は平成7年6月、日本文化の研修のために札幌大学に来学した、アメリカ・インディアナ州の教員グループに対して行なった日本史の講義である。僅か60分で日本史の講義をせよ、というのはあまりにも無茶な注文であるが、あれこれと考えた末このような内容になった。もとより筆者は日本史の専門家ではなく、誤りの多いことを恐れる。なおまた、これが紀要に載せるべき性質のものではないことは好く承知しているところであるが、雑録として片隅に載せていただければと考え、敢えて提出するものである。

なお、英文に関しては、短期大学部のウィリアム・グリーン講師のご援助を得たことを記して、深くお礼を申し上げる次第である。