

3.

DIVINITY OF THE JAPANESE IMPERIAL FAMILY:

Defensive Actions Taken by the Imperial Clan after the Fall of Paekche in Korea and Eventual Degeneration into Symbolic Sovereign Status

According to Confucian theory, emperors rule through a mandate from heaven, but a mandate granted to a virtuous ruler could be withdrawn from an unvirtuous one, justifying changes in dynasty from time to time. In Japan, however, the imperial institution was preordained by the gods and this mythological mandate was supposedly granted to the imperial clan to rule Japan eternally.

Kojiki emphasizes the eternal sacredness and inviolability of the imperial family in a very mythical form, and Nihongi emphasizes the divine origin of the imperial family as history. The promotion of emperor to the rank of God was a sign of an identity crisis and an expression of the insecurity about the future of an imperial clan after the fall of Paekche. The emperor was no longer to be a traditional king, but was to be identified with the divine as a "God Incarnate," and hence no revolution was conceivable. The imperial throne was thus provided with divine right that was immutable and claim to the throne could be made only with the authority of descent. As a result, even when the imperial clan had to concede real power in the later period, the emperors could continue reigning over the country as politically neutral Divine Beings.

The dominant religion in Korea prior to the introduction of Buddhism and Confucianism was Shamanism. Shamanism seems to have been brought to Japan by those who migrated from Korea. Reischauer and Fairbank (1958: 473) note that "[m]embers of the priestly class who performed the various rites . . . probably represented the Japanese variant of the shamans of Korea and Northeast Asia." According to Tsunoda, et al.(1964: 21-22), "Shintō 神道 was not an indigenous religion . . . Shamanistic and animistic practices similar to those of Shinto have also been found throughout Northeast Asia,

especially in Korea, and we thus cannot say of Shintō that it is a purely Japanese faith. . . . The oldest center of Shintō worship was that of the Izumo Shrine on the Japan Sea coast, and thus close to the Korean peninsula, by way of which continental civilization had reached Japan.”¹

Allan G. Grapard (KEJ: 7. 126) states that: “The Kofun period (ca 300-710) was marked by heavy influences from the continent. It was a time of dramatic changes which led to the emergence of Japan as a nation. Future research may provide us with crucial information concerning the exact nature of the relationships between Japan and Korea, which seem to have had an impact on the development of Shintō practices.”

The records of Nihongi seem to suggest that the influences of Paekche rather than those of Silla helped form the main Shintō tradition at its beginning. Nihongi (NII: 77) describes the Minister Soga 蘇我卿 counselling the Paekche emissary [A.D. 555]: “Now the God who originally founded this country 原夫建邦神者 is the God who descended from Heaven [Paekche?] 自天降來 and established this state in the period when Heaven [Paekche?] and Earth [Yamato Wa?] became separated 天地割判之代, and when trees and herbs had speech. I have recently been informed that your country has ceased to worship him 不祀. But if you now repent your former errors, if you build a shrine 修理神宮 to God and perform sacrifice in honour of his divine spirit 奉祭神靈, your country will prosper.”²< 3. 2. 15 >

It was also Paekche that introduced Buddhism to Japan in A.D. 552, though it was very much suppressed in Japan until A.D. 587.³ Buddhism first

¹Allan G. Grapard (KEJ: 7. 125) notes that Shintō “slowly emerged at the dawn of Japanese history, crystallized as a religious system during the Nara 奈良 (710-794) and Heian 平安 (794-1185) periods, and subsequently was in a constant and dynamic interaction with the other religious and philosophical systems of Asia.”

²Samguk-sagi records that King Koi performed a sacrificial rite to Heaven, Earth, Mountain and River 祀天地山川 in A.D. 240. It also records that King Piryu himself performed the sacrificial offering 祀天地 王親割牲 in A.D. 314, and that King Keun Ch’ogo performed a sacrificial rite to Heavenly Deities and Earthly Deities 祭天地神祇 in A.D. 347.< 5. 6. 4 >

³Hall (1971: 42) notes that “[i]n the middle of the sixth century when the Yamato sovereign put to his advisors the question of whether to worship the Buddhist images received from Korea, he precipitated a major conflict among the great families of Japan. The division of opinion thrust the Soga family, a relatively recent and ambitious offshoot of the Yamato line who served as 厩-omi, against a conservative coalition of families of long service to the Yamato line, chief among whom were the 厩-muraji Mononobe (hereditary generals) and the Nakatomi 中臣 (Shintō-ritualists). The quarrel between these factions divided Yamato for several decades; but in 587, the

entered Paekche from China in A.D. 384, it was promoted strongly by Silla after the sixth century, and it became the national religion of the Koryeo dynasty. Confucianism, however, became the ruling national doctrine for the Choseon dynasty. Naturally, Shamanism has been very much suppressed and degraded in Korea since the introduction of Buddhism and Confucianism, although it apparently has survived in various disguised forms and even prospered among the lower classes. By contrast, in Japan Shamanism has been converted into a more sophisticated Shintoism with imperial patronage and has enjoyed prosperity equal to that of Buddhism and Confucianism.⁴ According to Reischauer and Fairbank (1958: 472), the Yamato imperial clan skillfully integrated this shaman cult into the official mythology of “the supremacy of the Yamato cult of the Sun Goddess 天照大御神 and the subordinate relationship of the cults and chieftains of the other *uji* to those of Yamato.”⁵

The first two books of *Nihongi* contain the myths that formed the basis of Shintō. The introduction of Buddhism caused the systematization of Shintō and elevated it to a coherent religious system. In Japan, not only have Buddhism and Shintō coexisted; they also have enjoyed a reciprocal relationship at all levels. Indeed, Amaterasu *Ōmikami* and Buddha were supposed to represent two aspects of one single reality (see KEJ: 7. 126). The imperial clan attempted to give divine status to the emperor through *Shintō*. *Ōbayashi* (1985) notes that “the royal genealogy of ancient Japan contains many cases of . . . incestuous marriages among the royal family . . . for the most part in the period after Emperor Nintoku 仁德 . . . This marriage custom is an expression of the prestige of sovereignty so high that no appropriate spouse equal in rank can be found outside the royal family . . . Not only the social distance between the royal persons and others but also ideology may have been factors in the royal incest practiced in ancient Japan . . .”

On the death of Buretsu 武烈 [A.D. 498-506], no successor could be found

Soga, who steadfastly championed the cause of the new religion, defeated the Mononobe in battle and assured the acceptance of Buddhism.”

⁴Varley (1974: 6) notes that “[i]n Shintō we can observe a primitive religion of the sort that elsewhere in the world has been absorbed by the universal faiths but that in remote and parochial Japan has been perpetuated into modern times.”

⁵“The religious beliefs and practices of *uji* times have also continued as one of the main religious streams of Japan. Nameless at first, these beliefs were subsequently called Shintō . . . to distinguish them from Buddhism . . . During the last century and a half, it was consciously used, through an emphasis on the early mythology connected with it, as an inspiration for national solidarity and fanatical patriotism”(Reischauer 1970: 15-16).

among his immediate family, and as a result a fifth-generation descendant of *Ōjin* was sought in Mikuni 三國 and was made the Emperor Keitai 繼體 [A.D. 507-531]. Sakamoto 坂本 (1984: 19) comments: “It would have been possible for one of the ministers who chose the emperor to have taken the position for himself, had he been so inclined, but none even considered doing so. This fact points out that even at this early date, it was firmly accepted as an article of faith among the powerful clans that no one but a descendant of the Sun Goddess could accede to the throne.” When Anko 安康 [A.D. 453-456] was assassinated by his nephew, and also when Sushun 崇峻 [A.D. 587-592] was killed by Yamato no Aya no Atahe Koma 東漢直駒 at the order of Soga no Umako 馬子, princes of imperial blood succeeded to the throne. Furthermore, a daughter of Kimmei 欽明 [A.D. 539-571] succeeded Sushun to become the first female emperor, Suiko 推古 [A.D. 592-628]. Hence Sakamoto (1984: 20) further comments that “Suiko’s accession clearly illustrates the concept that women of imperial blood as well as men could take the throne, provided they were in direct descent from the Sun Goddess.”

The divine quality of emperors was derived from the fiction of *Kojiki* and *Nihongi* that the sovereigns were the lineal descendants of the Sun Goddess. This genealogical relationship conferred upon the emperor divine legitimacy to rule. By making the emperors sacred and inviolable, as well as politically neutral, the imperial family could in theory keep its position protected against all possible insurrection. Indeed the systematic defensive actions undertaken by the imperial clan succeeded in planting the concept of the Heavenly Empire deep in the minds of the Japanese people. The position of emperor became sacred, and for politically ambitious warriors, the imperial throne turned out not to be worth the trouble of attaining, especially given that the usurper ran the risk of earning dishonour as a betrayer of the Manifest God (Akitsu-kami 現神). As Bito Masahide (KEJ: 2.102) notes, “however much the shogunate acted as the de facto government, the shogun remained the emperor’s subject; he could never usurp the throne.” Befu (1971: 30) also notes that “no matter who came into power and controlled the nation, his power remained brute force until and unless it was legitimated by the emperor. It is this indispensable role which in an important way perpetuated the emperor as a political institution for over a thousand years and kept his office from being annihilated on many occasions in Japanese history when it came precariously close to destruction. At the same time, efforts to win the emperor’s official backing have been the source of a good deal of political struggle in Japan, for the adversaries of the men who won it automatically became imperial enemies and illegitimate seekers of power.”

Varley (1974: 12) notes that “although there were a number of forceful sovereigns during the next few centuries, Japan’s emperors have in general been noteworthy for the fact that they have reigned but have not ruled.” In this way, the emperor remained outside the arena of political power struggles, which successfully stabilized the position of the Japanese emperor over a period of time that was perhaps well beyond the imagination of the authors of *Kojiki* and *Nihongi*.

The tendency of Japanese people to take the words and phrases in *Kojiki* and *Nihongi* as they stand and to interpret their meaning in the most nationalistic way has been promoted strongly by the so-called *Kokugaku* 國學 tradition. *Kogugaku* [National Learning] in Japan, which is generally regarded to have been established by Kamo no Mabuchi 加茂真淵 (1697-1769), completed by Motoori Norinaga 本居宣長 (1730-1801), and propagated by Hirata Atsutane 平田篤胤 (1776-1843) to serve nationalist ideology, was a study dedicated to clarifying events and personages of ancient times, depending solely on ancient sources such as *Kojiki*, *Nihongi* and *Man’yōshū* 萬葉集. *Kokugaku* was the ideological study of Japanese classics and antiquity. Kamo’s predilection for the world of *Man’yōshū* represents the Japanese people’s longing for spiritual origins and for a time of truth that was not contaminated by sinicized Buddhism or by the moralistic and speculative interpretations of classics espoused by the Zhu Xi 朱熹 [Chu Hsi] school of confucianism. Its central goal was to derive and define *Michi* 道 [the Way or Path], which represents the way of Amaterasu *Ōmikami* [the Sun Goddess] and the way of Sumera-mikoto 皇尊 [the Emperor] on the basis of various events of mythological and ancient ages. Motoori believed that the ancient Japanese acted correctly without moralizing. According to Tahara (1973), Motoori’s teaching was “to accept unconditionally the authority of the emperor derived from the gods in heaven without discussing its merits and demerits.”

Norinaga accepted the mythology of creation and history since the creation of the universe described in *Kiki* (*Kojiki* and *Nihongi*) as facts and embraced them unconditionally as truth. According to Tahara (1973), the *Kogugaku* scholars of the Tokugawa 徳川 period took the bakufu 幕府 establishment for granted as bestowed by the gods, and they “regarded cooperation with the establishment as loyalty to the emperor and realization of the divine way.” After all, the Minamoto 源 line of the Kamakura 鎌倉 Shogunate 幕府 (A.D. 1192-1333) could trace their ancestry to the imperial clan, the Ashikaga 足利 line of the Muromachi 室町 Shogunate (A.D. 1338- 1573) could trace their ancestry to Minamoto, and Tokugawa Ieyasu 徳川家康 of the Tokugawa

Shogunate (A.D. 1603-1867) could, however tenuously, also trace a link to Minamoto ancestors.⁶ That is, even the 700 years of warrior rule in Japan can be regarded as rule by warriors whose leaders were the offshoots of the imperial clan itself.⁷

Once the bakufu collapsed in the wake of the Meiji Restoration 明治維新, however, Kokugaku became a suitable ideology to serve the new nation with the emperor at its vertex, and consequently its ideological contents came to be absorbed into national educational policies and permeated the minds of the people at large. Koyasu Nobukuni (KEJ: 4.259) notes that: “These [Kokugaku] scholars believed that the activities of people in this world, directed toward realizing the divine will of the god of procreation, should be those of a subject’s obligatory duty to the emperor.” Many Japanese insist that the ideological effort to propound the Japanese spirit through Kokugaku studies ended with Japan’s defeat in World War II. It can not, however, escape casual observation that even today almost every segment of Japanese society is still feverishly concerned with the racial, national and genetic origins of *Nihonjin* 日本人, revealing the kind of identity crises Yamato Wa experienced upon the fall of Paekche in A.D. 663.

⁶In A.D. 814, Saga 嵯峨 (A.D. 809-823) created, as dynastic shedding, the surname Minamoto 源 (Gen) for 33 of his 50 children. The Minamoto family was commonly referred to as the Genji 源氏. In addition to the original Saga Genji, there were Minamoto lineages tracing their origins to Seiwa 清和 (A.D. 858-876), Uda 宇多 (A.D. 887-897), Murakami 村上 (A.D. 946-967), etc. Minamoto Yoritomo 源頼朝, who established the Kamakura shogunate, and Ashikaga Takauji 足利尊氏, who established the Muromachi shogunate, both could trace their descent from Seiwa Genji.

⁷The samurai 侍 emerged from the peasant class in the provinces in the early tenth century. The existence of an armed peasantry originated as a result of civil disorder and the need for self-defence in the rural areas. As early as A.D. 792, the Yamato court abandoned its policy of countrywide conscription of peasants and made district-level officials responsible for keeping peace in the provinces through the organization of militia. At first, samurai returned to farming whenever a military campaign was over. By the eleventh century, however, the warrior bands had developed into more permanent, fuedal-like entities. The samurai became the real ruling class of Japan by the late twelfth century (the beginning of the medieval age). The leadership of the samurai class, however, came to be assumed chiefly by men who were descended from the imperial family. This samurai class of peasant origin latter became the established leaders of government and other sectors of a modernizing Japan. See H. Paul Varley (KEJ 7: 7). One may say that, in the earlier stage, the Paekche people conquered Japan and set themselves up as a layer of overlords above the rice-growing Yayoi-Kofun period peasants, but in a later stage lost power to the samurai class of peasant origin.