

Japan's Imperial Institution Embedded Harmoniously in Modern Democracy

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Abstract: After the defeat of Japan in World War II, major changes took place in Japan. The constitutionality of the Emperor as an incarnation of god or *arahitogami* (living God) was abolished, but in reality the rituals associated with it were retained. Emperor Heisei is a tangible example, maintaining public confidence in mythology and spirituality yet open to change of modern democracy without leaving the traditional Japanese values. The existence of Imperial Institution provided harmonious relations among government and Imperial Household. Traditionally Shinto is substratum of Japan's culture, and Emperor as iconic symbol of Japanese culture and modern democracy. To search and explain more about these phenomena, this study used historical, social, and cultural approaches to help explain the harmonious roles of Japan's Emperor.

Keywords:- Japanese Emperor, Culture, Spiritual, Hirohito, Amaterasu Omikami.

I. INTRODUCTION

We cannot talk about Japan without technological advances, economic developments, hand in hand with the culture of people with traditional impressions. Japan as a developed country has a very rapid development. The modern and fast moving society often seemed to be not religious and far from the impression of being religious in life. A society that looks increasingly individualistic and pragmatic makes the Japanese man seem stiff and unconcerned. However, if we take a look deeper, what appears on the outside does not include all the facts. Japan one's religious belief is not governed by the State and is the right of the individual. Japanese Constitution Article 20 Chapter III stipulated clearly that every citizen is entitled the right freely to embrace a belief, provided that there is no compulsion for anyone to follow, or run such celebrations and ceremonies. Based on the circumstances, if Japanese society is said not to be religious, the answer is no. Japanese society is able to absorb the teachings of religion into everyday life, so that religion is not only an empty memorize, but has been rooted and pervasive in life. Such conclusion can arise because until now Japanese people still perform rituals associated with spiritual beliefs. One of the greatest and easiest examples to find is the ritual within the Japanese Imperial institution. The Japanese Empire is the longest and oldest form of monarchy that still survives today. Starting from the history of Yamato around the 4th century AD, the term Emperor is used. Starting from Yamato we can see the power of the Emperor legitimized on

the basis of his position as a spiritual leader of society who is still very dependent on agriculture (Woodard, 2014: 55).

Based on the records of Wei Zhi the Japanese leadership had been formed even before the Yamato era. The leader was a woman who was also a shaman. Her ability as a leader was legitimized through spiritual abilities. In carrying out her rituals, Queen Himiko uses mirrors, swords, and *magatama* as her most important means of ritual, which until these modern times these three objects can be found in imperial family rituals (Miller, 2014: 181-182).

After Queen Himiko, we could find other Queens who ruled the empire of Japan. This shows that in the early days of the monarchy in Japan, both men and women had equal standing. Woman is in a lineage of the Goddess Amaterasu Omikami and considered to have a spiritual charisma to occupy the throne. Some of the names that emerged as female Emperors were Emperor Kogyoku (642-645) and Emperor Shotoku (764-770) who in life had twice occupied the throne. Emperor Kogyoku succeeded her husband as Emperor after his death. Emperor Kogyoku was better known as a great shaman rather than political player like two names before her (Tsurumi, 1981: 43).

This fact is, empire is not much discussed by contemporary society. Most Japanese societies or learners have always focused on the role of the imperial Japanese institutions in politics and ideology during wartime and peacetime without looking deeper into imperial institutions of the spiritual aspects. Changes within the imperial institution, whether recognized or uncertain, will have an impact on society in general. Based on the situation, it felt important and interesting to discuss the imperial institution of Japan in particular the position of Emperor in this contemporary era.

II. RESEARCH QUESTION

In the Imperial Japanese institution, the construction and representation of traditional Japanese culture is clearly seen, which in this discussion focused on the belief system in society that has become a cultural tradition of Japan. There are two research questions to help solve the following research problems. First, how is the position of Emperor as the patron in the contemporary era and second, why traditional rituals associated with imperial institution are still preserved today, although in contemporary times the

Emperor is no longer has the same position as the Meiji Era. This research will focus on that two questions.

III. RESEARCH METHOD

This research used qualitative descriptive analysis method and content analysis approach in problem solving. Problem solving is done by conducting literature studies, by collecting, comparing, and analyzing the data or sources obtained. Sources of data used are books, national or international journals, and information that can be accessed via the Internet to solve research questions. This study used historical, social, and cultural approaches to help explain and solve research questions.

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

This study focused on the Emperor and the rituals associated with the Him, especially the emperor's bias as the patron of the contemporary period. Based on literature search, there has not been much research on this topic. Most is on the coronation and death of Emperor. This relates to the position of the sacred Emperor and represents the god/goddess that Japanese public trust. Here are the writings relating to these rituals.

The Japanese cosmology changes over time. Many cosmological understandings are then lost and abandoned as science progress. This also happened in Japan. The development of Japanese cosmology has undergone many changes in the long history process, but not all Japanese cosmological knowledge changed or disappeared. One of the most important cosmological beliefs and mythological beliefs in Japan is the *Tennō* or the Emperor of Japan. The Emperor of Japan is 'the biggest myth' which is still believed and preserved until now. According to Ohnuki (1991: 199-202) explained that the Emperor of Japan now has much different role compared with the role of Emperor in the Yamato Era.

At first, the Emperor was a spiritual figure who was then given political power. Ohnuki also mentioned that the Emperor was a direct descendant of the Sun Goddess *Amaterasu Omikami*, making it automatically have a specific position in the community. His position is specific because Japanese society is heavily dependent on success in agriculture. The success of the harvest is very dependent on the availability of enough sunlight, and not excessive rain. The Emperor's existence was considered important, as it represented the existence of the Sun Goddess, as well as the link between human and the Goddess. Initially, the Emperor was a figure believed to perform rituals that supported the success of the harvest. The legitimacy of an Emperor's power is seen by how successful his rituals are in producing abundant harvests, not by how large his territory is. Then, if the previous Emperor died, does the descendant be cut off? The answer is no. Ohnuki explained that there are rituals performed to continue the direct lineage of the Goddess of the Sun. The ritual was called *Onamesai*, which was carried out to pass on the spirit of the former Emperor to his successor.

One example of ritual that remains to be implemented is during the death of Emperor Taisho in 1926. The ceremony was performed with a large scale and loaded with magical and sacred events. The ritual and ceremonial replacement of the Emperor began with the preparation of rice planting for a whole year. The paddy and rice will be used in the interest of the rituals associated with the Emperor and the Imperial institution. This was natural because there was a strong bond between the Emperor and the farming culture that existed in Japanese society. This stage showed how Japanese society and imperial household institutions seek to maintain the essence of ritual. In this ceremony, thousands of people participated as witnesses. Japan was busy for a whole year to complete the ritual transfer of power from Emperor Taisho to the new Emperor Hirohito and began the year of Showa (1926). Wilson (2011: 290) mentioned that there are many rituals performed, scattered in Tokyo, Kyoto and Ise temples. Among all rituals, there are two great rituals (*Gotaiten*) that drew most attention of the public, *Daijosai* and *Sokui no rei*.

A. *Daijosai* or *Onamesai* Rituals

Daijosai or *Onamesai* rituals are ceremony related to the coronation of an Emperor in Japan. This stage is the first stage before the new Emperor can really bear the title *Tennō* or Emperor. This ceremony is more widely known as *Daijosai*. This first ritual begins with the "transfer" of the old Emperor's soul to the new, as an unbroken form of the descent of the Sun Goddess *Amaterasu*. Ohnuki, (1991: 202-203) mentioned that since the early time of monarch, this *Onamesai* ritual is very closed and forbidden for outsiders but the existence of this ritual can be traced through *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki*. The continuity of this ritual is considered very important in early civilization because the Emperor is the messenger who brought the first seed of rice to Earth and introduced it to humans. This rice seed itself, according to Ohnuki could also be interpreted as the seed (fetus) of man. This ritual represented the cosmic cycle, which continues to recur; death and birth, long replaced with something new, but has an unchanging essence.

The position of Emperor as living God or *Arahitogami* requires certain rituals to legitimate the throne. The fact that as an Emperor, man would die one day is absolute but his soul as descendant of the sun goddess would continue to live and move on to his successor. Specifically the ritual called *Onamesai* was carried out to pass on the spirit of the former Emperor to successor Emperor. In this ritual, the new Emperor was left alone in a space in the palace to connect the bond between him, the ancestors and the gods. After undergoing this ritual, then an Emperor can hold the title of *Tennō* as it has regained the spirit of the Sun Goddess. The essence of this ritual is to declare that even as a human, Emperor may die but his soul will not experience death and maintain the continuity of the lineal line of the Sun Goddess intact steadily to the descendants of Emperor's successor. Through this ritual, the position of the Emperor as *arahitogami* is crystallized.

The *Onamesai* ceremony is another important ceremony held in connection with the coronation of new Emperor. This ritual relates to rice as the main means. Two farm fields were chosen to plant rice to be consecrated for ceremonial means. These two farm fields are named *Suki-den* and *Yuki-den* which are located around Kyoto from East and West. It symbolizes the Empire as center of Japan and surrounded by people from East and West. This ritual takes place over a considerable period of time, from rice cultivation to harvest. In this ritual the emperor, who is said to be "empty-minded", is helped to dig his position as *arahitogami*. At the time near harvest time there will be two buildings built located in *Suki-den* and *Yuki-den*. Each building looks identical but distinction is made to differentiate men's and women's buildings. It is to honor gods and goddesses. At the time of harvest, the newly crowned Emperor will start from *Yuki-den*. The emperor walked with his legs, symbolizing the Emperor walking between heaven and earth, where his feet did not really touch the ground beneath him or the air above him (Cohen, 2012: 434).

These rituals continue to be held with a rousing, not even rare attention from people outside Japan, especially in the Meiji, Taisho, and Showa era. However, after Japan lost to Allied forces in 1945, a new constitution was enacted in Japan. The new constitution started in 1947 and forced Japanese Empire to manage ceremonies into the Imperial Household Affairs alone, no longer as a state affair, nor particular religion or temple. Articles 20 and 89 of the new constitution clearly stipulated the separation between state and religion. In reality, changes have to be made, but does not diminish the essence of the rituals that the imperial institution of Japan should do (Ohnuki 1991: 206).

B. *Sokui no rei* Ritual

Another ritual is *Sokui no rei*, a submission ritual of the throne. This ritual begins by giving the "offering" (*hohei*) to the gods followed by reading the Imperial message and reading the declaration on the replacement of old Emperor. The ceremony is performed in the same order from Meiji, Taisho, Showa until now in the Imperial Palace. There are two main places for this ceremony to take place: *shishinden* and *shunkonden*. *Sokui no rei* begins in the morning in *shunkonden* with ceremonies before the mirror, followed by in front of the sacred sword and also *magatama*. Before noon, the ceremony took place in *shishinden*. In this place, the Emperor has been officially crowned and delivered his promise to safeguard tradition and protect his people, where the Emperor at that time still had political and military power. *Sokui no rei* ritual is then declared complete and done with the *hosoi no gi* or thanks ritual, which is done by the new Emperor by praying on the altar in the *shunkonden*, the Emperor then bowed and entered the altar to worship the gods until that day ended accompanied by music, and the sacred dance of *kagurauta* (Mayer, 1991: 40-44).

C. *Senso* Rituals

Mayer (1991: 37-38) stated that there was another great ritual in the coronation ceremony of the Emperor, in addition to *Daijosai* and *Sokurei*, named the *Senso* ritual. In this ritual there are many ceremonies and prayers to the ancestral spirits by the new Emperor, at this point Tenno's call was first used by the new ruler. This ritual lasted a full day and at the turn of the day a new year's name was announced for the Emperor. The implementation of *Senso* ritual was not directly conducted. At the time of the Emperor Meiji's death, the *Senso* ceremony took place 14 days after the announcement of death, while Taisho Emperor held *Senso* ceremony 17 minutes after the death of previous Emperor was announced and Showa Emperor performed *Senso* in 110 minutes after the announcement of death. We may see the difference in the time interval that occurred at this ceremony in three different timeline. This was, according to Mayer, influenced by the western cultural where western believe the King or Emperor never dies, so the throne should not be empty for long and the throne to the crown prince should be done in time as quickly as possible (Mayer, 1991: 39). In addition, the Meiji Constitution in Article 4 stated that the crown prince should immediately replace the previous Emperor who had died by starting a *sokui no rei* ceremony, which of course was followed also by other rituals (Ohnuki 1991: 206).

The coronation of new Emperor shall be conducted at once and overlapped previous Emperor's funeral ritual. The burial ceremony is not much because basically the Emperor had died and his funeral was a personal thing for the Imperial family. Nevertheless, there was an explanation that the funeral ceremony is usually performed adjacent to the coronation ceremony of the new Emperor. At the time Emperor Meiji passed away, the funeral ceremony was performed 45 days after the day of his death. Before the sessions of rituals performed, the Emperor's body remained in the same manner when the Emperor was alive, as the emperor supplied food three times a day to the death ritual. The death ceremony (*renso*) was done in the afternoon. In the morning, the Emperor made his last honor and the ancient Emperor's spirit resided in the ancestral family temple (*koreiden*), while the corpse with the coffin was taken to a cemetery (*sojoden*) away from the city. When Emperor Taisho died, the same pattern was applied (Mayer 1989: 3-4).

V. DISCUSSION

A. *Rituals and Modernization*

In the previous section it has been explained that new Emperor shall pass through many rituals to be called as an Emperor. The essence of these rituals is to establish position as *arahitogami* and this position is closely related to Shinto's belief or Shinto State, the one accused by American as emerging root of the ultra-nationalist ideology in Japan. It can be said that in the Meiji era, Emperor and Empire began are used as political tool. Antoni, (2016: 214) stated that Japan was a very good country in managing its mythological beliefs to develop its politics. Since Meiji Restoration, Japan

has undergone modernization, thus influencing various forms of ritual that already existed. Shinto as a belief of its existence is increasingly confirmed, all its practices adapted to pragmatic and modern society. This then begins to make existing beliefs exploited for political purposes. This situation resulted in the destruction of the initial image of Japanese spiritual beliefs. The role of Japan in World War I and Pacific War under the ideology of Shinto State had made this ideology labeled as radical ultra-nationalist ideology. In fact, myths and beliefs are merely tool used by nationalist and military political actors to form a nationalist image in society.

The emperor is used as a center and linked to various events related to war and territorial expansion, which made Emperor as spotlight of the world. In the Meiji Constitution, it is stated that the heir to the throne must be from the lineage of the male Emperor. This probably was not a problem at that time because the emperor was still allowed to have a concubine who could give boy offspring to them. As the incoming and widespread western insights, the practice of polygamy was subsequently eliminated from the Empire starting from the Taisho era (Shillony, 2006: 6-7). The modernization and influx of western knowledge and ideology did not subsequently diminish traditional Japanese beliefs. This modernizing influence precisely brought Japan to a new stage of modernization imitating Western modernization patterns. In a brief explanation of literature review it can be seen that the existence of Japanese Emperor is closely related to ritual and spiritual nuances. Its emergence during the early monarchy was certainly strongly influenced by the public's belief in things that were magical-oriented. As time went on, with Japan's long history, Japan's Emperor also changed his role and position in society.

The greatest change occurred when Japan lost the war against the Allied forces in 1945. The existence of the Emperor of Japan was threatened because he was considered as actor who drove the war, which made the Emperor in disadvantaged position and very likely to be blamed. General McArthur realized that, if the Emperor was forced to be abdicated or be annihilated, the unruly state of society would become increasingly unfavorable. It is not a favorable situation either by the American or Japan. America still desperately needed the Emperor's existence, although they recognized that the Emperor is not the person who held military or political authority (Herbert, P. Bix, 2005: 544). The dismissal of the post-war Emperor's posture ultimately left only the emperor's role as a spiritual symbol. This was conducted to avoid chaos in the society due to the loss of leadership in a sudden time. The circumstance certainly provided a shock to the Imperial Japanese institution, nevertheless the crisis has passed and this institution can survive to this day.

B. Emperor and the Contemporary Era

Japan lost in World War II and the Shinto State ideology was strictly forbidden to flourish as it was considered the root of ultra nationalist ideology. The situation then affected Emperor's position as he was forced to recognize his existence as a human and no longer a god

by the Americans. The sense of trauma and separation of religion and politics produced a society that was not familiar with a particular religion ideology in this contemporary period. Yet the possibility of separating Shinto and Emperor is almost impossible. Emperor Heisei to this day is still a tangible example, maintaining public confidence in mythology. Emperor Heisei was in a very safe and advanced period. Unlike his predecessors who lived during the Japanese period full off war and crisis. After being crowned on November 12, 1990, no tragic incident happened to Japan, such as war, riot and others (Surajaya, 2018: 48). The Japanese have lived peacefully and even well.

The Emperor, as a cultural icon, survives until this contemporary period. His existence provided a bias on the state of Japanese society that does not seem to notice the spiritual life. The loss of religion-state has left the Empire as the only real evidence that Japan was once a state based on a spiritual ideology. Unlike the Japanese situation in the Taisho or Showa era, which clearly and firmly stands on the pro-Japanese constitution and pro spiritual ideology used as a political tool, Emperor Heisei live in a different time. Surajaya (2018: 49-50) stated that, in Heisei era, the Emperor is like an idol. Emperor Heisei brought a wind of change to the Imperial Japanese institution by becoming more human and close to the public at large. One of things attracted attention was when Emperor Heisei decided to marry the girl he really loved and broke the old tradition of matchmaking or political marriage. This girl is also a girl of ordinary people and not from nobility family. Due to his actions, Emperor Heisei is considered as a symbol of Japanese cultural identity that is open to change and modernization, without leaving the traditional Japanese values.

The real evidence that Japanese people idolized Emperor was when Emperor Heisei decided to announce his resignation as Emperor due to health reasons. This reason was very human to be expressed and has risen pros and cons in society. In August 2014, Emperor through the Imperial Household institution announced his intention to resign with several reasons that the Emperor conveyed in his press statement. First, the Emperor emphasized that the Emperor is a symbol of the state as well as a unifying symbol of Japanese people without giving too much comment on the sustainability of the Imperial Japanese institution in the future. Second, Emperor Akihito stated that the most important task of an Emperor is to pray and to seek peace and happiness for all the people of Japan, which this work is expected to continue to be carried out by his successor as Emperor. Third, Emperor Akihito expressed his reasons for resignation and the fourth, Akihito also alluded throne ceremony and ascended the throne of the next Emperor is expected not to burden the state and society (Okuyama, 2017: 2)

Shimazono (2005: 1079) said that Shinto State still survived after the war ended. This was because it was difficult to separate the Emperor from Shinto and his practice. The imperial institution that survived to this day is a proof that Emperor has important role in the unity of the

Japanese nation. The Emperor was not only a symbol, but also a Japanese identity itself. Shimazono further said that the attitude of antipathy towards the term Shinto State is caused by the uncertain meaning of the term. One thing that needs to be underlined is the difference between State in wartime and contemporary period, not to mention politic in the religion ideology. The unequal separation between these two elements certainly has a great impact.

The abolition of the Imperial function in Japanese society, according to Surajaya, also proves that Japan is still a 'Shinto state' until now, in a sense, Shinto is not in the meaning of state and political ideology but in the context of social and cultural ideology that survives in Japanese society (Surajaya, 2018: 49-50). Although Japanese society seems indifferent to the spiritual life but by recognizing the existence of Emperor the community also recognize the fact. The difference is that most of these rituals are then performed in private and done only within the territory of the Imperial institution. This gave rise to the position of the Emperor as a patron, while his coronation ceremony as a manifestation of the gods remained, but was no longer widely disseminated to society.

Emperor Heisei had a different self-image than emperors before him. Emperor Heisei felt more human and close to the community. Unlike his father, Emperor Hirohito, who is very synonymous with the image of a rigid and obedient war on regulation, Emperor Akihito enhance the image of the Imperial institution in the eyes of society.

The existence of Emperor of Japan in this contemporary period is an important part for society. Through this research we also see how the Emperor's existence was accepted by society, which indirectly also showed the attitude of society to Emperor and Imperial institutions including rituals in it.

VI. CONCLUSION

The Emperor's existence in contemporary Japanese period is considered harmoniously. Emperor is considered as person and also combined with fact that he remains as important symbol for the sustainability of Japanese life. Emperor Heisei as the first Emperor who lived and witnessed Japan in contemporary period is a clear evidence that the position of Emperor in contemporary Japan is still steady, despite its bias and distortion historically. All rituals performed by his predecessors showed that the Imperial institution retains the traditional values. Admitted or not, Emperor's presence showed the side of Japanese spirituality.

The Emperor's existence provided a balance in the life of modern Japanese society. Traditional and spiritual values live and awaken along with the aging Empire of Japan. As one of the oldest imperial institution in the world, the Japanese Empire proves that modern and traditional life can run side by side. Spiritual values can live and be preserved in society without becoming a frightening specter attached to a perverted doctrine. Japanese Emperor does not change his position as an important key to the identity of the state,

whether as iconic symbol of Japanese culture and dynamic modern democracy of Japanese society.

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