The substantive purpose of this article is to present a preliminary interpretation of the Japanese imperial system in historical perspective. This I do with a focus on the cultural meanings assigned to the emperor and their changes over time. Because the major characterization of the emperor during most of history has been the officiant in the rice harvest rituals, the first section starts with the imperial harvest ritual, *shamesai*, the last of the three accession rituals performed when a new emperor is enthroned. I then discuss the *Kojiki* and the *Nihonshoki*--the two oldest myth-histories--to examine the structure of meaning underlying the Japanese imperial system in a broad context of the cosmology and polity of ancient Japan. At that time, I argue, the emperor was a shaman-cum-political leader whose ability to ensure a bountiful crop of rice was crucial for his political legitimacy. Subsequent periods witnessed an almost complete erosion of the political, economic, and symbolic bases of the imperial system brought about by various military governments.

In the second section, I examine the notion of *kami* (deity) in Japanese religions, which is radically different from the concept of God in Judeo-Christian tradition. *Kami* is crucial for understanding the imperial system and its historical transformations, as well as the extended resilience of the imperial system which survived in the face of changing meanings and without any apparent power.

The time frame is from the beginning of the imperial system to the present; it is a symbolic *longue durée* of the system. The risky decision to consider the entire history of Japan and make sweeping generalizations was made because the question I have chosen--how and why the imperial system has undergone extensive changes and still persists today--cannot be adequately dealt with by focusing on a narrow dimension of the imperial system in a given historical period. This article is not a comprehensive work on the Japanese imperial system per se, for which there is a plethora of primary sources as well as scholarly interpretations in Japanese and in other languages. Nor is it a theoretical work on religion or kingship, for which additional cross-cultural as well as theoretical studies are necessary. I use the terms Japan and Japanese loosely throughout; neither Japan as a nation nor the Japanese as a well-bounded social group has existed throughout history.

**HISTORY OF THE IMPERIAL SYSTEM**

*The Emperor as Shaman in Early History*

Wet-rice agriculture was introduced to Japan around B.C. 350, likely from southern China, and spread northeastward from northern Kyūshū in three successive waves. Almost six centuries elapsed after the introduction of rice agriculture and before the establishment of the Yamato state. The imperial system
founded by the Yamato state derives from the political-religious leadership established on the basis of rice agriculture during the preceding centuries. These early agrarian leaders, like the early emperors, were magico-religious leaders; i.e., shamans-cum-political leaders, whose political power rested upon an ability to solicit supernatural powers to ensure good crops. Thus, the annual harvest ritual was in fact a ritual to legitimate a local political leader, ensure the leader's rebirth and rejuvenate his power (Murakami 1977:4-6). For this reason many scholars (e.g., Akasaka 1988; Hora 1979, 1984; M. Inoue 1984; Miyata 1988:193-94, 1989; Murakami 1977, 1986; Okada 1970; Yamaori 1978; Yanagita 1982) consider the emperor first and foremost as "the officiant in rituals for the rice soul (inadama no shusaisha)," who ensures the blessing of the deities for the new rice crop on behalf of the people. These scholars' emphasis on the religious-ritual nature of the Japanese kingship, held even by Marxist scholars, de-emphasizes the exclusively political nature of the Japanese kingship.

The religious cum political cum economic nature of these agrarian rituals of early leaders, including the emperors, is clearly expressed in the concept matsurigoto, explicated by Orikuchi (1975a:160-61; 1975b:175-77; 1983:275-77), which was the conceptual basis of the political system at the time, called ritsuryō-sei. Advancing the interpretation by Mitsuya Shigematsu and Andō Seiji, Orikuchi proposes that the early use of the term matsuri (which in contemporary Japanese means festivals or ceremonies) means osukuni no matsurigoto. Written in three characters representing to eat, country, and polity, it denotes the country where food for deities is made (see also Ebersole 1989; Kitagawa 1987).

Although other rituals were added in later periods, especially at the time of the so-called Meiji restoration of the imperial system, the core imperial rituals officiated by the emperor are all related to rice harvesting. The annual harvest ritual of niinamesai becomes the ōnamesai at the time of the accession of a new emperor and is held as the last of three accession rituals, following the senso (including kenji togyo) and the accession ritual (sokui no rei), discussed later (for overviews of imperial rituals, see Nihiname Kenkyūkai 1955; Sakurai 1988; Tanaka 1988; Ueda 1988; Yamamoto, Satō et al. 1988:224-231; Yokota 1988).

Ōnamesai

The imperial harvest ritual, modeled after the folk harvest ritual at the time, gradually developed over time with its earliest record dated to the reign of Seinei (480-484) (Miura 1988:143). Only after the imperial system became established did the Sun Goddess (Amaterasu) become the deity addressed in the ritual (saishin). Earlier, various deities of production and reproduction addressed in the ritual included Takami Musubi and Miketsu Kami (Matsumae 1977:97, 105-106); Musubi no Kami (Murakami 1977:19).

The preparation for the ōnamesai starts in the spring (February-April) (Kōshitsu Bunka Kenkyūkai 1988) when the location of two fields, yuki and suki, is chosen by divination. Rice offered during the ōnamesai is grown in these fields with utmost care to prevent contamination by impurities. Situated toward the southeast and the northwest of Kyoto, respectively, these fields symbolize the entire nation. There were purification rituals that the emperor and the Japanese people performed in preparation for the November ceremony. The entire series of the ōnamesai in November lasted four days during the Heian Period and consisted of
eleven segments (Hida 1988:214; Kurabayashi 1988:37). Although the duration and details of the ritual have undergone many changes, they basically consist of the following elements: the rejuvenation of the soul; offering of the new crop of rice by the new emperor to the deity; commensality between the emperor and the deity; and commensality among the humans, that is, a feast with the emperor as the host (Orikuchi 1975b:239; Yoshino 1986:13–20).

The most difficult ritual for interpretation is the mitamashizume (the rejuvenation of the soul), which takes place the night before the public ceremony and continues until dawn. It is a strictly private ritual during which the emperor lies in the sacred bed (ohusuma) placed on the sacred seat (madoko). Meanwhile, a court lady, sometimes two of them (Miyata in Amino, Ueno and Miyata 1988:52), perform a ritual to receive and renew the emperor’s soul, which departs from his body. Since the mitamashizume is a secret ritual, there is little information about what took place during the ritual in the past. Even today some refrain from discussing it openly.

There are three types of interpretation. First, the ritual rejuvenates the emperor’s soul, enabling him to perform the ōnamesai the next day at the height of spiritual power (Murakami 1977:15–16). Second, the presence of a court lady leads to an interpretation that the emperor engages in sexual intercourse with her. A third interpretation pertains to the ōnamesai held at the time of the previous emperor’s death, when, according to some scholars, the deceased emperor’s corpse is placed on the sacred seat and his soul enters the new emperor’s body during the mitamashizume.

To understand the mitamashizume, the notion of soul in ancient Japan is essential. According to Orikuchi (1975b:189–90), the Japanese believed that the soul of a person or an object waxed in the winter and waned in the spring. It is easily detached from the body. For the person to continue to live, another soul must be attached to the body (tamafuri) or, as conceptualized later in history, the soul must be recaptured (tamashizume). The mitamashizume thus first of all rejuvenates the emperor’s soul which might have waned or have been ready to leave his body.

The sexual act theory is not incompatible with the soul rejuvenation theory if we take into account that in ancient Japan production and reproduction were seen as identical processes and both were conceptualized in terms of a soul. The term musubi referred to the act of making a knot (musubi) with a string, a twig, or a piece of grass, in order to encapsulate a soul in a knot, as described in the Manyōshū and other literature of the time. During the mitamashizume, a cotton knot is tied as a ritual act of capturing the emperor’s soul which is ready to depart his body (Matsumae 1977:96–97). But the term musubi also meant reproduction and production: musu meant reproduction and bi (=hi) meant production or growth by the sun (Ebersole 1989:42, 56; Matsumae 1977:96–97). The interpretation that the emperor sleeps with the court lady-cum-sacred lady simply as a sexual act grossly misrepresents the notion in ancient Japan when sexual intercourse was conterminous with soul rejuvenation, which in turn was the necessary condition for agricultural reproduction.

The third theory, originally advanced by Orikuchi (1975b:194), considers the Japanese emperor to be singularly characterized by the possession of what Orikuchi calls the imperial soul. According to him, the ōnamesai ritually enables the imperial soul departing from the previous emperor’s body to enter the new
emperor’s body, thereby assuring the soul’s lineal transmission, which is crucial to the Japanese imperial system. He is alleged to have remarked that a new emperor would bite into the corpse of the previous emperor in order for the latter’s soul to enter him (Miyata personal communication). Orikuchi’s interpretation raises an important issue about divine kingship (see Feeley-Harnik 1985) by suggesting the transcendence of the individual emperor’s biological humanity to guarantee the continuity of the imperial system. Similar interpretations have been advanced by Ebersole (1989) and Yamaori (1990a, 1990b).

Following the private ritual, the emperor offers various foods to the deity (the shinsen or kyōsen). The most important offerings are products of the new rice crop grown in the two fields: cooked rice, gruel, white sake (shiroki) and black sake (made from sake colored with plant ashes or, later in history, black sesame). Other food offerings include cooked, newly harvested, Italian millet (awa), fresh fish, dried fish, fruits, soup, and stew (oatsumono) (Kōshitsu Bunka Kenkyūkai 1988:104–05; Murakami 1977:18). These are offered during the ritual, which lasts more than two hours, and are then consumed together by the deity and the emperor (naorai). The ōnamesai concludes with an elaborate banquet in which the emperor and the guests feast together (utage). At the time of the ōnamesai for the Showa Emperor, the feast lasted for two days.

On one level, the meaning of ōnamesai may be seen as a generalized gift exchange of cosmic scale, whereby a new crop of rice is offered to the deities in return for the original seeds they gave to the first emperor. The mode of exchange takes the form of commensality between deities and humans, including the emperor. Given the symbolic meaning of rice as soul-cum-deity, this is not a gift exchange in any ordinary sense of the term, but is an exchange of one’s own self. On another level, with the symbolic equation of agricultural production and human reproduction, it enacts the cosmic cycle of production and reproduction, facilitated by the flow of rice and (at least symbolically) semen.

From the emperor’s perspective, the ōnamesai is a vital personal and political rite of passage which ensures the renewal of his soul, his office, and, if we follow Orikuchi, Ebersole, and Yamaori, the imperial system.

The Ōnamesai and the Early Writings

Unlike the Malinowskian claim that myths provide a charter for action, and the performance of rituals, Saigō (1984) and others argue that the two earliest writings of Japan—the Kojiki, dated 712 A.D., and the Nihonshoki, dated 725 A.D.—represent an attempt to validate the existing harvest rituals at the court ex post facto. Since the crucial part of the ritual is private, scholars have extensively relied upon these writings to decipher the meaning of the imperial ritual. A systematic comparison is, however, difficult since these oral myth–histories were put in writing over a long time and contain many different elements. Although they were compiled at the order from Tenmu (r.672–686), they were not special sets of myths created for this purpose alone; instead, they were selected (cf. Vansina 1985:190–92) from existing myths which share basic cosmological schemes such as the theme of "the stranger deity" (marebito) who reside outside one's settlement and, if well-disposed, brings gifts, such as rice seeds, to humans (see Ohnuki-Tierney 1987).
Two myth episodes seem to parallel the imperial harvest ritual. In the episode 
popularly referred to as "the heavenly cave" (ameno iwaya), the Sun Goddess, 
Amaterasu Ōmikami, isolates herself in a building or cave because her younger 
brother has offended her with his defiling behavior. Myriad deities gather noisily 
in front of the cave, laughing and engaging in merry making. A shamaness-deity, 
Ameno Uzume no Mikoto, dances semi-nude in front of the cave, causing 
uproarious laughter. The deities hang a mirror from a branch in front of the 
building and tell Amaterasu that there is a deity superior to her in front of the 
building. Curious, she comes out and mistakes her own image in the mirror for the 
superior deity. With her emergence from seclusion, the universe is again bright 
with the sun.

This episode is often interpreted as a symbolic enactment of the death and 
subsequent rebirth of the Sun Goddess (Saigō 1984:82-87; Orikuchi 1975b:198), 
which in turn is seen to correspond to what happens to the emperor's soul during 
the mitamashizume. Like Amaterasu in the myth, the emperor in the ritual goes 
into seclusion while his soul, detached and ready to depart from his body, returns 
and is rejuvenated. Likewise, the behavior of the court lady during the 
mitamashizume is seen to parallel the dancing by Ameno Uzume no Mikoto in 
front of the building where Amaterasu is secluded (Matsumae 1977:119; Murakami 

The second episode seen to correspond with the imperial harvest ritual is the 
tenson kōrin. In this well-known episode, the Sun Goddess sends her grandson 
(Ninigi no Mikoto) to earth to govern it. He is described as being wrapped in the 
madoko ohusuma, the same term used for the bedding in which the emperor is 
wrapped during the mitamashizume.5 In this ritual, the emperor then re-enacts his 
descent from heaven as the grandson of the Sun Goddess.

Not only are there parallels between the ōnamesai and the episodes in these 
myth—histories, the myth—histories are replete with references to rice as deities. 
Thus, the soul of rice grain (ina dama or ina—damashii) is clearly identified as a 
deity (kami), called Ukano Kami. There are various versions of the origin of this 
deity who, in one version, in the Kojiki, is an offspring of Susano-o, the brother 
of the Sun Goddess and a notorious enfant terrible, and, in another in the 
Nihonshoki, is born when Izanami and Izanagi, the creators of the Japanese 
universe, fainted from starvation immediately after the creation of Ōyasu no Kuni 
(Sakamoto et al. 1967:90; see also Itoh 1979:162–63; Ōbayashi 1973:8.)

Most important, when the Sun Goddess sent her grandson to earth, she gave him 
the original rice grains which the Sun Goddess had grown in two fields in Heaven 
(Takamagahara) from the seeds of the five types of grains (gokoku) which she had 
received from Ukemochi no Kami, the deity in charge of food (Kurano and 
Takeda 1958; Murakami 1977:13). Thanks to the original seeds given to him by 
Amaterasu, the grandson transforms a wilderness into a country with heavy ears 
of rice stalks (mizuho) and abundant grains of the five types (gokoku).

Unlike other creation myths of the universe, the Japanese version is not about 
the creation of the universe but about the transformation of wilderness (ashihara 
no nakatsu no kuni) into a cultivated land with abundant rice. This came at the 
command of (according to the Kojiki) the Sun Goddess whose descendants, as 
emperors, rule the country by officiating at the rice harvest rituals (Saigō 1984:15— 
29; Kawasoe 1980:86). The creation of the myth was especially important, since
rice agriculture was introduced from the continent, yet was adopted as the defining feature of Japanese culture. Note that the deities identified as *kokurei* (the soul of grains, not exclusively rice) are all female. Yanagita called attention to a parallel between the gender of grain deities and a ritual at the parturition hut. First recorded during the tenth century and observed today in some parts of Japan, during the ritual rice grains are scattered in the parturition hut. This led Yanagita to conclude that the birth of grains and the birth of humans were once thought to be identical (see Yanagita 1981, 1982; Itoh 1979, 1988), which again suggests the equation of production with reproduction.

*The Imperial System in Subsequent History*

Having reached its zenith during the eighth century, the imperial system disintegrated soon thereafter, never to regain its former power. During the Medieval (1185-1603) and Tokugawa (1603-1868) periods the emperors often could not hold the imperial rituals, even the most important *ōnamesai*, for financial and political reasons. Between 1466 and 1687, that is, during the reign of nine emperors, no *ōnamesai* was held, and at other times held on a reduced scale (Hashimoto 1988).

Fundamental changes in the imperial system took place with the Meiji restoration of the imperial system. What is often seen today as the essential character of the Japanese imperial system is a result of the Meiji "inventions" in the sense historians emphasize today (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Lowenthal 1985). Paradoxically, when Western monarchies were inventing their own traditions, the Meiji leaders modeled their monarchy after them, especially the British, while referring to their effort as the "restoration of the imperial system of the Ancient period" (*kodai ōsei fukko*). What actually took place was the establishment of an imperial system that differed radically from the Ancient system in at least three significant ways. This transformation was effectively carried out through the promulgation in 1889 of the *Kōshitsu Tenpan* (Manual of the Imperial Household) and the *Dai Nihon Teikoku Kenpō* (Constitution of Imperial Japan).

First, Article 3 of Chapter 1 of the new constitution issued in 1889 declared that the emperor was sacred and may not be intruded upon (*okasu bekarazu*). The emperor was defined as *arahitogami* (Manifest Deity) (Gluck 1985:41, 142-143, 219-220), or Visible Deity (Harootunian 1988). Although the term and concept of Manifest Deity appeared during the Ancient period when the imperial system was at its zenith (Kitagawa 1990: 138), the notion at the time was still a Japanese sense of a *kami* (discussed below). The Manifest Deity of the Meiji, however, was altogether different and much closer to "Almighty God" in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The transformation of the meaning of the emperor was the way the Meiji leaders fashioned their own imperial system after the Western monarchy model.

Early Japanese emperors were essentially shamans; human beings endowed with extraordinary power to communicate with deities, but not themselves deities. Their religious and spiritual authority rested on power that had to be periodically rejuvenated through the imperial rituals. The emperor therefore was divine only in a conditional sense. With the Meiji reformulation, the emperor became, at least nominally, the Manifest Deity, a *bona fide deity*.4
Second, the Meiji constitution assigned the emperor military power. Article 11 of Chapter 1 designates the emperor as commander-in-chief (daigensui) of the army and the navy, which were referred to as the imperial force (kōgun). The emperor appeared in portraits in military uniform, decorated with chevrons for his military rank, army medals of stars, navy medals of cherry blossoms, and the paulownia crest symbolizing the imperial court. His military-cum-political power ceased to be a corollary of his religious power as it was during the Ancient period.

A third innovation was to stipulate the Japanese people as the emperor's subjects. For this purpose, the Manual of the Imperial Household adopted the "one label for the reign of each emperor" policy so as to establish the identity of the people with the reigning emperor. The notion that the emperor is the controller of time was introduced from China, where the name of an era changed with each new emperor. After its introduction to Japan, this system soon became pro forma and was discontinued after the Ancient period. Even after its revival in 1664, the practice was often violated; the name of an era was often changed if there was an inauspicious event (Murakami 1977:122-23) and the Japanese continued to use the zodiac calendar system, which operated on a twelve-year cycle irrespective of who the emperor was. The one name under one imperial system was adopted by the Meiji government and, after initial reluctance, was accepted quite eagerly by the people. Thus, using the year of birth, people refer to themselves as well as to others as, for example, "the Meiji person (Meiji no nigen)," "Taishō person," "Shōwa person," or, "I am a first digit Shōwa," subdividing an era. In fact, these identifications are used as if birth in a particular era or its subdivision assigns a certain personality to all those born during those years.

If the designation of an era served to unite the people, the invention of a national flag and a national anthem were other means to achieve the same goal. Contrary to popular belief within and outside of Japan, the rising sun flag was chosen formally as the national flag only in 1870, although it had been used by various groups, including, ironically, those both supporting and opposing the Shogunate government before the Meiji restoration. The people showed little interest in the national flag and some even staged protests (Murakami 1977:127-29). The national anthem is even more of an invention, originating by a suggestion in 1869 by William Fenton, Director of the British Army Band then stationed in Yokohama, and resulting in 1880 in a song that later became the national anthem, the Kimigayo. This nonetheless was not formally identified as the national anthem until the 1930s (Murakami 1977:128-131). The 16-petal chrysanthemum was also officially adopted as the imperial emblem during the Meiji, and not before.

The transformation of the emperor involved the clever use of a new technology, photography, which transformed the invisible emperor, far removed from the people in the past, to a visible, powerful figure. Insightfully interpreting the complex process of "the visualization of the emperor," Taki (1990) analyzes how the Meiji leaders "constructed" the Meiji Emperor, first through brocade paintings and then a series of photographs whose use and distribution were carefully monitored. Indeed, the visualization of the emperor was perhaps a subtle and thus quite effective mechanism to manipulate his imperial image.

The Meiji ordinances signaled the beginning of indoctrinating the ideology of the imperial system, effectively executed through newly created formalized apparatus such as the constitution, shrines and schools, as well as through an informal means of visualizing the Manifest Deity. The new imperial system thus
created remained intact for the next 70 years, until the end of World War II (Murakami 1977:69).

Although the emperor became nominally quite powerful, in reality the actors and their governments who brought forth these changes held all the power. As Gluck (1985:43) remarks, "Ministerial decisions would pass through imperial hands for the sanction of legitimacy, remaining, like the scroll, unchanged."

After the death of Meiji, Taishō reigned for a short time (1912-1926) and was succeeded by Shōwa, who took over the throne in 1926. The accession ceremony and the ōnamesai for Shōwa reached heights of splendor, only to signal the beginning of "the dark ages" for Japan; its entry into World War II and ultimate defeat in 1945. The announcement by the emperor of Japan's surrender over national radio was unprecedented.

The Allied powers issued a memo on December 15, 1945, forbidding the Japanese government to have any relationship with Shintoism, including financial aid to Shinto shrines. From the beginning of the occupation, the Allied powers intended to have the emperor deny his divinity and declare his identity as a human: a plan suggested by a Shinto scholar, D.C. Holtom, who authored a book (Holtom 1972 [1928]) about the enthronement ceremonies of Shōwa (Murakami 1977:195). The emperor made the "Human Emperor" announcement on New Year's Day in 1946: a strange declaration indeed to many Japanese who had always thought of emperors as humans, as we will see later. The emperor became the symbol of the state, stripped of any executive power. From May 24 of 1946 to 1954, "the symbolic emperor (shōchō tennō)" spent 165 days, traversing 23,000 km, visiting various parts of Japan as "the emperor for the masses (taishū tennō) in order, according to Murakami (1977:196-97), to weaken the increasing opposition to the imperial system.

The new constitution, imposed by the occupational forces and issued in 1946, declared the separation of state and religion (Articles 20 and 89), which brought revolutionary changes in the Japanese imperial system. For the first time in history, imperial rituals became private rituals; the emperor was no longer the officiant of rituals for the social group he represented, the Japanese. In 1957, the new Manual for the Imperial Household was issued. Article 4 specified that the crown prince immediately succeeds the emperor upon the emperor's death during an accession ritual (sokui no rei). References to the two other accession rituals, the senso and the ōnamesai, in the old Imperial Manual were deleted. Thus, these rituals technically became concerns of the imperial family, not the government or the people (Murakami 1977:201).

Although these changes seem clear on the surface, the actions of the occupational forces completely ignored the concept of deity (kami) or the nature of religion in Japanese culture. Therefore, it has never been clear what was to be considered religious and thus to be separate from the state. The death of Shōwa created a great deal of confusion because, for the first time, the changes to be implemented by the new constitution had to be confronted for what they in fact meant.

For example, while the funeral and the accession ritual (sokui no rei), held on November 12, 1990, and the ōnamesai, held on November 23, 1990, caused much controversy over their religious nature (and consequently their appropriateness as state functions), hardly any notice was taken when, immediately after Shōwa's death, Akihito accepted the "three imperial treasures" from the Prime Minister. The ritual (kenji togyo and part of the senso ceremony) was originally included in
the ōnamesai and is very religious in that the three imperial treasures handed down to a new emperor are the most important symbols of native Shintoism.

The confusion prompted by the death of Shōwa indicates that the Allied forces at the conclusion of the war imposed new regulations drawn from the framework of a Western conception of religion that meant little to the Japanese, who then must interpret them.

INTERPRETATION OF THE IMPERIAL SYSTEM

Fully realizing the sin of what postmodernists call totalizing, I suggest some ways for how the Japanese understood the emperor. He has always been multivocal in that there are various ways by which different Japanese social groups and individuals assigned meanings to him.\(^5\) I propose that the notion of kami (deity) in Japanese religions is crucial for understanding the imperial system, especially from the perspective of ordinary people.

The persistent characterization of the emperor is as the officiant in rituals for the soul of rice; and all imperial rituals relate to rice. While the imperial system never retained its own power ever since the Ancient period, and the imperial rituals were only intermittently performed, the symbolism of rice remained viable with the folk through their own rituals and cosmology. The agrarian cosmology, adopted soon after the fall of the ancient imperial system by the successive military governments, was successively developed into an agrarian ideology. Meanwhile, the imperial system lost even its conceptual foundation; its relationship to the symbolism of rice, which has taken at least semi-independent historical courses.

Many contemporary Japanese are unaware of the connection between rice and the imperial system. Only when the Shōwa Emperor was ill and television reported that he had asked about the rice crop, did many young Japanese learn for the first time that the emperor and rice were linked. Until the mass media started to discuss the daijōsai (ōnamesai), even older people hardly recognized the term, let alone the content of the ritual. Probably no Japanese today believe that the emperor’s rice harvest rituals ensure a good rice crop. Some individuals oppose both the imperial system and the importation of foreign rice. Even for these people, rice remains a metaphor for a post-industrial Japan whose rice agriculture has little economic value (Ohnuki-Tierney n.d.).

The fact that the imperial system rested neither on rice agriculture nor on a rice diet may provide us only a partial explanation for the resilience of the imperial system in the face of changing modes of production and changing dietary habits. To further understand what the emperors meant to the Japanese, I now turn to the Japanese notion of kami.

The Emperor as Kami

Throughout the topsy-turvy transformations of the imperial system, the meaning of the emperor has undergone several changes: from a shaman-farmer, to the kami in absentia during the Tokugawa period, to the Manifest/Visible Deity during the Meiji period, reduction to a symbolic emperor (Shōchō Tennō) at the end of World War II, and, finally, “an emperor for the masses” (Taishō Tennō). The changing nature of the emperor reflects the changes made for the designation. According to Murakami (1977:10), in order to stress the religious nature of the headship of the
nation during the mid-seventh century, the term ōkimi (great kimi), which had been used to refer to the head of the Yamato state, was replaced by tennō (emperor), a term taken from China where it had a religious meaning. The designation was again changed to the Confucian term tenshi (Son of Heaven) when Neo-Confucianism was adopted by the Tokugawa shogunate (Kitagawa 1990:157), only to revert back to tennō.

What remains constant throughout history is the emperor's identity as a deity (kami) in the Japanese sense. The way the Japanese view the kami is responsible for the way the imperial system has undergone such dramatic changes and yet survived. The notion of kami (deity/deities) is crucial, therefore, to an understanding of the imperial system.

Although kami usually refers to Shinto deities, I use it here to refer to all the supernaturals, including buddhas and even deities originating in Taoism. The Japanese do not make a clear distinction between various religions, which many of them espouse simultaneously (Ohnuki-Tierney 1984:145-55).

Throughout history, the kami have been both human and super-human, requiring a complex and fluid application of the sacred and profane opposition. In Japanese cosmology, both deities and humans have dual characters and powers: good and evil, constructive and destructive, etc. (for details, see Ohnuki-Tierney 1987:130-40). Ozawa (1987) emphasizes that in Japanese religion humans and deities constitute a continuum and that the notion of hitogami (human-deity) is central in Japanese cosmology, although it has undergone significant historical changes. In this continuum, shamans are humans with extraordinary supernatural power to communicate with deities, thereby being able to solicit their power for the benefit of humans. As in the case of early emperors, shamans must prove their supernatural ability, such as the ability to produce good rice crops, in order to maintain their legitimacy. But the kami too is required to prove its power, as we will see below. In the fluid cosmology of the Japanese, humans, including shamans, and deities do not constitute clear-cut categories.

In the relationship between deities and humans, deities have always been at the mercy of human manipulation. Throughout history, the Japanese have aggressively shaped and reshaped their pantheon; they assign certain functions (goriyaku) to deities, such as business success or the healing of certain illnesses, or assigned them new functions or discard them altogether when they find them not efficacious or no longer useful. The smallpox deity, for example, was retained after the smallpox vaccine was developed only through an expansion of its functions to contagious diseases in general. The deity for boils and growths became enormously popular when the people added cancer treatment to its repertoire (Ohnuki-Tierney 1984:153). Anthropologists used to say that magicians manipulate the supernatural while religious specialists, such as monks and priests, supplicate. By this naive distinction, the Japanese have been magicians who cajoled and threatened the deities to do their bidding.

But, after all, the kami can and will exercise power over humans, favorably and otherwise. For this reason a great fuss was made over the removal of a torii gate (the gateway to a shrine) with the construction of Narita Airport in Tokyo; the Japanese feared that removing the gate might invite the wrath of deities.

As with a deity, the various military governments in different historical periods assigned and reassigned various meanings to the emperor, as described previously. The ability of these historical actors to move the emperor up and down the scale
of humanity-divinity was possible because of the fluid conception of *kami* in Japanese culture.

Since the *kami* are like humans, emperors too have been human to most Japanese, though some thought and continue to believe that they are special humans. Throughout history there have been many folktales pointing to the humanness of the emperors. For example, as a crown prince, Sakuramachi (r. 1735-47) acquired a taste for *soba* (noodles made of buckwheat). After becoming emperor (and the official guardian of the rice crops), he could no longer eat other grains, which were inferior to rice. Nor could he receive moxibustion—the healing technique that uses lighted cones of artemisia placed on certain spots of the body—because no foreign objects could touch his "crystal body" (Miyata 1989). The story relates his great pleasure when he abdicated the throne and could eat noodles to his heart's content and have moxibustion administered to his body (Tsumura 1970 [1917]:615). Its moral, in no uncertain terms, is that a prince is an ordinary human and that a prince who becomes an emperor can also revert back to an ordinary human.

The Japanese perception of individual emperors as humans did not change when Meiji leaders transformed the emperor into the Manifest Deity. The Meiji Japanese, who were proud of being born during that period, talked about him quite fondly in human terms. Men emulated the emperor by wearing a Kaiser mustache like the Meiji Emperor's, and gossiped about his liking for women of all ages. A standard joke among the people concerning Taishō, well-known to have been mentally feeble, was that he rolled up a document that a minister handed him, put it against his eye like a telescope, and looked around. To avoid further embarrassment, the crown prince, Shōwa, took over his father's official functions.

A conspicuous example of humanity assigned to Shōwa is the image of the emperor as a serious biologist, eagerly propagated by the political leaders and mass media throughout his life. They wished to promote an image in accordance with the country's modernization effort, epitomized for the Japanese in Western science and technology. Sure enough, from the perspective of native Shintoism and even Buddhism, the emperor's gaze into a microscope would have been an intensive examination of nature deities, an interpretation which did not cross anyone's mind.

A story also circulated about Shōwa who ate noodles for the first time when he travelled throughout Japan in the 1950s and liked them. As in the story about Sakuramachi, the theme is the irony of the prohibition for emperors against eating non-rice grains, which emperors as humans indeed cherish as food.

The Japanese daily watched on television the condition of Shōwa's health during his last months in late 1988 and early 1989. His blood pressure, pulse rate, and other details were broadcast day and night. The Japanese are generally fond of talking about minor fluctuations in the condition of one's body (see Ohnuki-Tierney 1984:51-74) and to that extent such detailed reports were not peculiar to the emperor, except that such public disclosure of the emperor's intimate condition was felt inappropriate. Repeated blood transfusions were reported as well. His "royal blood" was replaced several times by blood rumored to have come from young defense army men. Yet, this dramatic event of the exchange of royal blood for commoner blood did not receive much attention—"a clear sign of the recognition of the human emperor.

Still, the emperors, like the *kami*, have superhuman powers. Having usurped political and economic power from the emperors, the military governments seem
to have held an uneasy and ambivalent attitude toward the symbolic/religious power traditionally held by them. On the one hand, their lack of support for the performance of imperial rituals during the Medieval and Early Modern periods suggests that they did not rely on the emperor's symbolic power to guarantee a good yield of rice, which was important for the agrarian ideology they had adopted. Even more daring was the banishing of emperors and ex-emperor by the shoguns; Sutoku (r. 1155-1158), Go-Toba (r. 1184-98), and Junctoku (r. 1210-1221), and the Go-Daigo Emperor (r. 1318-1339) (Kitagawa 1990:144, 147, 150). Kitagawa (1990) elaborates with numerous instances how the de facto military leaders held power over emperors.

On the other hand, some military leaders seemed to recognize the limitation of their own strictly human or secular power. At the height of the Fujiwara oligarchy, Fujiwara Michinaga (966-1027), the greatest of the Regents, expressed his sentiments: "Great as are our power and prestige, nevertheless they are those of the Sovereign, for we derive them from the majesty of the Throne" (Sansom 1958:157). Later shoguns not only acknowledged the special power of the emperor but actively sought divine power as well. This was precisely because of doubts in their own mind whether they could be entirely successful in becoming emperors. For example, none dared take over the role of officiant in the rituals for the soul of rice. Likewise, some attended the imperial rituals wearing hoods (zukin) over their heads (Miyata, personal communication), perhaps as admission of their blasphemous presence. Clearly, shoguns knew they were not the emperors who were kami.

Dramatic instances revealing these warriors' recognition of the power of kami occurred when they demanded their own apotheosis. Thus, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, the military leader who in 1590 succeeded in uniting Japan for the first time, asked the imperial court to deify him as Toyokuni Daimyōjin. His life as a deity was short-lived and his descendants were unable to enjoy his divine status. Upon his death, his rival, Tokugawa Ieyasu, defeated the Toyotomi clan and asked, or more appropriately, ordered the imperial court to deny the divinity previously granted to Hideyoshi. Furthermore, Tokugawa Ieyasu, the most powerful of all shoguns, in his will asked the imperial court to deify him as Tōshō Daigongen and his divinity became the bulwark of Shogunate power for the next 250 years (Inoue 1967a; 1967b:258-59).

From the perspective of power, the hierarchy of beings in the universe consists of humans, shaman-emperors, and deities in ascending order. If we assume this hierarchy as permanent and linear, then the orders by Hideyoshi and Ieyasu to the emperors to deify them constitute an inversion of this hierarchy. It means that these humans willfully bestowed upon the emperor the extraordinary power to create deities out of mere humans, quite an extraordinary feat. Likewise, the human architects of the imperial system during the Meiji period assigned themselves—mere humans—the power to create a bona fide deity out of an emperor. On the other hand, such inversions of the hierarchy are embedded in Japanese religions where the hierarchy of beings is neither fixed nor linear. Thus, in Japanese religion, an ordinary human can assign divinity even to a toothpick (Miyata 1975).

These individual instances expressing the dynamic characterization of the kami in Japanese religion are paralleled by fluidity with which the Japanese adopted various foreign religions. When Buddhism was introduced from India via China
and Korea, it was embraced eagerly by the elites, including the imperial family. But "most people in Japan at that time [the sixth and the seventh centuries] probably thought of the Buddha as just another kami" (Kitagawa 1990:136). Officially, the Japanese tried to reconcile the two religions, by claiming that the kami are manifestations of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, a theory known as honji sui jaku. With equal ease, the Tokugawa Japanese, especially the elites, adopted Neo-Confucianism and magic "absolute emperor toward heaven" with its emphasis on natural law and the Way of Heaven (Kitagawa 1990). Astonishing as it may be from the perspective of Western religions, the Meiji government concocted "non-religious Shinto" which was to be adhered to by every Japanese subject, regardless of his or her personal 'religious' affiliation" (Kitagawa 1990:161). As I elaborated elsewhere (Ohnuki-Tierney 1984), most Japanese today are at least nominally both Buddhist and Shintoist simultaneously and usually without personal conviction. To understand Japanese religiosity is to abandon the false dichotomies of magic RELIGION and primitive/CIVILIZED (modern). How else could one explain the profusion of what I call "urban magic" among educated Japanese today?

If the Japanese have shown a fluid attitude toward individual deities as well as toward individual religious systems, so did they toward both individual emperors and the imperial system. From the perspective of the Japanese folk, neither the emperor nor the imperial system is divine, if the term implies an ascription of absolute divinity to the kingship. Feeley-Harnik (1985:276) reminds us that divine kingship has existed mostly in the imagination of anthropologists, and not in African and other kingships. The Japanese case, like many others, offers an uncanny parallel to the Kuba kingship of Zaire. Their king too was a shaman, the medium of the spirit, who only later, around 1750, declared spirit status as the power of kings had increased (Vansina 1978: esp. 207-208).

Without considering the dynamics and fluidity of the notion of kami and supernatural power in Japanese culture, we fall short of understanding the historical transformations of the imperial system. The emperor, as a kami, has been like an empty vessel, whose content can be assigned and reassigned meaning by historical actors. Nonetheless, the actors are constrained by the received wisdom of the imperial system and the broader structure of meaning in Japanese culture in which the imperial system is situated.

SUMMARY

The Japanese imperial system is often portrayed as a tradition characterized by a linear and absolute hierarchy with Amaterasu at the top and her direct descendants, the divine kings, occupying the apex of Japanese society. This view has been promoted since the end of the nineteenth century by successive military governments of Japan, but was almost completely eliminated at the end of World War II. Outside of Japan this view seems to continue to be held as the contemporary Japanese perception of the emperor.

In sharp contrast, the above discussion tells us that the emperor and the imperial system have undergone many transformations, often as a result of traditions invented by successive military governments. The emperor in ancient Japan was a shaman whose power was simultaneously religious, economic, and political. On behalf of the agrarian population, he ritually solicited supernatural power to ensure bountiful rice crops. The harvest ritual expressed the symbolic equivalence...
between food consumption, agricultural production, and human reproduction. This equivalence is found among many peoples, as Levi-Strauss (1969:e.g.269) pointed out with the material from the Tupari, Calingang, Mundurucu, and Cashibo in South America, in whose languages the same verb means to copulate and to eat. In subsequent Japanese history, military governments usurped the political power of the imperial system. Furthermore, rice symbolism, the basis of the ancient imperial system, has developed semi-independently from that of the imperial system. Although it has lost its foundations developed during the Ancient period, it has survived for a long time.

Yet, it is erroneous to say that the imperial system has enthusiastic support by the Japanese today. To the contrary, most contemporary Japanese are apathetic about the imperial system. Some of my Japanese colleagues went about their business, some attending New Year's parties, during the mourning period for Shōwa. Young people flocked to the ski slopes. Some attack the imperial system, covertly and overtly (see Ohnuki-Tierney 1990). Others were truly sorry about his death for various reasons; some because anyone's death is to be mourned, and others felt sorry because the emperor had experienced turbulent years. Although the political ultra right follows the line created by the Meiji government, which emphasizes the divinity of the emperor, it is a very small minority. Most Japanese are indifferent to the imperial system. Their attitude toward the emperors is akin to their attitude toward the kami; they do not concern themselves with the kami so long as the kami do not exercise their power.

EPILOGUE

It is an outrageous misunderstanding, with an undercurrent of Orientalism, to portray the Japanese as having perceived and "worshipped" the emperor as God, as a British journalist, Ian Buruma, did in a recent New York Times Magazine article that featured a two-page picture of a few Japanese bowing to the ground in front of the imperial palace. The term kami as embodied in the emperors is hardly what the English term, God, suggests. Buruma's attempt to portray rising militarism in Japan through this imagery is an irresponsible and misleading representation of contemporary Japanese. As I completed this writing, the war with Iraq ended. I cannot resist juxtaposing Buruma's contention with the accusation that the same Japanese are not military enough to send ground forces to Saudi Arabia, thus ducking the moral responsibility of a world economic power. It was the American Occupational Forces that stripped the Japanese military, only to reinstate it under the name of Defense Force when the threat of the cold war—that monstrous construction which gave an excuse for very many aggressions—was seen to be intensifying. It is worth reflecting upon the double ironies of history: "it was an irony of history that Western colonial control of much of Asia, some of which went back four centuries, was ended by an Asian nation that had emulated the Western colonial powers. Perhaps it was an even greater irony of history that the imperial throne, which had been mercilessly manipulated and utilized by various ruling forces in Japan since 1868, turned out to be the only viable authority that could surrender the huge body of armed forces at the end of World War II" (Kitagawa 1990:165). As Carol Gluck, during a television interview after the death of Shōwa Emperor, remarked perceptively, blaming the emperor or the imperial system for militarism is merely an attempt to shift the responsibility for World War
II, which should be shared by all Japanese, including the emperor, but especially the military.

NOTES

1. Jan Vansina offered invaluable written comments on an earlier draft of this paper. Robert Bellah’s encouragement led me to develop the discussion on kami. Aidan Southall’s comments from comparative perspective were helpful. Leonard Plotnicov extended generous support and substantial comments as a colleague. I am thankful to all. This article is not a defense of the imperial system or a polemic regarding its future. Nor do I seek to ignore where the responsibility of aggression may lay in the past and, more importantly, in the future. Indeed, there is justification for voicing my views on these matters. During World War II, as a fifth grader, machine gun bullets fired from a diving plane sped inches from me as I jumped into a ditch. This paper is dedicated to my mother who, instead of going to the air raid shelter, searched for me during the raid, and to my maternal grandmother whose sons, lost in the war, would have given her comfort in her later years.

2. The term daigōsai is more popular at present, while ōnanesai is an older pronunciation. A more proper pronunciation was ōname matsuri (reading all the characters in kun) or ōnies matsuri (see Bock 1990:27). For descriptions of the ōnanesai in English, see Bock 1990; Ellwood 1973; Holtom 1972.

3. In the main text (honbun) and Sections 4 and 6 of Book 1 of the Nihonshoki, it is Takami Musubi, rather than Amaterasu, who sends to earth Ho no Ninigi (Ninigi no Mikoto), the heavenly grandson, wrapped in the madoko ohusuma (sacred bedding) (Matsumae 1977:95–96).

4. To enforce this new doctrine, the Meiji government systematically reorganized some 170,000 shrines to be directly under the control of the Imperial Household. Furthermore, rituals at local shrines and on national holidays were co-ordinated with the imperial rituals (Murakami 1977:132–140). The government issued an ordinance prohibiting Buddhistic practices such as gong ringling or reciting sutras; instead, the people were told to pray to the Shinto deities (Murakami 1977:68–69).

Imperial rituals also underwent significant changes under the Meiji ordinance. With the adoption of the Gregorian Calendar, the date for the niinamesai was fixed on November 23, rather than the traditional date in the lunar calendar. While the ōnanesai had always been held in Kyoto, for Emperor Meiji it was moved to Tokyo to signal the new era at a new capital. The government allowed people to make offerings during the ōnanesai, a custom hitherto allowed only for the annual harvest ritual of niinamesai. Also, the emperor’s wife became involved for the first time. Reflecting the Meiji leaders’ desire to situate Japan in the international scene, the government held a party the day after the ōnanesai, inviting foreign ambassadors, although the emperor was not present.

5. Only since the 1950s have some historians and political scientists turned their attention to how the Japanese people perceive the emperors and the imperial system. For the Meiji period, see Irokawa (1968, 1970).

6. This phenomenon has been debated by scholars; Eisenstadt (n.d.) explains it in terms of his scheme of Axial vs. non-Axial religions; Kitagawa (1990) describes it as "eclectic," others as "multilayered," while still others see that various religions have been "fused" (for details, see Ohnuki-Tierney 1984:145–49).

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