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Preserving Culture under Occupation: Individual and Collective Agency in Postwar Japan

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Abstract: After World War II, Japan faced not only political and economic reconstruction but also the dismantling of its cultural foundations under the Allied Occupation. The abolition of the Imperial Ritual Ordinance by the General Headquarters of the Allied Powers threatened the continuity of practices closely tied to national identity. This paper examines how cultural continuity nonetheless survived through individual and collective agency. It highlights Emperor Shōwa's decision to continue the Niiname-sai (Harvest Festival) ritual as a deliberate assertion of cultural continuity, despite the loss of legal foundations. It also analyzes the public's spontaneous participation in his postwar nationwide tours, which functioned as a form of cultural negotiation with the occupying authorities. These cases illustrate that culture endures not primarily through institutional protection but through the intentional choices of its bearers. Drawing on Arnold J. Toynbee's theory of civilizational decline, this paper interprets postwar Japan as a case of cultural resilience, where preservation became an ethical stance rather than a legal requirement. It concludes that this "stance of care"—embodied in both imperial practice and popular participation—offers a valuable perspective for rethinking cultural responsibility in contemporary Japan.

1. Introduction: Significance of the Theme and Research Question

What does it mean to preserve culture under Occupation? Following World War II, Japan faced a severe crisis involving not only political and economic restructuring but also the systematic dismantling of its cultural foundations.¹ The abolition of the Imperial Ritual Ordinance² by the General Headquarters of the Allied Powers (GHQ) critically threatened the continuity of traditional practices deeply tied to the nation's spiritual basis. However, unlike post-Nazi Germany, which underwent a thorough negation of its past, Japan managed to maintain its cultural anchor—the Imperial Institution—albeit in symbolic form. This continuity was not accidental; it was sustained by the intentional choices (agency) of multiple actors. The central question of this paper is as follows: What personal and collective choices underpinned this cultural continuity during the Occupation period? The survival of culture is not solely dependent on legal frameworks but is also strongly governed by

¹ Takemae, E. (2002). GHQ no hitobito: Keireki to seisaku [The people of GHQ: Their backgrounds and policies]. Akashi Shoten. P1~2

² Regulations concerning various ceremonies performed at the Three Imperial Shrines (Kenjo, Koryoden, and Shinden). Promulgated by Imperial Household Ordinance No. 1 in September 1908 (Meiji 41) and amended by Imperial Household Ordinance No. 12 in October 1927 (Showa 2). It remained in effect until May 1946 (Showa 21) but is now abolished.

(English translation following a quotation from the *Kokushi Daijiten*
“Koushitusaishirei”(Dictionary of Japanese History)

the continuous choice of its bearers to carry it forward. This paper aims to clarify how the Imperial Institution, the cultural core of Japan, was inherited, transformed, and ultimately survived the GHQ Occupation. We will first detail the process of institutional dismantling during the Occupation (Section 2), then examine the subjective agency of Emperor Shōwa and the populace (Sections 3 and 4), theorize their significance using Toynbee's Civilization Theory (Section 5), examine the legal status of Imperial rituals in the postwar and modern eras (Section 6), and finally conclude by defining the ethical stance and responsibility required for cultural inheritance (Section 7).

2. Historical Context and the Depth of the Crisis

In 1946, the Imperial Ritual Ordinance was abolished, eliminating the legal basis for the Tenno (Emperor) to perform state rituals.³ This measure was part of the GHQ's broader policy to reorganize the religious and ideological foundations of prewar Japan.⁴ Records from the GHQ's Civil Information and Education Section and the Legal Section confirm that the abolition of the institutional basis for Imperial rituals was a central pillar of the Occupation policy.⁵ Thus, the abolition was not merely a technical legal amendment but a structural reform targeting the core of Japan's spiritual culture. A key focus of the Occupation policy was the dismantling of State Shinto. In addition to the institutional abolition of Imperial rituals, this involved comprehensive measures to sever the ties between state and religion, such as ceasing Shinto ceremonies in public schools and abolishing state subsidies to shrines.⁶ Furthermore, the temporary suspension of Ethics, Geography, and Japanese History classes, along with the censorship of textbooks, was an attempt to reconstruct the national and historical memory of the prewar period. These reforms severely shook the cultural memory and spiritual foundation shared by the Japanese society. The abolition of the Imperial Ritual Ordinance was, therefore, part of the attempted institutional dismantling of Japan's spiritual center. Nevertheless, cultural practices did not vanish. Imperial rituals and related ceremonies, though losing their legal framework, continued in altered forms, quietly protected within society. This highlights a critical characteristic of cultural inheritance in occupied Japan.

³ Cabinet. (1946). *Abolition of the Imperial Ritual Ordinance* (Imperial Ordinance No. 219). *Official Gazette*, 5833, 1. (Accessed November 2025, from the National Diet Library Digital Collections)

⁴ Ara, T. (Ed.). (1993). *GHQ/SCAP top secret records: Gyōsei-hōritsu kankei monjo* [Administrative and legal documents]. Kashiwashobō. Number8.P388~389

⁵ Takemae, E. (2002). GHQ no hitobito: Keireki to seisaku [The people of GHQ: Their backgrounds and policies]. Akashi Shoten.

⁶ Takemae, E. (2002). GHQ no hitobito: Keireki to seisaku [The people of GHQ: Their backgrounds and policies]. Akashi Shoten. p.289

3. Individual Agency: Emperor Shōwa's Quiet Assertion

Amidst the cultural crisis of the Occupation, Emperor Shōwa demonstrated the first active instance of cultural agency. Despite the loss of the legal basis for the Tenno to officially perform state rituals following the abolition of the Imperial Ritual Ordinance in 1946, Emperor Shōwa continued to perform the Niiname-sai (Harvest Festival) as a customary practice.⁷

The Niiname-sai is the most critical Imperial rite, in which the Tenno harvests the new grain with his own hands, offers it to the deities, and partakes of it himself, thereby praying for the nation's peace and abundant harvests.⁸ Following the abolition of the Imperial Ritual Ordinance, the Niiname-sai could no longer be designated as a "state ceremony." Yet, Emperor Shōwa chose to continue this ritual as a "private act" (*shiteki kōi*).⁹

This "shift from public rite to private practice" holds critical importance for cultural inheritance. Specifically, the Tenno's choice to continue the ritual, even when divorced from its legal framework, can be interpreted as an expression of intent not to allow the cultural continuity of the Imperial rituals to be severed. The act of maintaining the ritual itself, despite the loss of institutional grounds, demonstrates that culture can be sustained not solely by institutions but by memory and practice.

Emperor Shōwa's response indicates that the Tenno acted not merely as a symbolic presence but as an active cultural agent engaged in the continuation of cultural practices.¹⁰ The continuity of culture, sustained not by the maintenance of external institutions but by the accumulation of subjective acts, is a crucial finding regarding cultural inheritance during the Occupation period. Examining the postwar Imperial rituals is crucial for understanding the influence this subjective choice during the Occupation had on subsequent Japanese culture.

4. Collective Agency: People's Cultural Negotiation

The survival of the Imperial Institution was not solely a top-down decision; many people in occupied Japan actively chose not to abandon their cultural anchor. Individual choice, coupled with the collective's active engagement, played a significant role in maintaining cultural continuity during the Occupation. Emperor Shōwa's nationwide tours (*Junkō*) from 1946 to 1954 serve as a symbolic example. Some officers in GHQ approved the Emperor's nationwide tours, partly under the assumption that public reverence for the Emperor had already collapsed.

As documented in *The Imperial Tours of Emperor Shōwa*, certain officials believed the Emperor's presence would not generate widespread respect and even

⁷ Mayumi, T. (2019). *Daijosai*. Chikuma Shobo.

⁸ Nihiname Kenkyūkai. (1953–1967). *Niiname no kenkyū* [Studies on the Niiname-sai]. Sōgensha.

⁹ Takemae, E. (2002). GHQ no hitobito: Keireki to seisaku [The people of GHQ: Their backgrounds and policies]. Akashi Shoten.

¹⁰ Mayumi, T. (2019). *Daijosai*. Chikuma Shobo.

predicted he might face open hostility from citizens who had lost family members in the war. This reveals that the tours were, at least for some within GHQ, expected to diminish the Emperor's symbolic authority rather than reinforce it.

However, the actual outcome was the reverse: large crowds gathered across the country, demonstrating that the cultural bond between the Emperor and the populace remained intact. The tours provided a rare opportunity for the Tenno and the populace to meet directly amidst the postwar turmoil, serving as a catalyst for restructuring the relationship between the state and society under Occupation. It is known that initial considerations within the GHQ included the abolition of the Tenno system or the Tenno's exile. However, the populace's response during the tours significantly altered these policies. Large numbers of people spontaneously gathered to catch a glimpse of the Tenno. For instance, in front of the Osaka Prefectural Government Building, approximately 40,000 citizens gathered, forcing the U.S. military police providing security to fire warning shots.¹¹ This phenomenon, occurring independently of state mobilization or organized support, can be understood as an expression of the cultural and emotional bond the populace continued to hold toward the symbol of the Tenno amidst social devastation. Dower (1999) described this popular reaction as the "emotional restoration of the emperor's aura," pointing out that the tours contributed to the reconstruction of the Tenno's symbolic authority. Furthermore, the public sentiment is considered to have significantly influenced the decision to maintain the Tenno system, as the GHQ recognized that abolition risked massive social unrest. Thus, the populace's spontaneous participation in the nationwide tours was not merely an emotional reaction but a collective act of negotiating cultural continuity with the occupying authorities.¹² The people did not passively accept the symbolic Emperor system but actively participated as subjects in maintaining their cultural foundation.

5. Theoretical Reflection: Toynbee's Civilization Theory and Modern Japan

In his magnum opus, *A Study of History*, historian Arnold J. Toynbee proposed three conditions leading to the decline of a civilization: the "loss of tradition," "excessive imitation of others," and the "erosion of self-confidence" (Toynbee, 1934–1961).¹³ These points not only serve as a theoretical framework for understanding the cultural crisis in occupied Japan but also offer insights when considering the cultural challenges facing contemporary Japan.

1) Loss of Tradition and Internal Cultural Collapse: In contemporary Japanese society, population decline and rapid aging have reduced the bearers of local communities, making the continuation of traditional events and festivals difficult.

¹¹ Suzuki Masao. (1992). The Imperial Tours of Emperor Shōwa. Ten-ten-sha.P110~P111

¹² Suzuki Masao. (1992). The Imperial Tours of Emperor Shōwa. Ten-ten-sha.

¹³Toynbee, A. J. (1949–1952). *Rekishi no kenkyū* [*A study of history*] (M. Hasegawa, Trans.). Social Thought Research Association Publishing Department.

This decline stems not from external compulsion but from internal structural change, leading to the gradual severing of cultural memory. This clearly aligns with Toynbee's "loss of tradition."¹⁴

2) Excessive Imitation and the Dilution of Cultural Autonomy: Furthermore, with the advancement of globalization, as Anglophone cultural norms penetrate various sectors of society, recognition of Japan's own cultural uniqueness and autonomy is weakening. Scholars warn that this "uncritical imitation" leads to a cultural hollowing-out¹⁵, which corresponds to Toynbee's second condition.

3) Loss of Self-Confidence and the Transformation of Cultural Stance: According to Toynbee, active trust and creative adaptation to one's own culture are essential for a civilization to endure. However, in modern Japan, the intentional stance to maintain culture seen during the Occupation is weakening, and the social and psychological foundations supporting cultural inheritance are wavering. Consequently, cultural decline appears to be proceeding not from external pressure but from internal apathy and the dilution of value awareness. Therefore, the experience of the Occupation period demonstrates that cultural survival is decided not by legal institutions but by the "attitude" and "responsibility" of individuals and the collective. Even today, the challenge of cultural preservation must be approached not as a nostalgic look at the past but as an ethical question concerning the stance we take toward culture.

6. Postwar and Modern Legal Status of Imperial Rituals

The postwar continuation of Imperial rituals in Japan is characterized by their existence outside any formal legal framework. The abolition of the Imperial Ritual Ordinance in 1946 led to the Tenno losing the legal basis for performing state rites.¹⁶ Furthermore, the 1947 Constitution of Japan clearly established the separation of state and religion, prohibiting the state from supporting Imperial rituals as public ceremonies¹⁷.

In practice, no law in contemporary Japan regulates the Tenno's ritual acts.¹⁸ Neither the Imperial House Law, the Imperial Household Economy Law, nor the

¹⁴ Iguchi, S. (2019). *Kasochiiki ni okeru matsuri no shūryō to saisei no mekanizumu* [Mechanisms of the decline and revitalization of festivals in depopulated areas]. Kyoto University.

¹⁵ Mizumura, M. (2015). *Nihongo ga horobiru toki: Eigo no seiki no naka de* [The fall of Japanese: In the age of English]. Tokyo, Japan: Chikuma Shobō.

Inoue, T. (Ed.). (2000). *Globalization and indigenous culture*. Tokyo, Japan: Institute for Japanese Culture and Classics, Kokugakuin University.

¹⁶ Jumin Lawsuit Case (Daijosai Attendance Case). (2002, July 11). Supreme Court of Japan, First Petty Bench.
<https://www.courts.go.jp/hanrei/52273/detail2/index.html> Supreme Court of Japan, First Petty Bench.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ *ibid.*

Imperial Household Agency Law contains provisions mandating the performance of the Niiname-sai or the Daijō-sai (Great Thanksgiving Festival).¹⁹ Instead, the Imperial Household Agency has consistently maintained that these rituals are neither “acts in matters of state” nor “public acts” but rather the Tenno’s *private acts*.²⁰

A particularly symbolic case involves the constitutional litigation surrounding the 1990 **Heisei Daijō-sai**. The plaintiffs argued that because the Daijō-sai possesses a religious character, state funding for the ceremony violated Articles 20 and 89 of the Constitution. The Tokyo District Court and the Tokyo High Court, however, both ruled that the ritual constituted a “traditional ceremony of the Imperial Household,” and therefore did not constitute a violation of the principle of separation of state and religion. Notably, the courts avoided making a definitive judgment regarding the ritual’s religious nature, emphasizing its aspect as a cultural tradition. This indicates that, despite its uncertain legal position, the Daijō-sai continues to be practiced through a deliberate commitment to preserving tradition.²¹

Despite the absence of legal regulation, rituals at the Three Shrines of the Palace have continued without interruption.²² This demonstrates that postwar Imperial rituals have survived not through institutional guarantees but through the internal customs of the Imperial Household Agency and, most importantly, the will of the actors involved—particularly the Tenno—to sustain them. The persistence of these rituals, despite the disappearance of the institutional framework that once supported them, symbolizes an important feature of Japanese culture since the Occupation: cultural practices can endure even in the absence of formal institutions. Ultimately, the survival of culture is determined not by the legal system but by the *agency* and intentional choices of those who seek to inherit and sustain it.

7. Conclusion

The case of occupied Japan demonstrates that cultural survival depends on the intentional choices (agency) of individuals and the collective, rather than on legal institutions. As symbolized by the continuation of Imperial rituals and the nationwide tours, the attitude to uphold cultural values played a decisive role, perhaps more so than institutional guarantees. As examined in this paper, cultural inheritance should be understood not as a passive preservation of tradition but as a responsible practice that resists external pressure and internal apathy, connecting the culture to the future. This perspective aligns with Toynbee’s civilization theory, especially his point that the loss of tradition and self-confidence leads to a civilizational decline. The Occupation experience revealed that the root of cultural support lies in the attitude of “care,” that is, the conscious choice to recognize the

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ Mayumi, T. (2019). *Daijosai*. Chikuma Shobo.

²² *ibid.*

value of one's own culture and to continually act for its continuation. This stance is not limited to historical examples but remains a crucial issue in contemporary Japan, where the cultural foundation is being shaken by demographic decline and globalization. While this paper analyzed how Imperial rituals and the symbolic Emperor system—the core of Japanese culture—were maintained through the Occupation period, the experience also serves as an opportunity to reconsider the ethical and practical significance of cultural inheritance in modern society. The survival of culture is not certain but is constantly supported by accumulating choices. Therefore, the inheritance of culture is not a reproduction of the past but depends on our own stance concerning our attitude toward culture today.

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