

# Abdication, Succession and Japan's Imperial Future: An Emperor's Dilemma

John Breen

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## Abstract

On 30 April 2019, 86-year old Emperor Akihito made history. He became the first emperor in 200 years to abdicate, yielding the throne to his son. The trigger for this historic moment was an extraordinary event that took place three years earlier. In August 2016, the emperor appeared on NHK and all TV channels to address the nation. His purpose? To intimate his desire to abdicate. The address, of questionable constitutionality, set in motion a debate about the nature of emperorship in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Japan, and led directly to the April abdication. This article sets out to explore some of the questions raised by the emperor's address, and its historic outcome: What are emperors for? What is their place in contemporary Japan? What, indeed, are their future prospects?

**Key Words** Emperor Akihito, Emperor Naruhito, abdication, Nippon Kaigi, Kobori Keiichirō, Murata Haruki, Abe Shinzō, Sun Goddess, Ise Shrines, *senso*, *sokui*, *daijōsai*

## Introduction

On 30 April 2019, 86-year-old Emperor Akihito 明仁 made history. He became the first modern

emperor to abdicate. Indeed, his was the first abdication since that of Emperor Kōkaku 光格 over two centuries before in 1817. By the same token, the succession of Akihito's 59-year-old son, Crown Prince Naruhito 徳仁 on 1 May was an historic moment. For he was the first in modern times to succeed to the throne while his father was alive and well. The trigger for all these firsts was an extraordinary event that took place nearly three years before. On 8 August 2016, Emperor Akihito appeared on NHK and all other TV channels to address the nation. He gave an understated but riveting performance. Speaking of his advanced years and the growing burden of his duties, he intimated his desire to abdicate. Abdication rumors had been circulating for some weeks, but his address dispelled all doubt. An address of this sort was quite without precedent. The Constitution requires that succession to the throne accord with the Imperial Household Law of 1946, but that law does not recognize abdication. The emperor was thus challenging the law. The challenge, however circumspect, was a political act, and political acts are not permitted him under the Constitution. It is little wonder that he caused a stir; it is no less than remarkable that he got his way.<sup>1</sup>

The emperor's TV address, watched by some 12% of the population, triggered a national debate that led to Prime Minister Abe Shinzō's government enacting a special abdication bill, which became law in June 2017.<sup>2</sup> It was this bill that enabled Akihito to abdicate, yielding the throne to his son. Emperor Akihito raised fundamental questions about the role of the emperor in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Japanese society. What are emperors for? What is their place in

contemporary Japan, and what are their future prospects? This article sets out to explore precisely these questions. The place to start is that August 2016 address.

## 1. The Emperor's Words: O-kotoba

The emperor began by framing his reign as a personal search for meaning. He had dutifully carried out the “acts of the emperor in matters of state” as stipulated in Article 7 of the Constitution. These include convocation of the Diet, dissolution of the House of Representatives, attestation of ministerial appointments, awarding of honors, and so on. However, he had “spent [his] days searching for and contemplating on” the meaning of Article 1’s designation of him as “symbol of the State and of the unity of the people.” The Constitution, after all, fails to elucidate what *action* is required of, or indeed permitted to, a “symbol of the State.” The emperor’s search led him to conclude that he must serve as “an active and inherent part of society, responding to the expectations of the people.”



**Emperor Akihito delivering his address to the nation on NHK, 8 August 2016<sup>3</sup>**

What matters, he said, is to “stand by the people, listen to their voices, and be close to

them in their thoughts.” Many of those who tuned in to his eleven-minute broadcast must have cast their minds back to the visits he made with the empress throughout Japan, especially in times of national crisis. Never was the emperor closer to the people than in 2011 after the Great East Japan earthquake. Historically a distant figure, he made a powerful TV appearance after the disaster struck, articulating his concerns, offering solace and hope.<sup>4</sup> He and the empress visited survivors in Saitama, Chiba, Ibaraki, Miyagi, Iwate, Fukushima, and Tochigi prefectures, and, of course, in Tokyo, too.<sup>5</sup> In his August 2016 broadcast, the emperor left no doubt that such active devotion to the Japanese people was his calling. It was demanded of him, he believed, as “symbol of the State.”

It was at this point in the broadcast that the emperor broached his dilemma. What to do when an emperor has become too old to serve the people? He acknowledged, only to dismiss, the constitutional answer: the appointment of a regent. A regency was, in his view, no solution. For when an emperor ceases to serve the people, he no longer functions as symbol. His role is done, and he must step down. Emperor Akihito intimated that stepping down was, indeed, his intention. He was especially concerned lest he become a burden to the people. He was thinking ahead here to his own death, and to the “heavy mourning” that would endure for months were he to die *in situ* as emperor. If he gave up the throne, he would inconvenience no one; his son Naruhito would succeed him, and continue the vital work of public service uninterrupted. Such was his “earnest wish.” Emperor Akihito concluded with a plea to the people of Japan: “I sincerely hope for your understanding.”<sup>6</sup> Nowhere in his address did the emperor deploy the word “abdication,” but this was the radical solution he offered.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Abdication

Emperor Akihito's address was more than an appeal for understanding: it was a personal challenge to the law, and a call for critical reflection on the role of the emperor in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. It was undeniably political. During his thirty-year reign, the emperor made several statements freighted with political meaning. In 2001, he declared "a certain kinship with Korea" on learning that the mother of Emperor Kanmu 桓武- the 8<sup>th</sup> Century founder of the city of Kyoto - was descended from Korean immigrants.<sup>8</sup> In 2004, he said it was desirable *not* to compel Japanese school pupils to sing the national anthem.<sup>9</sup> In 2009, he reflected that the monarchy under the 1946 Constitution was closer to Japan's "traditional model" than it had been under the 1889 Constitution. The 1946 Constitution, he implied, was more appropriate for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, in 2013, he praised the postwar Constitution for laying the foundations of peace and democracy.<sup>11</sup> These issues - relations with Korea, the anthem and the Constitution - were all, to differing degrees, political. The emperor's statements were political interventions, but he had never before questioned the law. Nor, of course, had he played any role in fashioning the law.

What did the Japanese people make of it all? The *Yomiuri* newspaper, Japan's best-selling daily, conducted an opinion poll three days after the national TV broadcast and found that it had won the approval of 93% of the population. This figure was reflected in other media surveys. The *Asahi* reported that 84% supported abdication, while 5% opposed it. The *Mainichi* survey yielded a somewhat lower 67% approval rating, but it rose to 84% in a second survey. Of those polled by the Kyōdō news agency, 86% approved changing the law to allow abdication.<sup>12</sup> In any case, it was abundantly clear that the emperor's wish to abdicate accorded with the "will of the people," albeit after the fact. This degree of popular support was little cause for surprise, given the

consistently high ratings the emperor and empress had enjoyed in recent years, especially since the disaster of 2011.<sup>13</sup>

What is interesting is the reaction of ultra-conservative groups, the self-appointed guardians of Japan's imperial legacy. The most vociferous among them today is Nippon Kaigi 日本会議 (Japan Conference; hereafter NK). This is a powerful group, whose board features many Shinto religious leaders. The chief priests of the Ise Shrines, the Yasukuni Shrine, and the Meiji Shrine are among them. But NK matters because Prime Minister Shinzō Abe and the majority of his cabinet are members.<sup>14</sup> How did NK respond to the emperor's address? NK was swift to deny press reports that it was "vigorously opposed" to abdication, but statements by key NK members suggested otherwise. The most articulate among them was Kobori Keiichirō 小堀桂一郎, emeritus professor of Tokyo University and incumbent NK Vice-Chairman.

### 特別来賓ご祝辞<メッセージ>

安倍 晋三  
自由民主党総裁

### 歴史的使命を果たす

このたび、日本会議・日本会議国会議員懇談会が設立20周年を迎えられましたことを、心よりお慶び申し上げます。

「誇りある国づくり」を目指し、美しい日本を守り伝えるため、草の根の国民運動を展開してこられた皆様の御尽力に、深甚なる敬意を表します。

先人たちが積み上げてきたものの重みを感じながら、大切なものを守るためにこそ変革していく。皆様の活動の大きな成果である教育基本法の改正は、心ある国民が育ち、品格ある美しい国・日本を創る上での礎となりました。

東日本大震災における皆様方の献身的な活動は、今も忘れることはできません。日本人の誇り、家族や地域の絆が復興の原動力であることに思いを致し、当時野党であった私も含め、多くの人々が勇気づけられました。東北の復興なくして、日本の再生なし。あの困難の日々を胸に刻み、東北の未来を切り拓いていきます。

今年、憲法施行70年の節目の年です。憲法は、国の未来、理想の姿を語るものであり、国民的な議論が大いに深まることを期待しております。自由民主党は、国民に責任を持つ政党として、憲法審査会における「具体的な議論」をリードし、その歴史的使命を果たしてまいります。

緊迫する北朝鮮情勢、急速に進む少子高齢化。この「国難」とも呼ぶべき困難を、皆様と共に乗り越えていく。そして、皆様と共に、日本を、世界の中心で輝く国としていく決意です。

最後に、本大会の御盛會と、皆様の一層の御発展を祈念して、私からの祝辞といたします。



PM Abe Shinzō addressing Nippon Kaigi's 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary gathering, 27

November 2017<sup>15</sup>

Kobori was “confused” by the emperor’s pressing the government to take extra-constitutional measures to satisfy his personal wishes. He wondered at the government’s apparent compliance, and was dismayed at the precedent set, namely of an emperor successfully challenging the Constitution. For Kobori and his colleagues, however, the real issue lay elsewhere, in the nature of emperorship. Is it really necessary, asked Kobori, for the emperor to engage in those actions that he finds so meaningful? Kobori’s answer was no. “Symbol of the state,” he argued, does not require social engagement from the emperor. That the emperor’s age rendered him no longer able to serve the people was, therefore, no reason for him to abdicate. Kobori blamed the American makers of the “anti-*kokutai* Constitution” for creating confusion about the emperor’s role.<sup>16</sup>

Other NK members were less measured. Murata Haruki 村田春樹 authored an extraordinary opinion piece in the journal *Seiron* 正論 in October 2017. His critique of Emperor Akihito makes for fascinating reading. Murata saw the emperor’s wish to abdicate as symptomatic of his failure to appreciate the unique nature of Japanese emperorship. The emperor cannot refer to himself as an individual, as he did in the broadcast, since he is semi-divine; he has no need for popular approval, since he is neither politician nor performer, but descendant of the Sun Goddess; and he has no business appearing on TV to address the people; it is his ancestors – the Sun Goddess and the first emperor Jinmu above all – whom he should be addressing.<sup>17</sup> Murata found, moreover, that Emperor Akihito had breached the Constitution on three counts: 1) he had failed to consult the will of the people before taking action; 2) he was responsible for

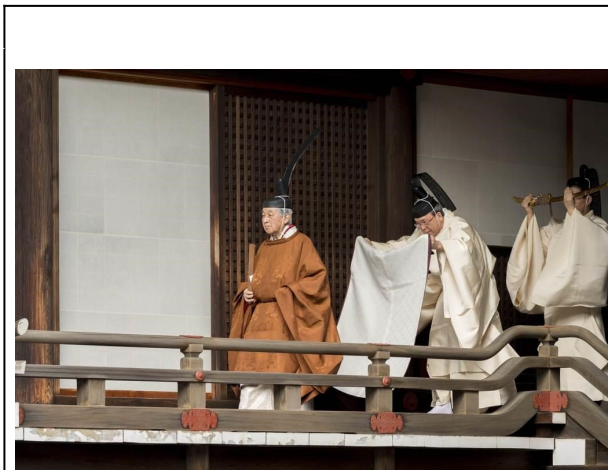
the fact that an abdication bill – not the Imperial Household Law – would determine succession for the first time ever; and 3) as a consequence, he had effectively exercised legislative power. All of this, asserted Murata, was “blatantly in breach of the Constitution.”<sup>18</sup>

Nippon Kaigi is, in fact, divided over the abdication issue, but it is clear that what matters to Kobori, Murata and their fellows is not the person of the reigning emperor, nor the Constitution, but the unbroken imperial line that began, so they believe, with the Sun Goddess. Emperor Akihito’s words and actions constituted a threat to their view of emperorship. Clearly, if an emperor can change the rules of succession on a whim, the myth becomes untenable. What then would they and their allies have had the emperor do? On the specific issue of succession, they wanted him to hand the burdensome tasks over to a regent, and stay put. As a general principle, emperors should abstain from the sort of public service in which Emperor Akihito found meaning. They should instead remain within the walls of the palace, perform their acts “in matters of state,” and otherwise devote themselves to prayer.

Emperor Akihito was clearly not averse to praying. Indeed, he stressed the importance of prayer twice in his TV address. “The first and foremost duty of the Emperor,” he insisted, “is to pray for peace and happiness of all the people.” He reflected further that it was always incumbent on him to “think of the people and pray for the people, with deep respect and love for the people.”<sup>19</sup> But for him, prayer alone was never sufficient. The NK position, by contrast, is that “symbol of the State” means precisely the emperor’s performance of prayer at the shrine-complex within the Tokyo palace. The complex in question, built in 1888, is known as the *kyūchū sanden* 宮中三殿, and as the name suggests, it comprises three sites. There is a central shrine for the Sun Goddess (the *kashikodokoro* 賢所), which is flanked by the *kōreiden* 皇靈殿, a shrine dedicated to the



imperial ancestors (the spirits, that is, of all deceased emperors since the time of the mythical Emperor Jinmu), and by a shrine for the myriad gods of heaven and earth (the *shinden* 神殿). It is worth noting in passing that the rites which Akihito and his father before him performed at the shrine-complex since 1945 are precisely those of prewar Japan; they differ only in that they are private, and no longer public, events.



**Emperor Akihito enters the *kashikodokoro* shrine in the imperial palace to report his abdication to the Sun Goddess, 12 March 2019<sup>20</sup>**

There is every reason to believe that Prime Minister Abe shared the concerns of his fellow NK members. He appears to have known of the emperor's wishes since the autumn of 2015, but denied him permission - or so it is claimed - to raise the matter at his birthday press conference in December that year. The emperor's frustration grew thereafter, and in July 2016, he had the Imperial Household tell NHK of his wish to abdicate. NHK informed the nation in a broadcast on the night of 13 July, and this paved the way for the emperor's address on 8 August.<sup>21</sup> Opinion polls quickly made it clear that a large majority of Japanese were sympathetic to the emperor; the broadcast and print media generated support

and sustained interest. The prime minister had no choice but to act.

The choice facing Prime Minister Abe was between a change to the Imperial Household Law, allowing abdication for *all* future emperors, and the enactment of an abdication bill, applicable to Emperor Akihito alone. The emperor was known to favor the former; the prime minister would only countenance the latter. He moved swiftly to appoint a council of experts to advise him. Over a six-month period starting in autumn 2016, he consulted twenty experts, eight of whom were affiliated with, or openly sympathetic to, NK.<sup>22</sup> Their final report recommended the enactment of a one-off abdication bill. The bill was duly drafted and approved by the Diet.

### 3. Succession

Emperor Akihito was reportedly shocked by the criticism leveled at him by certain experts during the consultation period, and he was displeased, too, with the compromised outcome.<sup>23</sup> Still, it rendered abdication possible for the first time in 200 years. The emperor duly abdicated on 30 April 2019 in a brief rite in the Matsu no Ma 松の間 chamber of the palace.<sup>24</sup> He stood with the empress before an audience of some 300 dignitaries. Prime Minister Abe faced them, and delivered a short speech, expressing his respect and gratitude for the emperor's reign on behalf of the Japanese people. The emperor responded by articulating his love and respect for the people of Japan. He thanked them for supporting his symbolic role, and concluded with a prayer that the new Reiwa 令和 era might be one of peace and happiness.<sup>25</sup>

Then, at 10.30 am on 1 May, Crown Prince Naruhito received the sword and jewel of the imperial regalia in the very brief rite known as *kenji tō shōkei no gi* 剣璽等承継の儀.<sup>26</sup> This regalia transfer took place in the same Matsu

no Ma chamber in the presence of the prime minister, the chief justice of the Supreme Court, the speaker of the Lower House and the president of the Upper House, among others, and was an entirely male affair. In line with prewar practice, the participation of the empress and the many other female members of the imperial family was not permitted. After the transfer of regalia, the emperor proceeded directly to the palace shrine-complex to inform the Sun Goddess and his ancestors of his succession. In a third ritual phase, Emperor Naruhito, accompanied now by the empress, returned to the Matsu no Ma to receive the heads of the three branches of government and some 250 dignitaries, and deliver his inaugural address to the nation.<sup>27</sup> Here, he spoke of his deep respect for his father and mother for their unwavering devotion to the people. He, for his part, promised to think always of the people and be with them.

He committed himself to fulfilling his constitutional role as symbolic emperor, and prayed for peace.

On 4 May, members of the general public were admitted to the palace grounds, and the emperor and empress appeared on the veranda of the Chōwaden building to greet them. The emperor thanked the public for their felicitations, and expressed his wish that Japan might work with other nations to promote peace in the world. On 22 October, the emperor and empress ascended their respective thrones before an assembly of dignitaries, Japanese and foreign, in the rite known now as the *Sokuirei seiden no gi* 即位正殿の儀 enthronement rite.<sup>28</sup> In his brief address, Emperor Naruhito pledged to act according to the Constitution, “while always wishing for the happiness of the people and the peace of the world, turning my thoughts to the people and standing by them.” The afternoon parade, in which emperor and empress were to ride in an open-top car west through the city to Akasaka, was postponed out of consideration

for the victims of the recent typhoon, and was re-scheduled for 10 November. The abdication, regalia transfer and enthronement were held as “acts in matters of state.” It is worth pointing out that, although they are broadly secular in nature, they are not entirely so. At the very least, the sword and the jewel that featured in all three rites are sacred objects, and are treated as such. According to Japan’s seventh century state foundation myths, they, along with a sacred mirror, were handed by the Sun Goddess to her grandson before he descended to earth. These objects are testament, in other words, to the sacred nature of Japanese emperorship.

The climax of the enthronement sequence is indisputably sacred in character. This is the *daijōsai* 大嘗祭 or “rite of great feasting,” which took place on the night of 14-15 November. A complex of wooden buildings, featuring two main pavilions (the Yukiden 悠紀田 and Sukiden 主基田), was erected on the palace grounds. Both pavilions were furnished with bed and shroud to welcome the Sun Goddess. Two different districts of Japan – the Yuki field in Tochigi Prefecture to the east of Tokyo and the Suki field in Kyoto to the west – supplied the rice and millet for feasting. In each pavilion, the emperor offered the Sun Goddess meals of rice and millet and rice wine, before partaking of them himself. He emerged at dawn on November 15, transformed by his mystical communion with his ancestress. The process of emperor making was now complete.

This enthronement sequence – regalia transfer, enthronement and *daijōsai* – is of great vintage. In some form or other, the rites can be traced back to the 7<sup>th</sup> Century. They have played a vital role in producing and reproducing Japan’s emperor-centered order for over a millennium.<sup>29</sup> The *daijōsai*, in particular, has undergone multiple interpretations over time, and its mise-en-scène has changed drastically, too. Only in modern times has it been regarded as the most important of the three

enthronement rites, and this is because it was interpreted now as the ultimate act of imperial piety. It served, by the same token, as dramatic proof that the emperor was indeed descended from the Sun Goddess. It was for this reason that the modern *daijōsai* as performed by the Meiji, Taishō and Shōwa emperors were staged as truly national events; they sought to engage the whole of Japan and, indeed, the empire with the imperial myth.

Emperor Akihito's *daijōsai*, the first in the postwar era, took place on the night of 22-23 November 1990. It had the distinction of being the first ever to cause legal controversy. The controversy and its resolution deserve to be more widely known. Articles 20 and 89 of the Constitution provide for the separation of state and religion. And yet, the state funded the *daijōsai*, which is "religious" to the extent that it features the Sun Goddess. The government fended off accusations of unconstitutionality by citing the "object and effect" principle established in a landmark Supreme Court ruling in 1977.<sup>30</sup> The essence of the ruling was that the state may engage with religion, so long as neither the "object" nor the "effect" of its engagement amounts to the promotion of any specific religion. The government's position was that public funding of the *daijōsai* contravened neither criterion. Many citizens' groups disagreed, and took legal action, but their suits all foundered on the "object and effect" principle.<sup>31</sup>



**Prince Akishino no Miya Fumihito 秋篠宮文仁 with the Princess at his birthday press conference, November 2018<sup>32</sup>**

Controversy surrounded the 2019 *daijōsai*, too, with citizens' groups poised once more to take legal action against the government, even though they stand little chance of success. This time, however, they had the moral support of Prince Akishino no Miya Fumihito, the new emperor's younger brother and next in line to the throne. At his birthday meeting with the press on 11 November 2018, the prince queried the wisdom of the government underwriting the *daijōsai* as it had in 1990. He confessed it left him feeling "uneasy." The cause of his uneasiness was this: the government sets aside two funds for imperial family use. There is the "court fund" (*kyūteihi* 宮廷費), totaling some \$83 million, which covers all of the emperor's public activities – his "acts in matters of state." There is also a much more modest "imperial family fund" (*naiteihi* 内廷費) of some \$2.7 million, which is for the private use of the emperor and his family.<sup>33</sup>

Both funds are, of course, tax payers' money, but the prince was uneasy at the government's insistence on using the "court fund" to underwrite the "religious" *daijōsai*. This implied that the *daijōsai* was, after all, a public not private act.<sup>34</sup> The prince's radical idea, intended to preserve the constitutional

separation of state and religion, was that the *daijōsai* be scaled back to a point where it might be covered entirely by the “imperial family fund.” The prince had raised this matter time and again with Imperial Household officials, but, he lamented, they had “refused to pay him heed.” He was, indeed, ignored by both the Imperial Household and the Abe administration.<sup>35</sup> No one doubts that the prince was articulating views shared by his older brother and father.

In any case, the *daijōsai* rite remains essential to emperor-making in Japan. In its postwar manifestation, it merits attention as one further piece of evidence of the sacred encroaching into Japan’s public sphere. By “the sacred,” I refer specifically to ritual performances involving the Sun Goddess, and to the myth of the emperor’s descent from the Sun Goddess, which the rites serve to animate. The postwar Constitution sought to confine the sacred to the private sphere of the imperial court, and yet, in the seven decades since its promulgation – and especially during Abe Shinzō’s premiership – the sacred has become ever more public. Abe’s active association with the Ise Shrines is a case in point. In 2013, when the Ise Shrines underwent their vicennial rebuild, he played a key ritual role, escorting the Sun Goddess on her solemn progress through the night from old shrine to new.<sup>36</sup> In 2016, he hosted the G7 summit in Ise, and took heads of the G7 states to the shrines as though they were a national site. In law, of course, they are a private religious juridical entity. In both 2017 and 2018, Abe participated in the *niinamesai* 新嘗祭 court rite, which also celebrates the Sun Goddess. The rite is held within the palace’s shrine complex annually on 23 November.<sup>37</sup> It was in this broader context that the Abe administration funded Emperor Naruhito’s *daijōsai* in November 2019.



安倍晋三  
@AbeShinzo

フォローする

凜とした空気の中、宮中において厳かに行われた新嘗祭神嘉殿の儀に参列いたしました。五穀豊穡に感謝の念を捧げ、そして、皇室の弥栄と国家の安寧をお祈りいたしました。



5:53 - 2018年11月23日

**Prime Minister Abe Shinzō at the palace shrine-complex, 23 November 2018<sup>38</sup>**

2018 marked the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Meiji Restoration, which brought emperors out of the shadows of the premodern court, allowing them to occupy the center of modern Japan’s public culture. The myth of the emperor’s descent from the Sun Goddess, which the Meiji government actively promoted and exploited, remains alive and well today. The myth, and the rites that sustain it, will be on more secure footing if the Abe administration effects its promised revisions to the Constitution. Article 20 deals with the separation of state and religion. The government plans to retain the principle of separation, of course, but wishes to render the *daijōsai* and other imperial court rites as non-religious “social rituals or customary practices.”<sup>39</sup> If, and when, the revisions are effected, there will be no further impediment to the state’s sponsorship of, and engagement with, such events. Their place in the public sphere will be assured.



We have seen evidence that the imperial institution itself is highly contested. The emperor's 2016 address, the abdication bill that it produced, and the very fact that an emperor abdicated for the first time in two hundred years, have highlighted the multiplicity of views on emperorship in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Japan. The prohibition of abdication, it should be stressed, is modern. There are fifty-eight known cases of emperors abdicating before the practice was prohibited in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Meiji bureaucrats ended abdication, fearful that it threatened the myth that guaranteed the stability of the imperial line. Their concerns are shared today by NK members with close ties to the Abe administration.

Let us not forget that there is, objectively speaking, a graver challenge to the imperial institution than abdication. It is the absence of male heirs. Emperor Naruhito's younger brother, Crown Prince Akishino no Miya, is now next in line to the throne, and *his* son the 13-year-old Hisahito 悠仁 will succeed him. If Hisahito produces no male heirs, that is it. This dire situation has generated impassioned debate about the pros and cons of female succession to the throne. According to the latest polls, 76% of the population would be happy to see a woman enthroned. There is, after all, ample precedent for this: women have succeeded to the throne on ten previous occasions. What is striking is that 74% have no objection to the offspring of a woman emperor succeeding to the throne. If this were to happen, it would be an historical first.<sup>40</sup>

Finally, it should be pointed out that, for ultraconservatives, the abdication issue and the future of the imperial line are intimately related. Yagi Hidetsugu 八木秀次, a radical conservative intellectual, who is sometimes referred to as Prime Minister Abe's "brain," puts it like this:

If an emperor is free to abdicate, it

won't be long before a man is free to decline the throne. Abdication, as the free choice of the emperor, can only lead in time to a man's right to refuse succession. [When this comes to pass,] the emperor system, which depends on an unbroken line of male heirs, will collapse.<sup>41</sup>

The historic precedent set by Akihito's abdication and the absence of male heirs will ensure that Japanese emperorship is contested for years to come.

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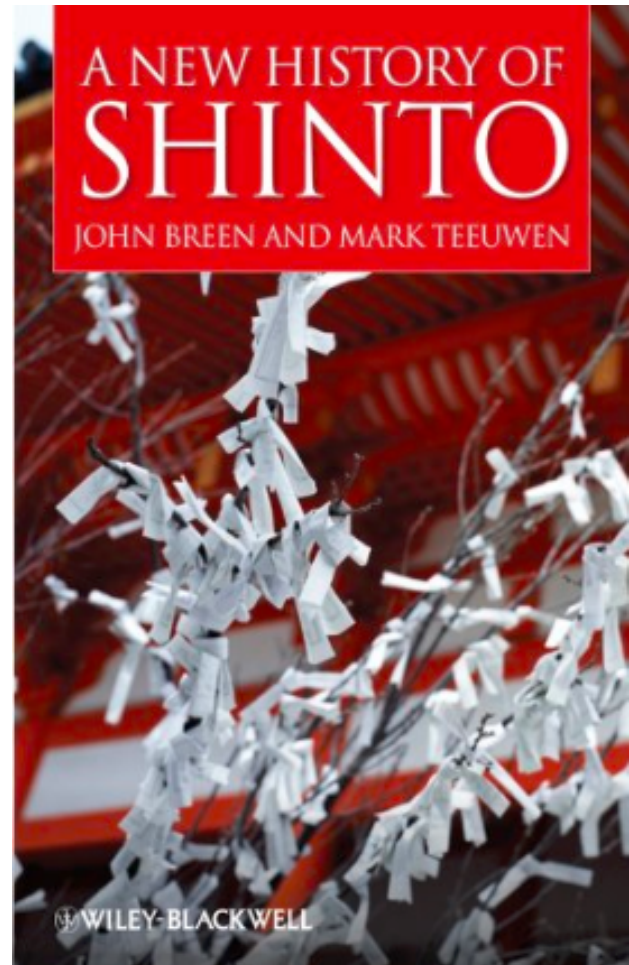
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Shirai Satoshi. *Kokutairon: Kiku to seijōki*. Shūeisha Shinsho, 2018

Teeuwen, Mark and John Breen. *A Social History of the Ise Shrines: Divine Capital*. Bloomsbury, 2017.

## Note

This is a revised, updated and expanded version of an article that was first published in Spanish as “El emperador ha hablado” (*Vanguardia Dossier: 71 Japón debilidad y fortaleza* (2018), pp. 39-42.) A much-abridged version will appear in Joy Hendry. *Understanding Japanese Society*. Routledge, 2019. The author would like to thank Geoffrey Wilkinson, Nick Breen and Mark Selden for helpful comments on earlier drafts.



***A new history of Shinto* (co-authored with Mark Teeuwen). Wiley-Blackwell, 2010**

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*Girei to kenryoku: Tennō no Meiji Ishin* 儀礼と権力 天皇の明治維新 Heibonsha, 2011.

**John Breen** is a professor at the International Research Center for Japanese Studies in Kyoto, where he edits the journal *Japan Review*. He taught Japanese and Japanese history at SOAS (University of London) before joining Nichibun in 2009.

Among his recent publications are the following books in English: *A Social History of the Ise Shrines: Divine Capital* (with Mark Teeuwen) Bloomsbury, 2017, and *A New History of Shinto* (with Mark Teeuwen) Wiley-Blackwell, 2011. He is also the author of two books in Japanese, *Shinto monogatari: Ise jingū no kingendaishi*, Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 2015 and *Girei to kenryoku: Tennō no Meiji ishin*, Heibonsha, 2011.

Among recent articles in English are “Ornamental Diplomacy: Emperor Meiji and the Monarchs of the Modern World.” In Robert Hellyer and Harald Fuess eds. *The Meiji Restoration: Japan as a Global Nation*. Cambridge University Press, 2020, and “Abdication, Succession and Japan’s Imperial Future: An Emperor’s Dilemma.” *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, 17:9, 3 (2019).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The official designation of the emperor's address is Shōchō toshite no o-tsutome ni tsuite no tennō heika no o-kotoba 象徴としてのお務めについての天皇陛下のおことば. The address can be replayed on the Kunaichō website, where the Japanese and English transcriptions can also be found: [here](#) and [here](#).

<sup>2</sup> The full Japanese title of the bill is Tennō no taii tō ni kansuru kōshitsu tenpan tokureihō 天皇の退位等に関する皇室典範特例法. The bill's nine articles can be accessed [here](#).

<sup>3</sup> [Source](#)

<sup>4</sup> The emperor's address in the aftermath of the Great East Japan earthquake can be replayed on the Kunaichō website; the Japanese text and English translation can be accessed there too: [here](#) and [here](#).

<sup>5</sup> For an overview of the activities of the emperor and empress at this time, see [here](#).

<sup>6</sup> The closest critical reading of the emperor's address can be found in Hara Takeshi 原武史. *Heisei no shūen: taii to tennō, kōgo* 平成の終焉: 退位と天皇皇后. Iwanami Shoten, 2019, pp.11-68.

<sup>7</sup> Abdication is hardly a new issue for the imperial family. In 1946, Prince Mikasa no Miya 三笠宮, Akihito's uncle, famously attacked the government's refusal to sanction abdication. The government was effectively "binding the emperor in chains, making him a slave of the cabinet." (*Asahi Shinbun* 17 December 2017)

<sup>8</sup> For the original Japanese, see [here](#). There is an English translation at [here](#).

<sup>9</sup> *Asahi shinbun* 28 October 2004.

<sup>10</sup> The emperor offered this view of the postwar constitution at a press conference to celebrate his 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. Note that here, too, he mentioned his struggle to interpret the meaning of "symbol of the state and of the Unity of the People." For the original Japanese and an English translation, see: [here](#).

<sup>11</sup> The occasion for this statement was the emperor's birthday press conference. See, for the Japanese original, [here](#) and, for the English translation, [here](#).

<sup>12</sup> For a survey of polls, see Hosaka Masayasu 保阪正康. *Tennō heika "seizen taii" e no omoi* 天皇陛下生前退位への思い. Mainichi Shinbun Shuppan, 2016, pp.85-88.

<sup>13</sup> The latest poll conducted by the *Asahi* newspaper in April 2019 shows that 76% of the population "feel an intimacy" with the imperial family. This is the highest "intimacy factor" ever recorded. (*Asahi Shinbun*, 19 April 2019.)

<sup>14</sup> For a recent academic study of Nippon Kaigi, see Thiery Guthmann. "Nationalist Circles in Japan Today: The Impossibility of Secularization." *Japan Review*, 30 (2017), pp.207-235.

<sup>15</sup> [Source](#)

<sup>16</sup> Kobori Keichiirō has articulated his views most cogently in *Kōdō* 弘道, the journal of the conservative organization, Nippon Kōdōkai 日本弘道会. See "Tennō = shōchōkan no konjaku." 天皇象徴感の今昔 *Kōdō* (January 2018), pp. 6-11. Kobori refers frequently in his recent writings to the "kokutai-wrecking Constitution."

<sup>17</sup> Murata Haruki. "Sakunen hachigatsu yōka no heika no o-kotoba wa." 昨年八月八日の陛下のお言葉 *Seiron* 326 (1 October 2017), p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> [Source](#)



<sup>20</sup> [Source](#)

<sup>21</sup> For the events behind NHK's July broadcast, which was watched by 14 million people, see Gomi Yōji 五味洋治. *Seizen taii o meguru Abe shushō no sakubō* 生前退位をめぐる安倍首相の策謀. Takarajimasha Shinsho, 2017, pp. 20-24, and Hosaka. *Tennō heika*, pp. 14-16 and pp. 81-83.

<sup>22</sup> On the advisory council (*yūshokusha kaigi* 有職者会議) and its experts, see Hara. *Heisei no shūen*, pp. 4-6, and Gomi. *Seizen taii*, pp. 104-109. [The agenda and the minutes of the several council meetings are accessible on the website of the Prime Minister's Office.](#)

<sup>23</sup> For the emperor's shock, see both *Mainichi shinbun* 21 May 2017 and the discussion in Shirai Satoshi 白井聡. *Kokutairon: Kiku to seijōki* 菊と星条旗. Shūeisha Shinsho, 2018, pp.16-19.

<sup>24</sup> The official name given to the abdication is *Taii rei seiden no gi* 退位礼正殿の儀 or (Palace rite of abdication.)

<sup>25</sup> The emperor's address in both English and Japanese can be accessed on the Imperial Household website: [here](#) and [here](#).

<sup>26</sup> *Ken* is "sword" and *ji* is "jewel." *Tō*, meaning "et cetera," refers to the fact that the emperor receives other objects, too. These objects include the state seal (*kokuji* 国璽) and the imperial seal (*gyoji* 御璽) and also the entire palace shrine-complex. This rite used to be known simply as the *senso* 践祚 or succession rite.

<sup>27</sup> This audience is officially known as the *Sokuigo chōken no gi* 即位後朝見の儀 or "Rite of audience after succession."

<sup>28</sup> This rite was formerly known simply as the *sokui* rite.

<sup>29</sup> For a concise critical history of the *daijōsai*, see John Breen and Mark Teeuwen. *A New history of Shinto*. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), Chapter 5.

<sup>30</sup> This principle is known in Japanese as *mokuteki kōka kijun* 目的効果基準

<sup>31</sup> For a summary view of the legal controversy concerning the 1999 *daijōsai*, see Breen and Teeuwen 2011, Chapter 5.

<sup>32</sup> [Source](#)

<sup>33</sup> It is, incidentally, this latter fund which pays for the rites performed by the emperor and empress at the palace shrine-complex.

<sup>34</sup> The total budget for the 2019 *daijōsai* is set by the government at \$21 million.

<sup>35</sup> The full text of the prince's statement on the *daijōsai* can be accessed on the [Imperial Household home page](#).

<sup>36</sup> On postwar conservative administrations' cultivation of the Ise shrines, see Mark Teeuwen and John Breen. *A Social History of the Ise Shrines: Divine Capital*. Bloomsbury, 2017, especially Chapter 10.

<sup>37</sup> The *niinamesai* is the annual version of the once-in-a-reign *daijōsai*. The prime minister informed the nation of his participation on Twitter.

<sup>38</sup> [Source](#)

<sup>39</sup> For the LDP's proposed revisions to Article 20, see Jiyūminshutō comp. [Nihonkoku kenpō kaisei sōan](#) (2012), p.7

<sup>40</sup> The poll referred to was conducted by the *Asahi shinbun*, and published on 19 April 2019.

<sup>41</sup> *Asahi Shinbun* 10 September 2016. For Yagi's intimate relationship to PM Abe, see also *Asahi Shinbun* 28 March 2018.