

Ancient lineage, the yamato dynasty essay

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The ancient lineage of Japanese Yamato Emperors have ruled with diverse layers of power for centuries.

Cultural and social changes affected the political influence and power of the “Sun Line” dynasty. But, because of the religious aspects of the divine authority of the emperor, the dynasty was manipulated for political legitimacy instead of being totally annihilated. Thus, the dynasty has survived from the legendary Jimmu in 660 to the present day 125th Emperor Akihito. Shinto, the native religion of Japan, defines the emperor’s authority in Japan.

The fundamental document of Shinto is the Kojiki, (Record of Ancient Matters). The Kojiki consists of an account of Japan from its creation to approximately the year A. D. 500, plus additional genealogical data about the imperial family for the next century. # Written in 712 and considered one of Japan’s earliest remaining works, the Kojiki establishes the Yamato imperial kami as the dominant kami of Japan, which, correspondingly substantiates the royal authority. The kami is a polytheistic host that, on the one hand animistically inhabits nature and, on the other hand, is intimately associated with people and their most basic units of social organization. Amaterasu-Opo-Mi-Kami is the Sun Goddess, the dominant kami of the Yamato royal clan, or uji.

Amaterasu founded the imperial line when she sent her grandson down from the heaven to rule the “land of luxuriant rice fields”. # An earlier tale in Kojiki tells how Amaterasu was so frightened by the behaviour of her brother Susano-o that she hid in a cave. The world was therefore plunged into

darkness and her fellow kami tried desperately to entice her out. As a trick, Amaterasu was told that a rival kami even more powerful than she had arrived.

Then a female kami danced a ribald dance outside the cave, and so loud was the merriment that Amaterasu's curiosity got the better of her. She peeped cautiously out of the cave. The first things she saw were a precious jewel hanging from a tree, and next to it the face of her new rival. This made her start, and she was grabbed before she had time to realize that what she was actually looking at was her own reflection in a bronze mirror.

The mirror and the jewel that had restored light to the world became the first two items in the imperial regalia. The three items in the imperial regalia are objects that were, and still are, the legitimates of kingship: the symbol and guarantee of the eternity of the imperial throne. The third item in the imperial regalia, the sword, is named Kusa-nagi, ? " grass-mower' or ? " grass-pacifier' in the Kojiki. # In the province of Izumo lived a fierce serpent with eight heads and tails. The kami Susano-o resolved to destroy the serpent. He began by getting it drunk on sake and then hewed off its heads and tails. But as he reached the tail portion his blade was turned, and Susano-o discovered a sword hidden there. As it was a very fine sword, he presented it to his sister Amaterasu, and she handed the sacred sword, the mirror and the jewel to her grandson Ninigi when he took possession of the earth.

He eventually passed the throne items on to his grandson Jimmu, identified as the first emperor of Japan, to whom traditionally are given the dates of

660 – 585 BC. The three items were handed down as the symbols of sovereignty from one emperor to the next. The imperial regalia was repeatedly taken into battle to establish royal legitimacy. During the Gempei war (1180-85), the sacred link between the emperor and the crown jewels was of vital importance in determining the righteousness of the causes and interests espoused by the rival sides. A decisive battle between the Taira and Minamoto rival clans took place in the narrow straits of Shimonoseki that divide Honshu from Kyushu at a place called Dan no Ura.

The Taira clan took with them the sacred person of the Emperor Antoku, now eight years old. He had with him three items of imperial regalia that proved he was genuine. When it became apparent that the sea battle at Dan no Ura in 1185 was lost, the imperial grandmother took the child emperor in her arms and with the words, “ This country is a place of sorrow; I? ” m taking you to a happy realm called paradise”, sank with him beneath the waves. # Little more than a century was to pass before the imperial regalia had a crucial role to play again in determining the legitimacy of the claimants to the throne and swaying the allegiance of their supporters. When his mission to overthrow the shogunate become know in 1331, Emperor Godaigo fled Kyoto with the imperial regalia to Mount Kasagi. Godaigo fled to the mountains again in 1336.

As before he took the imperial regalia with him, but this time he had apparently left behind a set of copies of the replicas which were used in the enthronement ceremony arranged for the nominee of the Northern Court, Emperor Komyo. From that time on the Southern Court argued for their

legitimacy on the grounds that they had the genuine replicas while the Northern Court had only fake replicas! In 1392, under the good offices of Shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu, the two imperial lines were reunited. The last Southern emperor, Go Kameyama (1338-92) returned the regalia to Kyoto at the time of reunification. # The imperial succession remained with the Northern emperor until the present day. The imperial regalia exemplifies the religious authority and dominance that prevailed with the Yamato line. But, this authority and power were manipulated by outside influence. This outside influence can first be clearly defined with the dominance of Buddhism during the end of the Nara period.

The Emperor Shomu abdicated the throne in 749 in favor of his daughter and appeared before the daibatsu and humbly declared himself a servant to the three Buddhist treasures (the Buddha, the law, and the priesthood). Shomu also founded a national Buddhist center at the Todaiji Temple in Nara and caused branch temples and nunneries to be constructed in the provinces. Shomu's great undertaking so taxed the public resources of the Nara court that it was probably the single most important factor in stimulating a decline in national administration over the next century and a half. His daughter became closely involved with a faith-healing priest named Dokyo (d. 772).

Before the loss of his patroness, who died in 770, Dokyo rose to the highest ecclesiastical and ministerial positions in the land and even sought, through the pronouncement of an oracle, to ascend the throne itself. The Dokyo affair convinced the court of two things: that Nara, with its many Buddhist establishments and its ubiquitous priesthood, was no longer satisfactory for

the conduct of secular affairs; and henceforth the line of succession to the throne should be confined solely to male members of the imperial family. Thus, in 794, the court moved to the newly constructed city of Heian or Kyoto, about twenty-eight miles north of Nara. The next major outside influence to the imperial line occurred during the Heian period.

The powerful Fujiwara clan came to dominate the imperial family through marriage. This was made possible by the peculiarities of Heian marriage customs. Usually, courtiers of this age establish formal residence in the homes of their wives. The typical courtier kept one or more secondary wives and mistresses, and frequently was lax in visiting his principal wife, not calling upon her more than once or twice a month.

Yet, the principal wife's home remained their joint residence and it was there that the children were raised. The Fujiwara offspring of such unions were reared in the mansions of the maternal relatives. Between the late ninth and late eleventh centuries, emperors without exception were the sons of Fujiwara mothers, and identified themselves as closely with the Fujiwara as with the imperial family. The Fujiwara in 858 assumed the office of imperial regent and within a century became the undisputed wielders of absolute power at court.

The next great outside influence to the imperial court developed in the Japanese countryside. The samurai leaders, the men who "served", came from a background of courtier society itself. # The dominance of the Fujiwara limited opportunities for other courtiers, so many individuals left Kyoto to accept appointments to offices in the provincial governments. Settling

permanently in the provinces after expiration of their terms of office, they took up warrior way, became the leaders of clans, and attracted members of lesser samurai families as the vassals.

The two dominant clans, the Ise Taira and Minamoto, were both branch families of the imperial line. The Minamoto clan developed their horsemanship and martial powers in the Kanto plains during grueling wars fought in the late 1100s against the rebelling Mutsu and Dewa provinces in the north. During this time, the Ise Taira steadily acquired land and influence in the central and western provinces. The Taira benefited by their proximity to court in Kyoto and the political developments in the late eleventh century. During the last years of the regent Yorimichi (990-1074), Fujiwara power in Kyoto began to wane, and the first of a series of abdicated sovereigns arose to reassert the traditional claim of the imperial family to rule. The abdicated sovereigns engaged the Ise Taira as aides and official, who became the first noncourtiers to gain ceremonial admittance to the imperial palace. Two battles in Kyoto, 1156 and 1159, finally resulted in a resounding victory of the Ise Taira over the Minamoto and ascendancy at court of Taira Kiyomori (1118-81) for twenty years. Kiyomori also had direct influence on the emperor; his grandson, Emperor Antoku.

Kenreimon'in (1155-1213), the daughter of Kiyomori, became a nun after the death at sea of her eight year old son, Emperor Antoki during the battle of Dan-no-ura. But, as The Tale of Heike states, "The proud do not endure; they are like a dream on a spring night; The mighty fall at last, they are as dust before the wind." # With the defeat of the Taira, Yoritomo (1147-99)

founded the new Minamoto government at Kamakura. This government is known in English as the shogunate after the title of shogun (“generalissimo”) that the Minamoto chieftan derived from the imperial court. Yoritomo was careful to secure imperial sanctification both for his own position and for the important administrative acts of the new shogunate, such as the expansion of its power to the national level through the appointment of Minamoto vassals as land stewards and constable to estates and provinces throughout the country. # The position of shogun was also made hereditary within the Minamoto family. # Government exercised by the shogun was called the bakufu, a name derived from the maku, the curtains that surrounded a general’s headquarters on a battlefield. It was a good choice for a new system of ruling that relegated the emperor to the position of figurehead with immense religious power but no political power.

The Minamoto did not have long to enjoy their success. Yoritomo was killed in a riding accident in 1199, and their dynasty only lasted two more generations before they were overthrown by the Hojo. Out of respect for the tradition of the title staying with the Minamoto, the Hojo rulers styled themselves regents rather than shoguns. Unlike Minamoto Yoritomo, who had governed in a highly autocratic way, the Hojo opened a Council of State to enable chieftains of the other great samurai families of the east to participate in the decision making of the shogunate.

Moreover, the Hojo based their rule on a epochal formulary, the Joze Code of 1232, which contained detailed provisions dealing with those matters that were of most concern to the members of a warrior class, including the duties

of land stewards and constables, the distribution of fiefs, and the settlement of armed disputes. It was therefore the Hojo shikken (regency), not the Minamoto bakufu, that faced a brief, and failed attempt at imperial restoration in 1221. Afterwards, the Hojo stripped the imperial family of nearly all political power and forced an agreement between the so-called senior and junior branches of the imperial family to alternately provide candidates for the emperorship. The decline of the Kamakura shogunate in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries was caused by many factors. The first factor was two failed attempts by the Mongols to invade Japan in 1274 and 1281. Both invasions took place in northern Kyushu and failed due to typhoons that forced the Mongols back onto their ships, out to open water, and subsequently, after severe losses, back to the continent. Another factor was the emergence in various regions of new warrior bands, organized originally as a military hegemony over the eastern provinces, that were difficult for the shogunate to control.

Still another factor was a succession dispute in 1318, when Godaigo (1288-1339), a forceful and headstrong member of the junior branch, ascended the throne and determined not only to transmit the line of succession exclusively to his own descendants but also to restore the throne to real power. # Godaigo's restoration or loyalist movement was successful in 1333 when the forces of both courtiers and samurai overthrew the Kamakura shogunate and gave the emperor the opportunity to rule and reign. But, the Restoration was totally unable to meet the real governing needs of the medieval age and barely lasted three years. The Restoration Regime was overthrown in 1336 by Ashikaga Takauji. After driving Godaigo and his supporters to the

mountains of Yoshino in the south, Takauji placed a member of the senior branch of the imperial family on the throne and established a new military administration in Kyoto, known as the Ashikaga, or Muromachi shogunate (1336-1573). The first half-century is known as the epoch of the Northern and Southern Courts because Godaigo and his successors maintained an opposition Southern Court at Yoshino that challenged the legitimacy of the puppet Northern Court of the Ashikaga in Kyoto.

In 1392 the Ashikaga, promising a return of alternate succession, persuaded the Southern emperor (Godaigo's grandson) to return to Kyoto and thus brought to an end the great dynastic schism. The Ashikaga never kept their promise of returning to alternate succession and the southern branch of the imperial family slipped into oblivion. Even the northern branch although left in possession of the throne, retained no governing authority whatever, and from this time on the emperorship was little more than a legitimating talisman for the rule of successive military houses. The Muromachi period was the most tumultuous age in Japanese history. During its two and a half centuries, there was almost continuous warfare in one part of the country or another. The third Ashikaga shogun, Yoshimitsu (1358-1408), brought to order much of Japan in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries by skillfully imposing his control over barons and daimyos.

But after Yoshimitsu's death, the shogun- gate steadily declined: and for its last hundred years or so it was almost completely powerless as a central government. The Onin War (1467-77) was a shogunal succession dispute between the shogun Yoshimasa's brother and son. # The country slipped

into a century of conflict and disunion known as the “ age of provincial wars. ” The Ashikaga shoguns became totally powerless, and the domains of many daimyos were torn sunder either by the internecine warfare or by great peasant uprisings. The imperial family gradually withdrew from participation in all but the most essential courtly functions, and often they found themselves embarrassingly unable even to defray the costs. The coronation of an emperor of the early sixteenth century was postponed for more than twenty years for lack of funds.

By mid-sixteenth century, much of Japan had been brought under the control of a new class of sturdy and progressive daimyos. Unification and the establishment of a lasting military hegemony were ultimately carried out by three great chieftains-Oda Nobunaga (1534-82), Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536-98), and Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542-1616)-all of whom came from the region between the central provinces and the Kanto# Nobunaga led his armies into Kyoto in 1568 and five years later dissolved the Muromachi shogunate. Upon his assassination in 1582 by one of his generals, another general Hideyoshi assumed control and brought the remainder of Japan under his control. Upon Hideyoshi's death in 1598, he left an infant son to succeed him, and a power struggle between two great daimyos ensued. With the victory of Tokugawa Ieyasu, the daimyo at Edo, the Tokugawa shogunate was established and endured until the late nineteenth century.

The Meiji Restoration, named after the Emperor Meiji (1852-1912) who ascended the throne in 1867 at the age of fifteen, was a political revolution from above carried out by younger enlightened members of Japan's ruling

samurai class. The shogun capitulated and the restoration was completed by early 1867 with very little loss of blood. The Meiji restoration brought modernization and industrialization to Japan. The imperial line of Japan survived due to their religious and political importance. The Yamato dynasty was used to legitimate shoguns political power and controlled by intermarriage, but was never destroyed.

Emperor Akihito is a testimony of the imperial line's resiliency.