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State Myth Analysis Paper

In Kenneth J. Ruoff's *Imperial Japan at its Zenith*, the spirit of Japan in 1940 is captured quickly and succinctly in a single quote: "Memory is central to identity, and national memories shape national identities (Ruoff 2)." Though nationalism played a prevalent role globally throughout the early twentieth century, the method by which a deep sense of national identity was applied and indoctrinated into Japanese citizens is particular at this time in the divinity distinct to the central figure of society: the emperor. Descended from Emperor Jimmu—a fictional character by all rights, great grandson of the first imperial ancestor to descend from the heavens—the divinity of the emperor gave divinity to the state. That said, this mythical divinity of the regime in Imperial Japan allowed for a strong social cohesion throughout not only Japan, but the Japanese colonial empire as well. Using Benedict Anderson's theory of imagined communities, which proposes a sense of national identity in order to foster national loyalty, as well as examples of civilians within the Japanese empire expressing this loyalty to the regime, the idea of divinity as the central part of an empire will be presented not only as the centerpiece of a nationalist society, but as a figure that allows civilians to adhere not only to the state, but to the united social order that props up the legitimacy of the state.

The narrative of a nation ruled by divine right rested on the aforementioned mythical figure of Emperor Jimmu—who was not only the centerpiece of the mythical foundations of Imperial Japan, but also deeply connected to another social mechanism tied tightly with the state

—the state religion, Shintoism. Jimmu, blessed by the Sun Goddess Amaterasu, had been given directive to carry out imperial rule, and thus his existence not only coincided with the state, but also with the deeply held religious beliefs of much of Japan; the state had been blessed to exist and prosper by the divine (Ruoff 2). Furthermore, Jimmu had only been *directed* to carry out imperial rule—the origins of the state were attributed to the Sun Goddess herself, who established the country and merely passed down imperial reign to Jimmu, who would further develop the country. During the 1940 celebration of the 2600th anniversary of the Imperial Empire, Prime Minister Konoe Fumimaro stated in his address to the Emperor Hirohito,

“...all succeeding emperors have inherited the divine rule, consolidated its foundation and added to the great Imperial plan straight down to the present—the 2,600th year... we hereby respectfully swear that we will, in perfect co-operation, observe the Imperial instruction, further bring the essence of our national structure into play and thereby overcome the present emergency and assist the Imperial plan of Universal Brotherhood, “imperial rule over the eight corners of the earth,” so that we may be able to respond to His Majesty’s boundless virtues (16).”

The state myth supports the idea that the legitimacy of the emperor and of the regime itself is in its divinity—having been blessed by Amaterasu, the concept of “imperial rule over the eight corners of the earth” (a saying attributed to Emperor Jimmu) intersects with two major aspects of society—nation and religion. As two aspects of society that generally effect the daily lives of a majority of citizens, the myth itself is integrated into daily life as a common belief held among social communities. Having inherited divine rule, all past and future emperors have the legitimacy to carry out their interpretation of Amaterasu’s vision of the Japanese empire—and

because their legitimacy is based in myth and fiction, their interpretation can never be anything but as correct as they claim it is. On this point, the unbroken imperial line of inherited divine right pointed not only to the resiliency and strength of the nation, but also, having lasted unbroken in its divine right since the time of Emperor Jimmu, pointed to what could easily be interpreted by Japanese civilians as celestial approval.

This national myth of divinity that upholds not only the regime, but the social structure, coincides with Benedict Anderson's theory of imagined communities. Nationalism, as defined by Anderson, is the imagined political community—imagined because even in the smallest of nations, citizens will never know, meet, or hear of more than a handful of their fellow countrymen, yet each imagines they live in communion (Anderson 6). He states: "...it is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately, it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings (Anderson 7)." By creating an imagined linkage between people whose only real connection is the state, the presence of the state begins to have a vital part in the relationships between people, and this presence becomes the reality of a community based around the state (Anderson 36). Whether Japanese civilians, particularly in the time period around 1940, were contributing to the state through monetary donations or through their own labor, they formed a community through their loyalty to the regime and through the collective action of validating the regime. The imagined community, essentially, revolves around a devotion not just to the state, but to the emperor and the myth of his divine right to rule over them as rightful subjects—because they have all

accepted this myth, they have accepted it as a community. The communal belief that the nation is propped up by divine ordinance allows citizens to be fully loyal to the nation, rather than loyal to the nation as an ideological force because it fosters the idea that one, as a citizen of a state, has been blessed by the divine to live in a state blessed by the divine. Zealous worship of the emperor, then, coincides with zealous worship of the state: “Employing the terminology of ancestor worship, Fujita [Munemitsu] stressed that the most important ritual for imperial subjects, whom he termed children of the emperor, to observe was that of worshipping the founder of the imperial dynasty (Ruoff 65)...” In this way, what Ruoff calls a “civil religion centered on the cult of the emperor” is created, where one’s life as connected to the nation connects directly with their spiritual beliefs (Ruoff 67).

With the increased militarization throughout the 1930’s and into World War II, this sense of an imagined community became deeply prevalent because it created a social necessity and a communal cohesion to rally around the regime. Ruoff exemplifies the anniversary celebrations as predominant displays of unity throughout the Japanese empire, as intended by the state:

“Organizers of the 2,600th anniversary celebrations intended for them to be participatory. Communal celebrations of the momentous anniversary suggested the extent of national unity more tangibly than did, for example, atomized individuals and families reading accounts of the national history, important though the national history publishing boom was. Public celebrations also provided imperial subjects with a sense of participating in the affairs of the nation (Ruoff 56).”

Precisely timed mass rituals, on that point, were a way of not only honoring the emperor and the nation, but also of performing rites of citizenship with their fellow countrymen. In devoting their

time to the nation—through labor, money, religious worshipping, and so on—they were devoting their time *collectively* to the nation, as to demonstrate national unity was to demonstrate community, since it was within the ability of all to participate in some way. Whether one was a citizen of Japan or part of Japan's colonial empire, a distinct unity could be achieved through ritualistic, communal reverence of not just the nation, but the figurehead of the nation:

“Virtually everyone throughout the empire, regardless of class, ethnicity, and myriad other differences, could take one minute to perform the ritual. With governmental and civil organizations enlisted to educate the citizenry about the required ritual and also to facilitate its performance, nearly total participation could be achieved (Ruoff 60).”

With the ability of everyone to participate in some way, social cohesion was achieved in that honoring the nation was not restricted by class, gender, age, and so on—as coinciding with Anderson's definition of nationalism, despite the fact that one can not know all of his fellow citizens, he can know that they are alike in their reverence of the emperor, and he can know that they are alike as he participates in a countrywide mass bowing towards the imperial palace.

Furthermore, looking more closely at the colonial empire specifically, the Japanese practice of ‘Japanizing’ colonial subjects is upheld by the divine ordinance of “imperial rule over the eight corners of the earth.” By imposing policies that implemented practices more in line with the Japanese way of life—through religion, language, names, and so on—colonial subjects were indoctrinated to believe the myth of their role as subjects to divine rule, and thus willingly modify their cultural practices to form a socially cohesive empire with the Imperial Emperor as the central figurehead (Ruoff 29). In Ruoff's analysis of colonial devotion to Japan, the poet Kim She-Jong recounts the childhood desire to make himself into a worthy ‘child of the emperor.’

“[He] even recalls witnessing as a junior high school student what he now understands was the kidnapping of Koreans to serve as forced laborers. At the time, he thought it natural that such Koreans be asked to exert themselves on behalf of their country, Imperial Japan (Ruoff 30).” Thus, by indoctrinating colonial subjects to the myth of divine imperial rule, these colonial subjects subjected themselves to exploitation and erasure of cultural heritage in exchange for social unity in the name of the emperor’s inherent right to rule over them as subjects of Japan.

In conclusion, by using the myth of imperial divinity, Imperial Japan was able to create a national community fully loyal to the regime rather than an ideology. In this way, the state was able to create a cohesive social force to unquestionably support and contribute to national interests—a cohesive social force that existed solely based on imagined constructs and state-enforced myths that created a horizontal, national linkage between citizens who ultimately had nothing in common part from the state itself. By creating a nation based on a communal belief, a Japanese identity was created around a figure of fiction—essentially: “Memory is central to identity, and national memories shape national identities (Ruoff 2).”

Works Cited

- Ruoff, Kenneth J.. Imperial Japan at Its Zenith: The Wartime Celebration of the Empire's 2,600th Anniversary (Studies of the Weatherhead East Asian Institute, Columbia University) (p. 29). Cornell University Press. Kindle Edition.
- Hamilton, M. (2006), *New Imaginings: The Legacy of Benedict Anderson and Alternative Engagements of Nationalism*. Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism