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The Emperor's Two Bodies: Japan's Imperial Crossroads?

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SYNOPSIS

This April, Emperor Akihito will become the first emperor to abdicate in modern Japanese history. His message to the Japanese people, broadcast in 2016, was the most significant imperial intervention since the end of the War.

COMMENTARY

ON THE surface, Emperor Akihito's abdication speech simply conveyed an ageing man's wish to retire, and this is all that the media has been content to convey. It was, however, a dramatic manoeuvre on a profound constitutional issue. It addressed the nature of the imperial throne and of the constitutional form of the Japanese state at a time when it faces revision.

The meaning of Akihito's abdication emerges only against the background of the Meiji-era's construction of Japan as an eternal sacred polity centred on a 'god-emperor', and the LDP-led government's project to revive that polity. To understand this, we need to turn to a constitutional and historical issue that will determine where Japan, and in turn its relationships with the region and the rest of the world, are headed.

'God-Emperor' and 'Human Emperor'

Mindful of the foundational role of emperor-worship in Japanese totalitarianism, the Allied Occupation administration had drafted a constitution that limited the emperor's role. They also had Akihito's father, Hirohito, declare formally that he was not '*akitsumikami* (現御神)', 'a living god on earth in human appearance'. Akihito's speech should be read alongside his father's *Humanity Declaration*. Each was meant to repudiate the emperor-worship system that developed under the Meiji concept of the Japanese state.

Each was issued at a liminal phase in Japanese history. Hirohito's declaration, given in January 1946, with the old order in ruins and a new being planned, made the emperor's role compatible with popular sovereignty. Akihito has spoken 70 years later, as the LDP is poised to deliver on its founding objective to replace the post-war constitution with a self-authored one written by the Japanese (*jishu kenpō* 自主憲法), and revive the form of the state, 'perpetual Japan', last seen under *The Constitution of the Great Empire of Japan*.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's government has made steady progress towards restoring the 'true shape' of Japan (in Abe's slogan, 'Beautiful Japan'). To the revisionists, the present order is a humiliating foreign imposition, and the limited role that it allows for a *symbol emperor* must be replaced for Japan to regain its rightful, hypermasculine form. The post-war constitution must be replaced with one that, like its hallowed predecessor, will articulate Japan's eternal theocratic political body (*shinkenteki kokutai kannen* 神権的国体観念).

Akihito's 'abdication speech' is a pointed rejection of this revanchist project and an affirmation of the emperor's role under popular sovereignty.

Body of the Emperor and Body of the Nation

Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of King Richard II* can help us bring out the meaning of the discourse on the body in Akihito's speech. To borrow Ernst Kantorowicz's 1957 analysis, the play exemplifies the medieval doctrine of the King's Two Bodies.

The king has a corporeal body but also one that 'is a Corporation in himself that liveth ever', a body natural that suffers and dies but also a body politic that is spiritual and divine, and persists without end as the basis of the continuity and eternity of the state. As Richard is forced to abdicate, he laments the separation of his immortal from his mortal body. He defrocks himself with hierophantic solemnity: 'bit by bit, he deprives his body politic of the symbols of its dignity and exposes his poor body natural to the eyes of his spectators':

> 'Now mark me how I will undo myself […]
> With my own tongue deny my sacred state […]
> (IV.i.203ff)

Akihito opens up the same contrast between his 'two bodies'. On one level, his speech is a plea for retirement. He dwells on the condition of his natural body. 'I am now more than 80 years old….I feel various constraints such as in my physical fitness'.

With equal exactitude, it is also a meditation on the nature of his incorporeal body: the throne and the Japanese state. 'I spent my days searching for and contemplating on what is the desirable role of the Emperor, who is designated to be the symbol of the State by the Constitution of Japan'. Indeed, he entitles the speech *Duties as the Symbol [Emperor]*.

Symbol of the State

He weaves together his two themes, his natural body and the role of the 'symbol emperor', into a proposal to abdicate that would simultaneously enact his argument. He attaches the formula '*the symbol of the state*' to each reference to his role with a tenacity that would be inexplicable if that doctrine were not now imperiled: 'I have felt that my travels to various places throughout Japan…are important acts of the Emperor as the symbol of the State […]'.

He recounts his acts as having been undertaken in his symbolic capacity, but also, inextricably, as acts of a natural body: 'travel to remote places and islands', 'listening to the voices' of the people, and being 'close to them'. His failing body no longer allows him to exercise his imperial role.

His narration of the importance of health and natural activity to the conduct of his *symbolic* role is a moving rejection of the emperor as a 'living god on earth', whose bodily voice the public had never heard until that radio broadcast of his father to the Japanese people to 'endure the unendurable' at noon on 15 August 1945.

Akihito ends by saying he hopes that through his resignation 'the duties of the emperor as the symbol of the State can continue steadily without a break'. He has stated his point repeatedly, but he will also now enact his message, for an *akitsumikami* emperor could not conceivably resign, however frail his human vessel.

His divine body originates an absolute power of state over his subjects. On the other hand, an emperor who *could* resign must be, as Akihito repeats, a 'symbol emperor', whose body politic, the state, derives from the will of the people. Behind the 'theological' question of the divinity of the emperor is the issue of the very survival of a post-war constitutional order based on popular sovereignty.

Reaction of Conservatives

This logic was not lost on conservatives. They reacted with dismay, arguing that the exigencies of Akihito's natural body are irrelevant to his role. He has merely to be. All the better if his body remain hidden in the depths of the imperial palace while his sovereign powers are articulated by the state.

Abdication would repudiate the conception of Japan as a holy Shinto state – a nation-body (*kokutai* 国体) embodied by a 'living god'. An imperial government would rule on his behalf, drawing directly on his unconditioned sovereignty, as did the Imperial Japanese Army, his 'thighs and elbows'. This political theological system anchored Japan's wartime totalitarianism and sanctified its outpouring of human sacrifice.

Akihito broadcast his speech just after constitutional revisionists won two-thirds of the Diet seat for the first time in post-war Japan and opened the way to the return of the eternal nation-body.

Had he not prepared to abdicate, and had his ageing body lost its physical powers, it might have been taken up in the project to rewrite the constitution and re-divinise the Japanese throne and state. His abdication, with its stunning repudiation of that project, ensures that his son, who holds to a similar conception of the imperial role, will

succeed, hopefully to assure the continuity ‘steadily without a break’ of the symbol emperor.

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