

# An Overview of Japanese Enthronement Ceremonies, Based on Ancient Documents, Focusing on *Daijōsai*

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Kokugakuin University Museum

## ► The Three Main Components of Enthronement Ritual

The ceremonies relating to accession to the throne are very ancient. They consist of three main parts: *Senso*, *Sokui no Gi*, and *Daijōsai*. In the *Senso* ceremonies, the emperor receives the imperial regalia (a Divine Sword and Divine Jewels), as proof of his accession to the throne. In modern times the *Senso* ceremony takes the form of *Kenjitō Shōkei no Gi*, and the new emperor now receives the State and Privy Seals in addition to the regalia. While this ceremony is conducted immediately upon the end of the previous reign in the presence of an audience of government officials, the *Sokui no Gi* is a more elaborate ceremony to proclaim the new emperor's enthronement throughout Japan and the world. It takes place at the State Hall of the Imperial Palace, with an audience of government officials and foreign dignitaries. The *Daijōsai*, which occurs only once in each reign, takes place following the *Sokui no Gi*, on the second Day of the Hare in November. It is based on a harvest festival celebrated annually, called the *Ninamesai*. In the *Daijōsai* the new emperor offers newly harvested grain to the ancestral deity of the imperial family, Amaterasu Ōmikami, symbolically sharing a meal with the deity.

## ► An Overview History of the *Daijōsai*

The custom of holding only one *Daijōsai* per reign was institutionalized at the end of the seventh century, during the reigns of Emperors Tenmu and Jitō. The outline of the ceremony was established and becoming standardized in the ninth century. Up until the Ōnin War of the

fifteenth century, the *Daijōsai* was held for each emperor without major alteration. However, the long-term battles of the Ōnin War devastated the imperial capital Kyoto, with the result that the *Daijōsai* was interrupted for more than 220 years. The ceremony was re-instituted for Emperor Higashiyama in 1687, and from the 1738 *Daijōsai* of Emperor Sakuramachi to the present it has been handed down without interruption.

### ► The Order of the *Daijōsai*

Rice plays an important role among the newly harvested grains offered to the imperial ancestral deity Amaterasu Ōmikami. The rice used in the *Daijōsai* is grown in two districts chosen by tortoise-shell divination, carried out in the fourth month by the lunar calendar. The districts are called *Yuki no Kuni* and *Suki no Kuni*. The people of these districts grow the rice to be used in the *Daijōsai* and transport it to the capital after the harvest.

The people of the *Yuki no Kuni* and *Suki no Kuni* districts also build the Ritual Palace (complex of buildings for *Daijōsai*) called the *Daijōkyū*, constructing it in five days from seven days before the *Daijōsai* ceremony and disassembling it afterwards. The Enthronement Palace mainly consists of two halls named for the districts and called the *Yuki* and *Suki* Halls (*Yukiden* and *Sukiden*), where the emperor performs the ceremony to offer the new harvest to his ancestral deity, Amaterasu Ōmikami, utilizing rice grown from each of the two districts.

In the center of each of these halls, a rest space for the deity is prepared, using a coverlet called a *Fusuma*, laid over stacked *tatami* mats. Significantly, the emperor neither touches nor faces the deity's rest space. The emperor's seat faces the Ise Grand Shrines, where the imperial ancestral deity Amaterasu Ōmikami is enshrined. A mat is laid in front of the emperor's seat in order for him to offer food to the deity personally.

### ► **The Day of the Daijōsai**

In addition to the *Yuki* and *Suki* Halls, the Ritual Palace includes a building called the *Kairyūden*, where at around 8:00 pm the emperor undergoes purification and changes into ritual vestments while he awaits the beginning of the ceremony called the Rite of Offering at the *Yuki* Hall (*Yukiden kyōsen no gi*). At around 9:00 pm the emperor proceeds from the *Kairyūden* to the *Yuki* Hall and washes his hands with purified water. The meal to be served to the imperial ancestral deity is prepared at the *Kashiwaya*, another building of the Ritual Palace, and taken from there to the *Yuki* Hall. The meal consists of new rice, millet, seafood (such as abalone, sea bream, and other items), fruit, and specially brewed sake. Each dish is placed before the emperor so that he may offer each one in order. Using chopsticks, the emperor places portions of each offering onto a plate, and handing each one to a court lady, who arranges the plate before the ancestral deity's place. This process is repeated for each dish, until all the oblations have been offered. Thereafter the emperor partakes of the meal, and the dishes are removed. This completes the Rite of Offering at the *Yuki* Hall, which ends around 10:00 pm.

The emperor returns to the *Kairyūden*, where he undergoes purification again, and changes into new vestments for the Rite of Offering at the *Suki* Hall, which begins at around 3:00 am. The procedure for this ceremony is essentially identical to the earlier observances at the *Yuki* Hall. Completion of the Rite of Offering at the *Suki* Hall ends the observances of the Ritual Palace.

For three days following the ceremonies of the Ritual Palace, Grand Banquets (*Sechi-e*) are held for three days. The emperor shares a meal made from the new harvest with those who attended the ceremonies, thankful that the *Daijōsai* has been successfully concluded.

► **The Purpose of the *Daijōsai***

Throughout the *Daijōsai* the emperor neither touches the deity's rest space nor faces in its direction but instead remains facing toward the Ise Grand Shrines. In effect, the emperor makes offerings to his ancestral deity Amaterasu Ōmikami from a distance, from the capital where he is located toward the place where she is enshrined. The ultimate purpose of the *Daijōsai* lies in the new emperor's prayers at the beginning of his reign to his ancestral deity for the peace and prosperity of the realm.

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