

Rituals of the Emperor and Esoteric Buddhism

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Kūkai, the Heian Buddhist (774–835) received permission from the government to construct a hall called Shingonin in the center of the royal palace for the performance of rituals of Esoteric Buddhism. Every year, a ritual called *Goshichinichimishiho* was performed at the hall over seven days every second week during the New Year. A mandala was displayed as the central divinity and other images of Esoteric Buddhism were installed. Many followers of Esoteric Buddhism prayed for national security and the harvest.

The most important thing to be noted in the ritual was that prayers were offered while sacred water was sprinkled on the emperor. When the emperor could not be present at the ritual, prayers were offered while sacred water was sprinkled on the emperor's clothes placed on a table. This ritual was believed to drive away evil spirits that may possess the emperor, and to make his body strong and full of life.

Goshichinichimishiho is reminiscent of rituals such as *Niinamematsuri* and *Onamematsuri* that took place in the royal palace from ancient times. *Niinamematsuri* is a harvest cult held in November every year. In this ritual the emperor slept and ate with his guest the god Amaterasuōmikami in a temporary palace. The importance of the ritual lies in the fact that it tried to soothe down and fortify the soul of the emperor, which would gradually have weakened as the year drew to an end. In this sense the ritual was performed to strengthen and revive the spirit of the emperor. When a new emperor ascended the throne, after the coronation, *Onamematsuri* was performed. In this case, the ritual to revive and fortify the soul of the emperor took place after the ritual where the soul of the previous emperor was succeeded by the new emperor. Thus the fortification and succession of the emperor's soul were the main importance of *Niinamematsuri* and *Onamematsuri*, whereas in Kūkai's *Goshichinichimishiho*, the prime importance of the ritual lay in driving away evil spirits that might possess the emperor. From the comparison of these two rituals, Kūkai must have been conscious of the political and religious function of *Niinamematsuri* and *Onamematsuri* and had the intention to oppose these rituals by introducing the ideology of Esoteric Buddhism in the center of a national ritual. *Goshichinichimishiho* performed in Shingonin was continued during the Heian period. In later times it became less popular because of the rise of the study of Japanese classical literature and Confucianism. After the Meiji Era it was completely abolished.