Hijiri rituals

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When undertaking a folkloristic study of the Japanese emperor system, the rituals which find repeated performance each year by the imperial family form one of the objects of such study. As the bearer of central kingly authority, the emperor was called *sumera mikoto* in the ancient period. This name refers to the fact that the words issued by the emperor at the beginning of each new year were thought to control the progress of the world.

The emperor was also called *hijiri no miko*, a title which appears as 聖天子 when written in Chinese characters. Here, the character 聖 is read *hijiri*, a word which comes from the homophone *hijiri* 日知り. *Hijiri* meant literally “day knower,” and referred to the person who judged whether a given day was auspicious, or who “read” the day, (in the sense of making a horoscopic judgement for various days). In turn, “day reading” (*hiyomi* 日読み) meant the same as the “calendar” (*koyomi* 曆), and *hijiri* thus signified a person who had control over time. In other words, the fact that the ancient emperor was the *hijiri* meant that he was in charge of the maintenance of time.

Although the techniques of imperial “day knowing” (*hijiri*) have ceased to exist in the present age, this essay attempts to discover remainders of *hijiri* rituals within current folk society, thus clarifying the cultural elements supporting the emperor system.

The essay introduces two examples. The first is the *shirayama* 白山 ritual found within the sacred dances (*kagura*) of the Oku-Mikawa region in Aichi Prefecture. Each year, ritualists performed seclusion in a building called the *shirayama*, and their reappearance signified the recreation of the world. What should especially be noticed here is the fact that the ruler of the local society, called the *kokuō chōja* (“kingly great man”) is depicted within the *kagura* dance as having possessed the ability to “read” the changing time of the four seasons beneath the tree which proclaimed the time.

The second example comes from annual rituals held at the Takamuko Shrine
in Mie Prefecture. What is important here is the ritual held on February 11 of each year in which the lion-head mask called the *otō* appears and renews the world. On that occasion, a "prognostication of the day" (*hiyorimi*) was performed, and the people believed that a new world had thus been born.

This kind of ceremony is not limited to these two cases, but can likely be discovered within the rituals practiced in various other parts of Japan as well.