

# Japan Fact Sheet

## NATIONAL FLAG AND ANTHEM

Modern symbols with historical roots

Japan's national flag is the Hinomaru, and its national anthem is "Kimigayo."

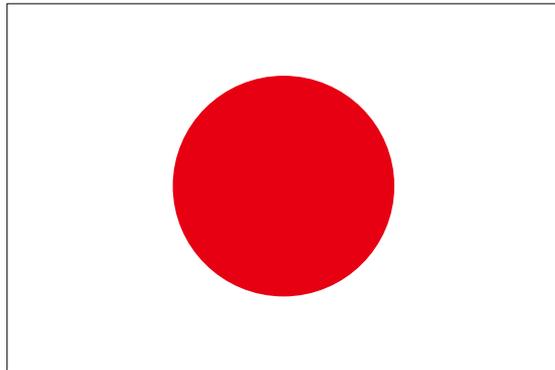
### The National Flag

#### The Red Circle Symbolizes the Sun

The national flag of Japan is called the Hinomaru. Its name comes from the Japanese word *hinomaru*, which literally means "sun circle." It is not certain just when the sun-circle symbol was first used on flags and banners. However, in the 12th century samurai warriors (*bushi*) appeared, and during the struggle for power between the Minamoto and Taira clans, *bushi* were fond of drawing sun circles on folding fans known as *gunsen*. In the Warring States period of the 15th and 16th centuries, when various military figures vied for spheres of influence, *hinomaru* were widely displayed as military insignia. One screen painting depicting the Battle of Sekigahara in 1600 shows a military force whose many banners all share the *hinomaru* motif. Although a red circle on a white background was the most common, there were also examples of gold circles on a deep blue background.

#### Sun-Circle Flags on Boats Carrying the Shogun

The use of a *hinomaru* as the symbol of the country as a whole dates from its use, by Toyotomi Hideyoshi in the late 16th century and Tokugawa Ieyasu in the early 17th century, on the flags of trading ships sent abroad. A screen with scenes from the 17th-century city of Edo (present-day Tokyo) shows a *hinomaru* flag being used as



#### Hinomaru

The vertical-to-horizontal ratio of the flag is set at 2:3; the disc is placed at the exact center; and the diameter of the disc is equal to three-fifths of the vertical measurement.



the symbol of a ship carrying the shogun. During the period of *sakoku*, or "national seclusion" (1639–1854), trade and other relations with all foreign countries except China, Korea, and Holland were prohibited, but when the Tokugawa shogunate began

#### Design motif

The *hinomaru* ("sun circle") symbol was featured on the uniforms of the Japanese women's hockey team at the Nagano Winter Olympic Games in 1998.

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to trade with other countries (including the United States and Russia) after 1854, Japanese trading ships again began to use a *hinomaru* flag.

The Tokugawa shogunate in 1854 accepted a proposal by Shimazu Nariakira of the Satsuma domain, and it was decided that Japanese ships, so as not to be mistaken for foreign vessels, would use a “*hinomaru* banner with a white background.” A *hinomaru* flag was displayed on the *Kanrin maru*, the official ship bearing Japanese officials sent to the United States in 1860.

## The Hinomaru as the Flag of Modern Japan

In 1868, the Meiji government was established after the Tokugawa family lost political power. According to Proclamation No. 57 issued by the Grand Council of State (Dajokan) on January 27, 1870, the Hinomaru was officially made the flag of Japan for use on commercial vessels.

The Hinomaru was first used on the grounds of government buildings in 1872, the year before the lunar calendar was officially replaced by the solar calendar. At that time many ordinary families and non-governmental establishments also expressed the desire to display the Hinomaru on holidays. In subsequent years, a number of notifications and documents were publicly issued which reinforced the Hinomaru's status as the flag symbolizing Japan.

## The National Anthem

### The Words of “Kimigayo”

The words of Japan's national anthem, “Kimigayo,” are taken from an ancient poem. In Japanese, the words are as follows:

*Kimigayo wa  
Chūyo ni yachiyo ni  
Sazare-ishi no  
Iwao to narite  
Koke no musu made*

The government presented its interpretation of the meaning of the



### Warrior banners

Sun symbols (*hinomaru*) can be seen on the war flags (*nobori*) pictured in this segment of a screen painting depicting the Battle of Nagashino in 1575.

The Battle of Nagashino, six-paneled folding screen, Treasures from Tokugawa Art Museum  
© Tokugawa Art Museum

anthem “Kimigayo” in the Diet during the deliberation of a bill to codify the country's national flag and anthem. At the plenary session of the House of Representatives of the Diet held on June 29, 1999, Prime Minister Obuchi explained as follows: “*Kimi* in ‘Kimigayo’, under the current Constitution of Japan, indicates the Emperor, who is the symbol of the State and of the unity of the people, deriving his position from the will of the people with whom resides sovereign power; ‘Kimigayo’ as a whole depicts the state of being of our country, which has the Emperor—deriving his position from the will of the people with whom resides sovereign power—as the symbol of itself and of the unity of the people; and it is appropriate to interpret the words of the anthem as praying for the lasting prosperity and peace of our country.”

It is not known who first wrote the words of the anthem. Although they are found in a poem contained in two anthologies of Japanese 31-syllable *waka*, namely, the 10th-century *Kokin wakashū* and the 11th-century *Wakan roeishū*, the name of the poem's author is unknown.

From very early times, the poem was recited to commemorate auspicious occasions and at banquets celebrating important events. The words were often put to music with melodies typical of such vocal styles as *yokyoku* (sung portions of Noh performances), *kouta* (popular songs with *shamisen* accompaniment), *joruri* (dramatic narrative chanting with *shamisen* accompaniment), *saireika* (festival songs), and

*biwauta* (songs with *biwa* accompaniment). The words were also used in fairy tales and other stories and even appeared in the Edo-period popular fiction known as *ukiyo-zoshi* and in collections of humorous *kyōka* (mad verse).

## The Music of “Kimigayo”

When the Meiji period began in 1868 and Japan made its start as a modern nation, there was not yet anything called a “national anthem.”

In 1869 the British military band instructor John William Fenton, who was then working in Yokohama, learned that Japan lacked a national anthem and told the members of Japan’s military band about the British national anthem “God Save the King.” Fenton emphasized the necessity of a national anthem and proposed that he would compose the music if someone would provide the words.

The band members, after consulting with their director, requested Artillery Captain Oyama Iwao (1842–1916) from present-day Kagoshima Prefecture, who was well versed in Japanese and Chinese history and literature, to select appropriate words for such an anthem. (Oyama later became Army Minister and a Field Marshal.)

Fenton put his own music to the “Kimigayo” words selected by Oyama from a *biwauta* titled *Horaisan*, and the first “Kimigayo” anthem was the result. The melody was, however, completely different from the one known today. It was



### Imperial greeting

Visitors wave the Hinomaru as they are greeted by imperial family members when the inner grounds of the imperial palace are opened to the public on January 2 every year.  
© Yomiuri Shimbun

performed, with the accompaniment of brass instruments, during an army parade in 1870, but it was later considered to be lacking in solemnity, and it was agreed that a revision was needed.

In 1876, Nakamura Suketsune, the director of the Naval Band, submitted to the Navy Ministry a proposal for changing the music, and on the basis of his proposal it was decided that the new melody should reflect the style used in musical chants performed at the imperial court. In July 1880, four persons were named to a committee to revise the music. They were Naval Band director Nakamura Suketsune; Army Band director Yotsumoto Yoshitoyo; the court director of *gagaku* (Japanese court music) performances, Hayashi Hiromori; and a German instructor under contract with the navy, Franz Eckert.

Finally a melody produced by Hayashi Hiromori was selected on the basis of the traditional scale used in *gagaku*. Eckert made a four-part vocal arrangement, and the new national anthem was first performed in the imperial palace on the Meiji Emperor’s birthday, November 3, 1880. This was the beginning of the “Kimigayo” national anthem we know today.

Words: Old poem (anonymous)  
Music: Hayashi Hiromori

ki mi ga - yo - wa chi yo ni - - ya chi yo ni sa za re i shi no

i wa o to na ri te ko ke no mu - su - ma - - de

“ Kimigayo”



### Box lunch

The *hinomaru* box lunch (*bento*) consists of a red pickled plum (*umeboshi*) centered on a bed of white rice.  
© Kodansha

## The Hinomaru and “Kimigayo” in Contemporary Japan

Today the Hinomaru and “Kimigayo” are displayed and performed during ceremonies on national holidays, during other public observances on auspicious occasions, and in ceremonies to welcome state guests from abroad.

In addition, many Japanese citizens display the Hinomaru outside their front doors on national holidays. The music of “Kimigayo” is performed also at non-official events, such as international sports events where Japanese teams are represented. At tournaments of *sumo*, which is considered by many to be Japan’s national sport, the national anthem is commonly performed prior to the award ceremony.

Acknowledging that the wide usage of the Hinomaru and “Kimigayo” has taken hold as customary law, the government, on the eve of the 21st century, deemed it appropriate to give them a clear basis in written law. A bill to codify the Hinomaru and “Kimigayo” as the national flag and anthem was submitted to the Diet in June 1999. The Law Concerning the National Flag and National Anthem was enacted by the Diet on August 9, 1999.

## Japanese National Holidays

**New Year’s Day (*Ganjitsu*)** January 1  
Celebrates the beginning of the new year.

**Coming-of-Age Day (*Seijin no Hi*)**  
2nd Monday in January  
This holiday honors young people who have reached the age of 20.

**National Foundation Day (*Kenkoku Kinen no Hi*)**  
February 11  
This holiday commemorates the start of the reign of Japan’s legendary first emperor, Jimmu.

**Vernal Equinox Day (*Shunbun no Hi*)**  
around March 21  
This is a day for family reunions and visits to family graves.

**Showa Day (*Showa no Hi*)** April 29  
This is a day to reflect upon the turbulent days and subsequent recovery of the Showa Period (1926–89) and to think about the future of Japan. It is the birthday of the late Emperor Showa.

**Constitution Day (*Kenpo Kinenbi*)** May 3  
This holiday commemorates the entering into effect of the Constitution of Japan in 1947.

**Greenery Day (*Midori no Hi*)** May 4  
This is a day to enjoy nature, to be thankful for nature’s blessings, and to nurture a rich spirit.

**Children’s Day (*Kodomo no Hi*)** May 5  
This is a day to wish for the health and happiness of children.

**Marine Day (*Umi no Hi*)** 3rd Monday in July  
This is a day to thank the sea for its blessings.

**Respect-for-the-Aged Day (*Keiro no Hi*)**  
3rd Monday in September  
This is a day to show respect to the elderly.

**Autumnal Equinox Day (*Shubun no Hi*)**  
around September 23  
This is a day for family reunions and visits to family graves.

**Sports Day (*Taiiku no Hi*)**  
2nd Monday in October  
Established in 1966 in commemoration of the opening of the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, this is a day to promote health and physical fitness.

**Culture Day (*Bunka no Hi*)** November 3  
This is a day on which the ideals of peace and freedom expressed in Japan’s Constitution (promulgated on November 3, 1946) are fostered through cultural activities.

**Labor Thanksgiving Day (*Kinro Kansha no Hi*)**  
November 23  
This is a day to show appreciation for labor and to celebrate a good harvest.

**Emperor’s Birthday (*Tenno Tanjobi*)**  
December 23  
On this day, in 1933, Emperor Akihito was born.