

Myth Map of Japan

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Whether or not one chooses to accept that the ancient Japanese actually believed in their myths, the myths themselves were intended as narratives serving to hold society together by creating common a historical legends beyond verification. For Japanese myths to be credible they therefore must have been based in some sense in perceived versions of actual historical events. Specifically I am interesting in addressing the issue of the types of categories of cultural information whose comparison might be fruitful in uncovering cultural patterns implicit in this and other ancient material. And one approach that I feel promises to be most fruitful is the analysis and mapping of ancient myth. My interest in this subject comes from a reference book I am compiling on Japanese myth which has led to the gathering of over 1100 myths and legends from this early period.

The transformation of Japanese civilization by means of the wholesale adoption of Chinese norms of religion, social convention, and political administration is often discussed as the beginning of recorded Japanese history. Indeed, perhaps the most significant aspect of this epoch is the transition from oral to written based narratives that served to define and legitimate a variety of cultural systems. But however monumental the consequences of moving from oral to written literacy in Japan may have been, it is well known that despite the loss of much ancient culture, many of these oral narratives did not disappear but continued in a variety of forms, with those most politically expedient for the imperial family being recorded in what became in fact the earliest written texts. But these surviving eighth century works were more than just written records of long-standing oral traditions held sacred by the ruling clan, instead they suggest carefully edited collections of myths, legends, and historical tales from a variety of sources.

The recording of these stories took place against the background of the geographical movement of a plethora of cultural forms from China to Korea and Korea to Japan that continued for well over a millennium. The earliest written record concerning Japan appears in the Wei accounts of travels by Chinese to Japan in the

third century, and the difference between these accounts and these first Japanese histories written in the first half of the eighth century is enormous. During the course of these five centuries Japan was transformed from a country with little ethnic and political unity and even less knowledge of the outside world into a unified nation that skillfully created a state called Yamato by using founding histories such as what appears in these early mythic accounts and the international religious consciousness known as Buddhism.

The problematic for historians of Japan is how to discern the cultural dynamics that lie at the heart of the many transformations that occurred in Japanese society between the brief Wei accounts and these first historical documents written in Japan some five hundred years later. By the time we reach the 8th century when the first written documents are created in Japan, much of what they record is about a past that is already slipping from collective memory as the leadership of the country steers it headlong into the long process of emulating Chinese models of statehood, religion, and education. The 8th and early 9th century writings are therefore critical records documenting political, material, religious and even phonetic evolution.

I propose to map the myths contained in these early documents for the purpose of creating a new tool for understanding this early preliterate period. What one finds in these records is a remarkable number of myths and mythic narratives, and a plethora of references to geography. Not only are the gods active in named localities, the names of the gods in the myths are often derived from place names as well. Given the reordering of so many political relationships at this time, both in terms of regional control and professional activity, if we can link changes in family activities with activities expressed in myth in a spatial sense, we might be able to develop a clearer model for decoding these myths.

As I have yet to begin any actual mapping, let me report on the kind of resource tools already available in the area of ancient Japan studies. There exist now extensive reference works on ancient place names, the location of known burial tombs, ancient Shintō shrines, and Buddhist temples. We also have comprehensive genealogies of known families that date back to the period just before these first histories were written. We also have extensive study of the myths that occur in these early written texts such as the *Kojiki* 古事記, *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀, *Izumo fudoki* 出雲風土記, *Engi shiki* 延喜式, etc. Much work has already been done in documenting which Buddhist images and which Buddhist scriptures have been found in the remnants of temples and monasteries from this period. After these myths are mapped

for their geographical information, the material from these other studies in map form can be overlaid to see convergences. There are, of course, other areas of information whose mapping could provide valuable insight, such as the gifts of Buddhist images, scripture, and relics to Shinto shrines, and the presence of Shinto ritual objects in Buddhist temples. Typically I expect that this kind of mapping overlay should show convergences of regional variations such as the type of image or ritual object that is favored in a certain locale, the form of traditional burial evident in archaeological sites, and the types of myths that are associated with that area.

We might ask, for example, if there are not broad cultural patterns that might be discovered to explain why this or that Buddhist school attained greater acceptance in particular regions of Japan. This question speaks to the intersection of overt, conscious doctrines and latent, more “traditional” cultural patterns of behavior that bespeak an underlying commonality. For example, we now know that it is all but certain that the famous first three Buddhist commentaries attributed to Prince Shōtoku were actually written by his Korean teachers. These works in themselves constitute an important link between continental understanding of Buddhism and Japanese conceptions of such, as they formed the basis for the study of monks for centuries thereafter. But the choice of which sūtras would be appropriate for this kind of imperial authentication through this form of writing, the public way in which these texts were produced as almost communal religious property, and the specific way in which they were read and understood speaks to the question of precisely *which* Buddhist truths were seen as worthy of “Japan” as a whole, or the “Japanese people” as a nation.

One aspect of myth that mapping will help us with concerns the principle that myths in general are characterized by variation region to region. We can assume that these changes in part reflect how the stories are transmutable by the powers that shape or at least influence the direction of religious discourse, but it is also true that different forms of a myth may reflect the particular cultural orientation of a particular region. While the lack of unanimity among accounts of myth is often a cause of consternation for the modern scholar in trying to discern their basic or core form, this dimension of myth also affords certain opportunities. That is, in comparing disparate versions of stories, these variations suggest regionally specific information. They also allow us to map an evolution of a myth as a reflection of the changing functionality of that myth for the community or communities that supported it and was supported by it. The evolution of a myth can thus be read as the evolution of a community or the interaction between communities, and is thereby suggestive of regional changes in

cultural, economic, and of course political forces. One important task of the cultural mapping initiative, therefore, is the careful documentation of such variations in myth.

As this report is only at the stage of a proposition, let me give an example of the type of myth which might yield interesting results when mapped. Chapters thirty-two to thirty-six of the *Kojiki* contain myths regarding the descent of the mythic ancestors of the imperial Yamato clan from the heavenly realm. These are the myths compiled by the early, in this case preliterate, founders of the Yamato clan who successfully asserted their control over at least the central area of the main Japanese island of Honshū by the third or fourth century of the Common Era. These particular stories are specifically concerned with a region known as Izumo, located north of the seat of government in the Nara plain. It is a mixture of the political savvy of this particular ruling house and the very content of the myths themselves that eventually led to an imperial lineage essentially unthreatened from this time right up to the present day. Indeed many Japanese people in moments of hubris are likely to boast that they have the longest continual monarchy in the world. One of the key factors in the success of that lineage is the fact that long ago these so-called emperors lost the power to rule and merely reigned over their kingdom, but this fact in itself bespeaks a certain mythic assumption about the nature of kings and their subjects that distinguishes Japan from its cultural cousins China and Korea, where the ability to put an end to dynastic succession has long been assumed as a critical social mechanism to relieve political tension.

One famous myth in section on Izumo is striking in its suggestiveness regarding contemporary attitudes to political power and the sources of its authority; that is, the story of the descent of the god called Ōkuni-nushi-no-kami. The name Ōkuni-nushi means “Lord of the Great Nation” or “Great Land-Ruler Deity” (Philippi). Summarizing the detailed study of Japanese myth by Matsumura Takeo,¹ Donald Philippi, who uses the reconstruction of the ancient pronunciation, Opo-kuni-nushi-no-kami, explains,

This deity has often been interpreted as a deification of the political rulers of Idumo (sic) or as a personification of the nation-building activities of the “Idumo people,” of the struggle for unification on the part of a series of heroic leaders, and of the social political, military, economic, and medical

¹ Matsumura Takeo 松村武雄, *Nihon shinwa no kenkyū* “日本神話 研究”, Tokyo: Baifōkan, 1954-58, 263-280.

contributions of these leaders. . . . It is also possible to regard him, in his complex manifestation, as the central figure of a nation-wide, pre-Yamato religious system which had one of its centers at Idumo.²

The most commonly occurring myth surrounding this figure depicts a struggle for and ultimately a surrender to a new set of gods and their human progeny in the region of the new capital. Ōkuni-nushi appears in various stories, but his role is central to the establishment of the Yamato clan as divine descendants mandated to rule the newly formed nation. In chapter 30 of the *Kojiki*, he laments,

“How can I create this land by myself? What deity can I join with that we might be able to create this land together?” At this time there was a deity who came, lighting up the sea. This deity said: “If you worship well before me, I will create together with you. But if you do not, it will be difficult for the land to be formed.” Then Ōkuni-nushi said, “In that case, in what manner should I worship you?” He replied, saying: “Worship me on the eastern mountain of the verdant fence of Yamato.” This is the deity who dwells on Mount Mi-moro.

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“Mount Mi-moro” has been identified as Mount Miwa in the Yamato region. The identity of the deity who offered to help unify the land for recognition and support of his cult remains unidentified, but as he appears in in another version of this story as a kind of pacified version of Ōkuni-nushi himself, the story suggests not only a subjugation of what Ōkuni-nushi represents to the powers associated with a specifically named geography, but also a transformation of the oppositional, even warlike, forces mustered by Ōkuni-nushi into a pacified gathering, probably of “immigrants” to the new capital. Stories like this have led some scholars to suggest that in fact Ōkuni-nushi, despite his central role in the myth of the handing over of the earthly realm to the invasion of heavenly gods who wish to install the Yamato line as rulers, is in fact a relatively late creation reflecting the actual conquering by the Yamato armies of a series of small states in the Izumo region. One scholar even concludes he was invented as late as the reign of Emperor Tenmu (ruled from 673–686), the ruler responsible for initiating the massive project to compile and edit Japanese mythic narratives that resulted in the *Kojiki*, finished in 712, the first book written in the Japanese language. Insofar as the agenda legitimizing Tenmu’s reign after he essentially usurped the throne is clearly visible in the *Kojiki*, this dimension of the myths surrounding Ōkuni-nushi cannot be denied.

² D. Philippi, *Kojiki*, Tokyo: University of Tokyo, 1968, 543.

³ Philippi, 177.

The inferred historical transformation of the political landscape in Izumo as alluded to in these early mythic accounts is also recorded as having been enshrined in a court ceremony called *kamuyogoto*. Mentioned in the early six national histories (*Rikkokushi*), this ceremony of showing fealty was performed in 716 at the Nara court by someone regarded as the chieftain of the Izumo region as a whole, described an emissary all village heads of Izumo and some 186 local deities. The general name of the territory surrendered involving °kuni–nushi is the cryptic Ashihara no Nakatsu–kuni, or “Central Nation of Reed Fields,” but there is still disagreement about where this specifically indicates. One interpretation ties °kuni–nushi specifically to a region in neighboring Shimane prefecture now called “°guni”. It is thus a matter of speculation as to whether the name is derived from a tutelary deity located in a specific locale, or as a kind of generic representation of an entire region. Some scholars in Japan suggest that in fact °kuni–nushi, despite his central role in the myth of the handing over of the earthly realm to the invasion of heavenly gods who wish to install the Yamato line as rulers, is in fact a relatively late creation reflecting the actual conquering by the Yamato armies of a series of small states in the Izumo region. One scholar even concludes he was invented as late as the reign of Emperor Tenmu (ruled from 673–686), the ruler responsible for initiating the massive project to compile and edit Japanese mythic narratives that resulted in the *Kojiki*, finished in 712, the first book written in the Japanese language. Insofar as the *Kojiki* is seen, among other things, to embody an agenda legitimizing Tenmu’s reign after he essentially usurped the throne, this interpretation is certainly plausible.

The land called Ashihara no Nakatsu–kuni also appears in the context of the famous myth in the *Kojiki* and elsewhere called “Ama no Iwado” when the Sun Goddess Amaterasu in a fit of pique locks herself in a cave. The result is described thusly:

The Fields of the High Heavens were all dark, and all the Central Nations of the Reed Fields were in darkness. (Takeda Yōkichi, 1975, p. 36)

In both cases, the names for the heavenly realm called Takama no Hara 高天 原 and human realm, Ashihara no Nakatsu–kuni 葦原中国 are designated as “fields.” The word for field in both names is written with the same Chinese character *yüan* 原 (J. *hara*) meaning flat plain. I would suggest that despite the surface meaning of this word as a rural environment with low population density, “field” here rather implies a collection of important personages with political and military power. This alerts us to

the fact that geographic references to fields in Japanese myth probably always imply human settlements, and that it makes more sense to flag this word as indicative of urban centers where political and economic power was gathered, coordinated, and systems set up for its continuation across generations.

On a similar note, let us consider the word *nushi*, meaning “lord.” Generally written with the Chinese character *chu* 主 (J. *shu*), it is a common feature in the names of Shinto gods. The deity mentioned above, °kuni–nushi, is just one example. In the sense that a great many Shinto cults derive from the worship of deities who protect geographical regions or groups of people organized by clan or village, the use of the word “lord” in the title of a Shinto *kami* is not surprising. But we also know that many of these myths derive from an apotheosis of local chieftains or warlords who have been transformed into eternal protectors and givers of life. Thus there is much to suggest that the word *nushi* in the names of deities who appear in Japanese myth indicates a specific instance of a regional or local political hegemon. To return to the generic sounding name of °kuni–nushi, arguing in this vein suggests that this deity represents not only a collection of different local geographies, but an amalgam of regional strongmen of throughout the region. The case for this collective interpretation of the myths surrounding °kuni–nushi is further substantiated by the fact that this god is described in these early accounts as having either four or six epithets, all of which appear to be names of distinct lineages or clans. To complicate matters, the form °kuni–nushi or Opo–kuni–nushi only appears in those texts written in the Nara region; the earliest local gazetteer, the *Izumo fudoki* uses the form °namudi or Opo–namudi.

What concerns us most here, and what cultural mapping promises to answer, is the question of whether or not the other names of °kuni–nushi represent local cults or local dialectical variation. If we can identify certain nominal forms with specific locales or specific clans, then we must seek to clarify their relationship is to this larger, umbrella concept that forms the core of the °kuni–nushi myth. Fortunately a great deal of scholarship has ensured over the centuries, beginning with Motoori Norinaga, on decoding the information in the myths in the *Kojiki* and identifying these ancient place names.

Another area of potential geographical significance is the names of °kuni–nushi’s 180 children, presumably the same list as the 186 local gods he is said to represent in the *kamuyogoto* ceremony. If we could link their names with specific shrines in this region of the country devoted to them, we would have a pretty good

guess as to the geographical limits of the conflict as described in the allegorical struggle in this corpus of myths.

Another important dimension of Japanese myth is the role of women. There are a number of striking images of women whose mythic functions reflect not only deep respect for the power of women in ancient Japan, but a central political and religious contribution as well. Japan had a long tradition of female shamanesses, oracles, and even political leaders in the pre-historical period. After the so-called Taika Reform of 645 when the government announced its intention to follow Chinese models of statehood, Confucian political values dictated that such forms of overt political influence could no longer be tolerated to reside in women, and the role of these shrine priestesses called *miko* became largely ceremonial. However, we have glimpses of the central role they played in earlier times in myth. And of course the most striking female element in Japanese myth is the central role played by a woman as the deity of the Sun, and founding ancestor for the imperial clan, implying a matriarchal substratum to the myth of political legitimacy for the kind.

Another important dimension of this issue is the interchange between Korea and Japan. There are a number of myths which specifically mention people immigrating from Korea. Take the story of Ame no Hiboko, for example, which appears in the *Kojiki*. He is a Korean prince who comes to Japan in search of his bride who ran away after he scolded her too fiercely. Unable to find her, he eventually marries a Japanese woman and settles down, never to return to his homeland. Some of the gifts he brought are linked to and possibly become part of the imperial regalia, and both the god and his gifts are enshrined in named Shinto shrines. Insofar as there is ample evidence of Siberian forms of shamanism in Korea and Japan, in the latter case much of it practiced specifically by women along the Japan Sea coast from TØhoku to Okinawa, our understanding of how this process of transmission took place will be greatly aided by detailed cultural mapping of the myths in which women play a prominent role as well as those myths with shamanic content in Japan, Korea, Manchuria and Siberia. The story of shamanic activity in northeast Asia, southeast Asia, the south pacific form patterns that scholars have long been aware of. The fact that Japanese shamanism is said to be of two types: one deriving from Siberia and Korea, the other from Polynesia, is one area where rubrics of shamanic type may be reflected in maps of those myths where such activity is manifest.