

The Ancient Japanese Sky-Father and Earth-Mother—a Study in Shinto Origins

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Modern ethnology—the “new ethnology”—supported by the sciences of psychology, sociology, history, comparative mythology and comparative religion, is giving us new insight into the interpretation of the experiences of primitive man. We are learning among other things that great mythologies emerge from great human experiences, and that a great deity stands for something correspondingly vital in the social life of man. As the material from the various, human cultural groups, past and present, is made available for comparative study, it becomes increasingly apparent how strikingly parallel are human reactions under similar circumstances of external environment. The great myths of mankind are almost monotonously similar in their fundamental aspects. The truth of this general observation is shown specifically in the well-nigh universal myths of the marriage of Earth and Sky.

“The expanse of heaven and the broad earth were early regarded as personal beings, and also as husband and wife; Earth, from which so many living things sprang, being thought of as female. Their union was the source of all things in Nature, and when the gods of departments of nature were evolved, these were regarded as their children. Generally also they are the parents of gods and men. In most cosmogonies Earth is the fruitful mother impregnated by

Heaven, though in some cases the Sun or "Great Spirit" is her husband and they are universal parents".¹

"The personification of the Earth, as the mother of life and the giver of food, is a feature of the universal mythology of mankind. It prevails everywhere in North America, except among the Eskimo, where the conception is replaced by that of the under-sea-woman, Food Dish, and on the North-West Coast, where sea deities again are the important food givers, and the underworld woman is no more than a subterranean Titaness. In many localities the marriage of the Sky or Sun with the Earth is clearly expressed".²

Foucart, reasoning from the universality of the sky-god concept at the base of practically all of the cosmogonic mythology of the world, concludes that the origin of the idea of the sky-god is to be assigned to the most ancient period of the history of religious feeling. The same author indicates the following fields and peoples among which the sky-god idea is found. In America: among the Toltecs, Mayas, Incas, the Indians of Brazil, the Indians of the Andes, the Caribs; in short, from the natives of Tierra del Fuego on the south to the Eskimo in the north. In Asia: among the Shamanist Groups of North Asia, among the Ainu, the Chinese, and in "primitive Japanese Shinto" [evidently *Ama-terasu—Omi-kami*]. The Sky-Father "is related to the ancient Pulugu of the Andamans, to the Varuna of primitive India, and, toward the west, to all the pantheons of the ancient classical East". He is found also in old Chaldea, in the Semitic and proto-Semitic mythologies.

In Oceania he appears in the cosmologies of Australia, of Melanesia and Polynesia. "But nowhere does his physiognomy appear more distinctly than in Africa—whether in the pantheons of ancient Egypt or in the many savage religions of the black continent. From the great Kilima of the Bantu groups to the Negritian Mahu

we recognize him as always the same under a hundred different names".³

The cult of the Sky-Father and Earth-Mother appear in the Rig Veda.⁴ It was likewise primary in the mythology of ancient Babylon. Vegetation rituals, to which mythologies of Earth-deities were intimately related, lay back of the ceremonies of the Mystery Religions of the Eastern Mediterranean area.⁵

Zeus, the father of gods, demi-gods and men, was originally a personification of the sky.⁶ The priestess of Dodona in Epirus chanted, "Earth sends up fruits, so praise we Earth the Mother".⁷ Personification of the earth and the sky had important places in the mythologies of the ancient Romans and Teutons, and also probably of the ancient Celts.⁸ The primitive Chinese myth of Panku is to be understood as a personification of heaven and earth.⁹ Among the Polynesians the original parents from whom came gods, men, and the islands, were the two great deities *Rangi*, the Sky-Father and his wife *Papa*, the Earth-Mother.¹⁰

To this list we may add Japan. Ancient Japanese mythology took shape under the influence of old concepts regarding the creative activity of a primitive Sky-Father and his spouse, the Earth-Mother. The evidence below attempts to show that in *Izanagi* there is preserved the memory of an ancient Sky-Father and in *Izanami*, his mate, the idea of a great Earth-Mother, and, furthermore, that while the Japanese account of the activities of this original creative pair has affinities with similar mythologies the world over, yet the most striking parallel to the Japanese story is to be found in an ancient Polynesian form of the cosmogonic myth. Whereas, then, in the following discussion the effort is made not to lose sight of the similarities between Japanese mythology and universal mythology, special use is made of the Polynesian material as a means of illustrating and explaining the

interpretation of *Icanagi* and *Icanami* that is herein suggested.

As a means of comparison we may note the Polynesian mythology first. The old Maori account says, "Men had but one pair of primitive ancestors; they sprang from the vast heaven that exists above us and from the earth which lies beneath us. According to the traditions of our race, Rangi and Papa, or Heaven and Earth, were the source from which in the beginning, all things originated. Darkness then rested upon the heaven and upon earth, and they still both claved together, for they had not yet been rent apart".¹¹

Rangi, the Sky, and *Papa*, the Earth Mother, however, were not the oldest of the gods. The cosmogonic myth of the Maori, which Dixon says as very old, presents a conception of existence as beginning with *Kore*, "Negation" and *Po*, "Darkness". Following these appears a series of similar abstractions presented in genealogical order and finally, twenty generations after the manifestation of the initial void, the great creative parents come into existence. *Rangi* takes to wife *Papa* and between them they beget the gods, and, according to some accounts, men and the islands on which they lived.¹²

(To be continued)