

# THE ANCIENT JAPANESE SKY-FATHER AND EARTH-MOTHER

## A STUDY IN SHINTO ORIGINS

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The form of the Japanese cosmogonic myth is closely similar. *Izanagi* and *Izanami*, although they occupy the primary position as creative deities, are not regarded as the oldest of the gods. The Japanese account as set forth in the *Kojiki* repeats the form of the Polynesian record in that it attempts to carry speculation back to the very beginning of the universe. The first god mentioned is *Ame-no-mi-naka-nushi-no-kami*, "The Lord of the Center of Heaven." Following this *Kami* appears a list of sixteen other divine beings, arranged in genealogical sequence, ending with the great creative pair, *Izanagi* and *Izanami*. These two give birth to the islands of the Japanese archipelago and likewise become the ancestors of gods and men.

In the *Nihongi* account the creation myth opens with a picture of chaos in which darkness and light have not yet been separated and in which Heaven and Earth are not yet formed. Out of this chaos Heaven eventually emerges and afterwards Earth. The first definite *kami* to appear is *Kuni-toko-tachi-no-mikoto*, given in a slightly variant account as *Ama-no-toko-tachi-no-mikoto*. Seven generations after this deity, *Izanagi* and *Izanami* appear and exercise the same creative functions as in the *Kojiki* record.

The introductory sentences of the *Nihongi* which have just been briefly summarized, have been criticised by Japanese and foreign scholars alike as an attempt to rationalize Japanese mythology under the influence of Chinese philosophy.<sup>(13)</sup> While the fact of Chinese

influence on early Japanese literature must not be lost sight of, yet it must be admitted that the problem of possible relationships is much more complicated than an exclusive reference to Chinese analogies would seem to indicate. The form of the cosmogonic myth of Polynesia likewise presents striking parallels. This similarity extends not simply to the idea of an original and undifferentiated chaos, as is true in a comparison with Chinese philosophy; it extends to the functions of specific deities and perhaps even to names.

After this general comparison we are in a position to note some of the more particularized data concerning *Izanagi* and *Izanami*. As evidence that they are to be taken as Sky-Father and Earth-Mother, respectively, we may further note:

The Japanese records agree in representing *Izanagi* as having originally come down from out of Heaven. One of the *Nihongi* accounts informs us that after his creative tasks were finally accomplished he went back to Heaven and lived there "in the smaller palace of the Sun."<sup>(4)</sup> The fact that *Izanami* is also represented as having come down from Heaven may be said to be in all probability the result of an early effort to assign an adequate origin to the Earth-Mother. As will be indicated below, in the later role which the mythology assigns her, she is completely identified with the earth.

In the *Kojiki* account the sun and moon deities sprang from the purified eyes of *Izanagi* as he washed in a river of Tsukushi, the sun-goddess from his left eye, the moon-god from his right eye.

Polynesian mythology presents analogous details here, again. The mythology of the Cook Group relates that the father of gods and men was *Vatea* who took to wife *Papa*, the Earth-Mother. An account which Gill considers very ancient represents *Vatea* as possessed of two wonderful eyes, "rarely visible at the same time." "In general, whilst one, called by mortals the sun, is seen here in the upper world, the

other eye, called by men the moon, shines in Aviki (the spirit world)."<sup>(16)</sup> A Maori poem speaks of the moon and sun as having been thrown up into the sky "as the chief eyes of Heaven."<sup>(17)</sup> Dixon says, "The sun and moon in the Maori myth seem generally to be regarded as Rangi's offspring who were later placed for eyes in the sky, and similar beliefs prevailed in the Society Group and in Samoa."<sup>(17)</sup>

A myth that connects the origin of the sun and moon with the eyes of *Izanagi* can mean little other than that this *kami* is to be understood as a deification of the sky, thought of as possessing two wonderful eyes.

Again, *Susa-no-wo-no-mikoto*, the Japanese god of storm and violence,<sup>(18)</sup> is represented as having been born from the nostrils of *Izanagi*. The mythology at this point can be consistently interpreted as presenting the idea that the stormy, violent wind was the snorting breath of the Sky-Father. It is also consistent with this that *Shina-tsu-hiko-no-mikoto*, the God of the Wind, was *Izanagi*'s breath with which he blew away the morning mists.

The fact that *Izanami* possesses the two-fold character of a deity of the upper-world and a deity of the lower-earth would tend to identify her with an original Earth-Mother. "So *Izanami-no-kami* through giving birth to a deity of fire, at length went away." "Then *Izanagi-no-mikoto*, wishing to meet and see his wife *Izanami-no-mikoto*, followed her to the Land of Yomi." The *Kojiki* states explicitly that *Izanami* after her separation from her mate became the "Great Goddess of Hades" (*Yomo-tsu-kami*). In the Polynesian myth *Papa*, after her separation from *Rangi*, was so closely related to the earth and the lower world as to constitute in her own person the various divisions of hell.<sup>(19)</sup> This identification of the Earth-goddess with the underworld is a wide-spread characteristic of primitive mythology. This

double nature was common to most Earth-divinities among the Greeks. MacCulloch points out that the Roman Tellus was likewise associated with the under-world. The same is probably true of the Babylonian Earth-goddess Allatu, "The Lady of Hell."<sup>(20)</sup> The Earth-mother of the Iroquois was the goddess of both night and earth.<sup>(21)</sup> The meaning of this two-fold character in the case of *Izanami* will be dealt with later in the discussion.

An additional piece of evidence pointing toward the ancient Sky-Father character of *Izanagi* is to be derived from that portion of the myth wherein the tears of *Izanagi* are introduced. How are we to understand the tears which *Izanagi* shed at separation from his wife? The Maori myth here throws light on our problem. The mythology of this people after recounting the story of the great separation already considered, continues, "Up to this time the vast Heaven has still ever remained separated from his spouse the Earth. Yet their mutual love still continues—the warm sighs of her loving bosom still ever rise up to him, ascending from the woody mountains and valleys, and men call these mists; and the vast Heaven, as he mourns through the long nights his separation from his beloved, drops frequent tears upon her bosom, and men seeing these term them dew-drops."<sup>(22)</sup>

Alongside of this we may place the Japanese incident of the weeping of *Izanagi*. After *Izanami* had retired upon giving birth to the fire-god, *Izanagi* is made to cry out, "Oh, my beloved wife! Oh! that I should have exchanged you for a single child!" The *Kojiki* then continues "And as he crept toward her pillow and as he crept toward her feet, there was born from his tears the deity who lives at *Ucivo no Konomoto* on Mount Kagu. Her name is "Weeping-Rain-Deity" (*Naki-same-no-kami*).<sup>(23)</sup> In the Japanese account the tears of *Izanagi* are rain-drops, in the Maori myth the tears of *Rangi* are

dew-drops ; in both cases moisture from the sky is interpreted as tears of grief and longing at the separation of the ancient lovers. A conclusion that *Izanagi* is to be interpreted otherwise than as the great Sky-Father, similar to Rangi seems almost impossible. The Sky-god nature of *Izanagi* is further elucidated by the apparently meaningless statement, "as he crept toward her pillow and as he crept toward her feet." What at first glance appears altogether fanciful if not ridiculous, becomes on further thought an inevitable part of the story. The myth has preserved for us here a fragment that is of singular value in determining just what and who *Izanagi* and *Izanami* anciently were. We only have to imagine ourselves standing with primitive man on the prostrate form of Mother Earth, with the weeping, rainy sky creeping down toward her "pillow" on the one horizon and down to her "feet" on the other—we have but to understand this and we know that *Izanagi* and *Izanami* emerged out of fundamental and universal human experiences with the phenomena of earth and sky.

How widespread and fundamental these experiences were may be suggested to us from an old Greek memory of the marriage of Earth and Sky which Aeschylus has preserved in one of his poems—

"Lo, there is hunger in the holy Sky  
To pierce the body of Earth, and in Earth too  
Hunger to meet his arms. So falls the rain from  
From Heaven that is her lover, making moist  
The bosom of Earth."

Jane Harrison in commenting on these words says that as we read them "we seem to stand in the ancient Cretan shrine... and we hear words august and venerable which tell of things that were before man and may outlast him."<sup>(24)</sup>

Likewise in the Japanese myth we may read, "words august and

venerable" and in the universality of this venerable human experience find occasion for maintaining that *Izanagi* and *Izanami* are to be explained in a manner identical with that of the explanation of similar deities elsewhere.

Further evidence pointing toward the original Sky-father character of *Izanagi* is to be found in the nature of the sword with which he killed *Kagu Tsuchi*, the god of "Glittering Earth."<sup>(25)</sup> The *Kojiki* gives the name of the sword. It was called *Ame-no-wo-ha-bari*<sup>(26)</sup> which Chamberlain has rendered, "Heavenly-Point-Blade-Extended," and again it was called *Itsu-no-wo-ha-bari-no-kami*<sup>(27)</sup> that is, "Majestic-Point-Blade-Extended-Deity" and, what is especially important for our discussion, it is spoken of as the father of *Take-mika-dzuchi-no-wo-no-kami*.<sup>(28)</sup> Satow, among foreign scholars, has already put forward the interpretation that this last named deity is to be taken as an ancient thunder god. *Mikadzuchi* is the same as the modern word for thunder, *Ikadzuchi*. Satow says, "*Ika-dzuchi* is the same as the modern word for thunderbolt, and is compounded of *ika*, ("terrible," "awful") and *tsuchi*, "mallet" or "hammer," so that *Take-ika-dzuchi* or *Take-mika-dzuchi* would simply be the god of thunder. And as a matter of fact the name is sometimes written 御雷之男 (*Mika-dzuchi-no-wo*, "August thunder man, in the *Kojiki*) and 鑿槌神 (*Mika-dzuchi-no-kami* or "Great Hammer god" in the *Nihongi*, where is used evidently as a sort of *kana* and the second character means "mallet or hammer")."<sup>(29)</sup> One of the offspring of *Izanagi*'s sword is thunder. We begin to suspect what the sword must have been in the original experience of the makers of the myth. Further evidence may be found in the *Nihongi*. In one passage we read of certain deities who dwelt in the Rock-cave-of-Heaven. They were the three generations of gods: *Mika-no-haya-hi-no-kami*,<sup>(30)</sup> ("Terrible swift-fire-deity"), *Hi-no-haya-hi-no-kami*<sup>(31)</sup> ("Swift-fire of fire deity") and *Taka-mika-dzuchi*-

*no-kami*,<sup>(32)</sup> the child of *Hi-no-haya-bi*. These deities lived in the Rock Cave of Heaven; that is to say, they were generally invisible,<sup>(33)</sup> but they flashed forth as swift-fire accompanied by a thunderchild. We may have little hesitation in saying that they had their origin in ancient human experiences with the lightening flash. The parentage of the thunder god, found once in *Izanagi's* sword and again in a swift fire, plainly favors the interpretation that *Ame-no-wo-ha-bari*, "The Majestic Point Blade Extended," worn by *Izanagi*, is nothing other than the Lightning Flash. We can well understand how the *shintai* of *Take-mika-dzuchi* at the Kasuga Shrine is a divine sword.

Evidence for the conclusion that the sword of *Izanagi* is the lightning flash can be made yet more particular. We have only to consider the exegesis of the various deities that spring from the blood that attaches to the different parts of *Izanagi's* sword when he slays *Kagu tsuchi*, to find unexpected confirmation of our interpretation. The pertinent section of the *Kojiki* reads, "Hereupon *Izanagi-no-mikoto* drew the ten-grasp sword with which he was girded and cut off the head of his child, *Kagu-tsuchi-no-kami*. The names of the deities that were then born from the blood that stuck to the point of his sword and bespattered the multitudinous rock masses were *Iwa-saku-no-kami*<sup>(34)</sup> ("Rock-Splitting-Deity"), next *Ne-saku-no-kami*<sup>(35)</sup> ("Root-Splitting-Deity"), and next *Iwa-tsutsu-no-wo-no-kami*<sup>(35)</sup> ("Rock-Possessing-Male-Deity"). The names of the deities that were next born from the blood that stuck to the upper part of his sword and again bespattered the multitudinous rock-masses were, *Mika-no-haya-bi-no-kami* ("Terrible-Swift-Fire-Deity") next *Hi-no-haya-bi-no-kami* ("Swift-Fire-of-Fire-Deity") and *Take-mika-dzuchi-no-wo-no-kami* ("Brave-Terrible-Hammer-Male-Deity" or "Brave-Thunder-Male-Deity").<sup>(37)</sup> . . . . The names of the deities that were next born from the blood that came together on the hilt of his sword and leaked out between his

fingers were *Kura-okami-no-kami*<sup>(38)</sup> ("Dark Rain Deity"), and next *Kura-midzu-ha-no-kami*<sup>(39)</sup> ("Dark Water Swift Deity"). The *Nihongi* version rounds out the number of deities born from *Izanagi's* sword to three sets of triplets by adding the name of *Kura-yama-tsu-mi-no-kami*<sup>(40)</sup> ("Dark Mountain Body Deity") to the last named pair.

How then shall we interpret a sword that, at its point breaks the rocks, splits the trees to the roots, and impregnates the rocks with fire,<sup>(41)</sup> that appears in its upper part as swift fire, giving birth to thunder—a sword that brings forth at the hilt dark, mountain-like masses that drip water? Plainly, it is the picture of a thunder storm. *Kagu-tsuchi* was killed by a mighty thunder-storm in which, when the sword of *Izanagi* flashed in the sky, swift fire broke on the rocks and trees, *Mika-tsuchi* pounded with his hammer, *Kura-okami* and *Kura-yama-tsu-mi* were seen gathering together like the masses of great black mountains up above, and then, as the climax of the entire scene, trickling out between the fingers of *Izanagi* came *Mizu-ha*—water raining down out of the black clouds upon the earth below. We stand here in the presence of what is probably the oldest picture in Japanese literature. It is indeed a picture-poem, certainly one of the first ever produced by the remote ancestors of the Japanese race. The picture placed before us here in the *Kojiki* contains all of the elements of a terrific thunder-storm and, *be it noted, nothing more.* We may here too catch a glimpse of the process by which myths are made. A great myth like this of *Izanagi* did not emerge out of mere primitive fancy. To be sure there is often fancy in mythology, frequently exaggerated, child-like imagination and playful caprice. Yet it may be set down as a safe rule that a great myth has its origin in a vital human experience. In this sense a myth gives us real history, for a great myth forms itself, so to speak, out of the great and vivid experiences that the race has lived through. The sword of *Izanagi*



was thus forged in the vivid life experiences of ancient man in the presence of one of the most awe-inspiring phenomena presented to the observation of man even in the sophisticated present. We see, too, why the sword of *Izanagi* was sacred (*kami*). It was divine for two reasons, first, because it was awful:—it flashed with swift, unknown fire that came down from heaven and it crashed with a dreadful sound—but more than this it was divine because it meant the coming of rain and thus it related to something that was absolutely central in the agricultural life of the early Japanese. We are here again reminded of how many of the religious interests of man have centered in securing and safeguarding a food supply.

It was thus a thunder-storm that killed *Kagu Tsuchi* (迦具土), "Glittering Earth." He is a true child of *Izanami*—Fruitful Mother Earth—and at the same, he is a Fire God; he is a specialized form of fire. He is that form of fire which manifested itself to the makers of the myth in their experiences with an intense summer heat. When it came time for him to be born his mother "became feverish," she "was burnt," she "suffered change and went away." The old mythology, in forms that are about as plain as human words can well be made, thus sets forth primitive man's experiences in a climate in which vegetation withered and died away owing to the coming of a season of intense drought. It was a heat so great that it "glittered" and "shone"; a very god of fire was brought forth from the womb of Mother Earth. And then *Kagu Tsuchi* died in a mighty storm. He was killed by the sword of the Sky Father. Yet he did not altogether die. His death was the breaking of the drought.

That *Kagu Tsuchi* did not altogether die is seen immediately in the character of the deities that came from his divided body. *Kagu Tsuchi*, who, it must be remembered, is, in the original formative experience, only an aspect of the earth, namely, earth in a fiery

mood, when slain by *Izanagi*, consistently, and it may be said beautifully, gives birth to mountains. "The name of the deity that was born from the head of *Kagu Tsuchi no kami* who had been slain was the Deity Possessor-of-the-True-Pass-Mountains. The name of the deity that was next born from his chest was the Deity Possessor-of-Descent-Mountains. The name of the Deity that was next born from his belly was the Deity Possessor-of-the-Innermost-Mountains. The name of the Deity that was next born from his private parts was the Deity Possessor-of-the-Dark-Mountains. The name of the Deity that was next born from his left hand was the Deity Possessor-of-the-Densely-Wooded-Mountains. The name of the Deity that was next born from his right hand was the Deity-Possessor-of-the-Outlying Mountains. The name of the Deity that was next born from his left foot was the Deity Possessor-of-the-Moorland-Mountains. The name of the Deity that was next born from his right foot was the Deity Possessor-of-the-Outer-Mountains."<sup>(42)</sup>

The *Kojiki* herein sets forth a poetic memory that is true to the experiences of the makers of the myth. One who has lived through the hot summer of southern Asia wherein the heated earth cracks and the air becomes so thick and heavy with dust that in certain districts the sun seems to go down in the middle of the afternoon, knows that after the terrific storms of the south-west monsoon have killed *Kagu Tsuchi*, that the air is washed clear and the mountains become visible and beautiful. It is not necessary to maintain that the great storm that killed *Kagu Tsuchi* was the south-west monsoon, yet it seems fair to conclude that somewhere in their wide journeyings the ancestors of the Japanese race passed through agricultural experiences in a mountainous country that had a terrific summer heat and which made it inevitable that from the slain body of *Kagu Tsuchi* should emerge

mountain deities. The mountains come into the picture as a poetic benediction after the storm.

We may conclude, then that the episode of the withdrawal of *Izanami* to the lower world is based on the same human experiences as are similar episodes relating the withdrawal of similar Earth-Mother deities in other fields. These ancient and fundamental human experiences are agricultural, emerging out of the effect of seasonal changes on vegetation. In a cold climate when winter comes on earth's vegetation withers and Mother-Earth retires. In a hot climate when the heat of summer comes, on vegetation likewise languishes and withers, and the Earth-Mother grows feverish, is burnt, and goes away. This interpretation is already widely accepted in fields outside of Japan. We may have little hesitation in accepting it in explanation of early Japanese mythology. The search which *Izanagi* makes for *Izanami* re-echoes the search of the Egyptian *Isis* for the body of *Osiris*.<sup>(43)</sup> The original meaning of the death of *Attis* in the Phrygian myth of *Attis* and *Cybele* was the death of vegetation in winter.<sup>(44)</sup> In the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*, the earth-mother goddess, written probably in the seventh century B. C. the story is told of how *Persephone*, when gathering flowers in a field, was stolen and carried away to the underworld (*to be continued*).

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