

THE ANCIENT JAPANESE SKY-FATHER AND EARTH-MOTHER

A STUDY IN SHINTO ORIGINS

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The mother saddened and languished and refused to produce grain that men might live. The earth was unfruitful. It was finally arranged that the daughter should spend eight months of each year with her mother during which time the earth was fruitful.⁽⁴⁶⁾ The languishing of the Greek Earth-Mother, Demeter, corresponds exactly with the sickness and departure of the Japanese Earth-Mother, *Izanami*. The Babylonian *Ishtar*, the mother of gods and men, was an ancient Earth-Goddess. Her journey to the lower world in search of Tammuz was the ancient Babylonian interpretation of the death of vegetation. Vegetation died and earth's fertility ceased when *Ishtar* was in the lower world.⁽⁴⁷⁾

The idea that the Japanese myth of *Izanagi* and *Izanami* was in some way connected with seasonal changes in vegetation is suggested by the fact that in the struggle between *Izanagi* and the forces of the lower world various food items—grapes, bamboosprouts, and peaches—appear as important factors in assisting his escape to the upper world. Further connection with seasonal changes arises from the indication of the *Nihongi* that *Izanami* was anciently worshipped with a spring festival "by offerings of flowers."⁽⁴⁷⁾ Flower festivals to the Earth-Mother occur in the folk religions of widely scattered fields. "Among the aborigines of India, Earth-mother is worshipped mainly in connection with agricultural seasons. Sacrifices are offered, and she is begged to be propitious, while she has often

a special festival, or as among the Oraons, a spring festival celebrates her marriage with Heaven."⁽⁴⁵⁾ The Dravidians of South India worship a Great Mother. The customary offering is flowers.⁽⁴⁶⁾ E. S. Hartland says, "Every year when the *sal*-tree is in blossom the Oraons of Bengal celebrate the marriage of the earth-goddess with Dharme, the sun-god."⁽⁶⁰⁾ Every year when the flowers on Mount Tsukuba are in blossom the peasants of the vicinity celebrate the *Ozagawari* ("Great-Seat-Change") of *Izanami*, that is, her journey to her shrine on the mountain top. And every year when vegetation begins to wither on the mountain she is brought down again to the shrine at the base. While it is true that *Izanagi* likewise shares in this modern *Ozagawari*, yet the present-day, popular explanation is that it is especially designed to protect *Izanami*. "It is not good that a woman should remain out on the mountain in the winter." It is of special interest that the movements of *Izanami* at the Tsukuba shrine should still be connected with seasonal changes. An old ceremonial seems to have been adapted to fit a northern climate.

The Earth-Mother character of *Izanami* is likewise to be found in the nature of the deities which spring from different parts of her body after her relations as the wife of *Izanagi* have been severed. These deities appear as the independent creation of *Izanami* and thus, on the hypothesis put forward in the present discussion, ought to be closely related to the earth itself. From the vomit of *Izanami* came two deities of metal, from her excrement two other deities who preside over clay, from her urine a water deity and also a god of growth called *Waka-musubi-no-kami* ("Young Growth Deity"). These first-named deities may be understood as originating in an early mythological scheme which regards metal, clay, and water as discharges from the body of the Earth-Mother. In the *Nihongi* account the "Young Growth Deity" just mentioned appears as the producer of the silk-worm, the

mulberry tree, and the five grains.⁽⁶²⁾ "Growth" thus transforms "Earth" into these objects useful to man. The *Kojiki* relates that in the body of *Izanami* as she lay in the lower world resided eight deities of thunder.⁽⁶³⁾ We here have a mythological fragment which may be consistently interpreted as originating in primitive experiences with subterranean noises. In Teutonic mythology the thunder god Thor has for his mother the great giantess Jordh who is identified as the Earth.⁽⁶⁴⁾

The term *papa* has survived in Polynesian languages with the meaning of "Earth Mother" or "Earth."⁽⁶⁵⁾ In archaic Japanese the same form *papa*, means "mother" (modern Japanese *haha*).⁽⁶⁶⁾

The interpretation of *Izanagi* and *Izanami* here adopted assigns them an importance consistent with the position which they occupy in the Shinto pantheon. Aston classifies them under the heading of gods of abstractions and regards them as "evidently creations of subsequent date to the Sun-Goddess and other concrete deities, for whose existence they were intended to account." *Izanagi* and his mate are assigned by this scholar "to that stage of religious progress in which the conception has been reached of powerful sentient beings separate from external nature." The interpretation of origin which Aston is thus led to accept is that they were suggested to the ancient Japanese writers by the *Yin* and the *Yang*, or the male and the female principles, of Chinese philosophy.⁽⁶⁷⁾

Against Aston's view can be advanced the thoroughly concrete character of *Izanagi* and *Izanami* as indicated by the evidence given above. They are not abstractions, but are personified objects of nature. Again the central position which they occupy in the Japanese mythology makes it hardly possible that they could have been borrowed from Chinese philosophy without the entire cosmogonic scheme having been taken over likewise. With all the obvious Chinese influ-

ence in the *Nihongi*, there is no evidence of such extensive and early borrowing from China, on the part of Japanese mythology, as Aston's theory would imply. *Izanagi* and *Izanami* are original Japanese deities. The *Nihongi* says, "they produced all manner of things whatsoever."⁽⁶⁸⁾ They occupy in the ancient Shinto pantheon exactly the position of the Sky-Father and Earth-Mother of other fields. They are the universal parents of early Japanese mythology.

Similar objections are to be advanced against the interpretation which over-emphasizes the phallic character of these deities.⁽⁶⁹⁾ The theory here builds largely on etymological considerations. It follows Motoori in assigning to the words *Izanagi* and *Izanami* an origin in *izanaui*, "to invite," while *gi* and *mi* are taken as old equivalents for "male" and "female" respectively; hence the meaning "Male-Who-Invites" and "Female-Who-Invites," i.e., invites to sexual relations. The naive detail with which the *Kojiki* enters into a description of the first creative activity of this pair lends some plausibility to the interpretation.

Also that phallic practices were once a part of the worship of *Izanagi* and *Izanami* is beyond question. Yet phallicism is not the key to their interpretation. On the other hand, an isolated phallic theory hardly seems to do justice to their central position in the cosmogonic scheme. Phallicism, with an underlying relation to fertility rites, has a world-wide association with Earth-Mother cults. *Priapus*, the Greek phallic deity, was the son of *Aphrodite*, an original earth-goddess. *Isis* and *Osiris* rites of Egypt appear to have been associated with phallicism. Among the Yoruba on the west coast of Africa the Earth-Mother is also a phallic deity and is frequently represented by the male and female emblems in contact.⁽⁷⁰⁾ It is altogether to be expected, then, that phallic rites should be associated with *Izanagi* and *Izanami* (to be continued).