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Japanese mythology

Contents

Sources
- Literary Sources
- Archaeological Sources

Cosmogony
- Origins of Japan and the kami
  - Kuniumi and Kamiumi
  - Yomi
  - The Sun, Moon, and Storm
  - First Emperor Jimmu
- The Japanese Pantheon
  - Folklore Heroes
  - Mythological Creatures
- See also

Spelling of proper nouns

References
- External links

Japanese mythology is a collection of traditional stories, folktales, and beliefs that emerged in the islands of the Japanese archipelago. Shinto and Buddhist traditions are the cornerstones of Japanese mythology.[1] The history of thousands of years of contact with China, Korea, Ainu, and Okinawan myths are also key influences in Japanese mythology.[1][2][3]

Japanese myths are tied to the topography of the archipelago as well as agriculturally-based folk religion, and the Shinto pantheon holds countless *kami* (Japanese for "god(s)" or "spirits").[1] This article will discuss cosmogony, important deities, modern interpretations, cultural significance, and the influence of these myths.

Two important sources for Japanese myths as they are recognized today are the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon Shoki*.[4][5] The *Kojiki*, or "Record of Ancient Matters," is the oldest surviving account of Japan's myths, legends, and history.[6] Additionally, the *Shintōshū* describes the origins of Japanese deities from a Buddhist perspective.[7]

One notable feature of Japanese mythology is its explanation of the origin of the Imperial Family, which has been used historically to assign godhood to the Imperial line.[4]

Note that Japanese is not transliterated consistently across all sources (see spelling of proper nouns).

Sources

Japanese myths are passed down through oral tradition, through literary sources (including traditional art), and through archaeological sources.[1][5] For much of Japan's history, communities were mostly isolated, which allowed for local legends and myths to grow around unique features of the geographic location where the people who told the stories lived.[1]

Literary Sources

The Kojiki and the Nihon Shoki, completed in A.D. 712 and A.D. 720 respectively, are the two most referenced and oldest sources of Japanese mythology and pre-history.[5][1] Written in the Eighth century, under the Yamato state, the two collections relate the cosmogony and mythic origins of the Japanese archipelago, its people, and the imperial family.[8][5] It is based on the records of the Kojiki and Nihon Shoki that the imperial family claims direct descent from the sun goddess Amaterasu and her grandson Ninigi.[8][5][1]

Emperor Temmu enlisted the help of Hiyeda no Are who committed to memory the history of Japan as it was recorded in two collections that are thought by historians to have existed before the Kojiki and Nihongi.[1] Under Empress Gemmio's rule, Hideya no Are's memory of the history of the Japanese archipelago and its mythological origins were recorded in spite of Emperor Temmu's death before its completion.[1] As a result of Hideya no Are's account, the Kojiki was finally completed, transcribed in Chinese characters, during Empress Genshō's time as sovereign.[1] The Yamato state also produced *fudoki* and *Man'yōshū,* two more of the oldest surviving texts that relate the historical and mythical origins of Japan's people, culture, and the imperial family.[8]

Motoori Norinaga, an Edo-period Japanese scholar, interpreted Kojiki and his commentary, annotations, and use of alternate sources to supplement his interpretations are studied by scholars today because of their influence on the current understanding of Japanese myths.[5]

Archaeological Sources

Archaeologists studying the history of the Japanese Archipelago separate the prehistoric history into three eras based on attributes of the discoveries associated with each era.[3] The Jōmun period marks the first cases of pottery found on the archipelago, followed by the Yayoi period and the Kofun period.[3] The Yayoi district of Tokyo, Japan is the namesake of the Yayoi period because archaeologists discovered pottery associated with the time period there.[3]

Contact with Chinese civilization in the latter part of the Yayoi period influenced the culture of the Japanese Archipelago greatly, as evidenced by the discovery of artifacts that archaeologists associate with various cultural streams from China, Korea, and northeast Asia.[3] Finally, Kofun period artifacts, ranging from A.D. 250 to A.D. 600, are the archaeological sources of what historians know about the Yamato kingdom — the same Yamato state that was responsible for the two most prominent literary sources of Japanese myth, the Kojiki and Nihon Shoki.[3][8]

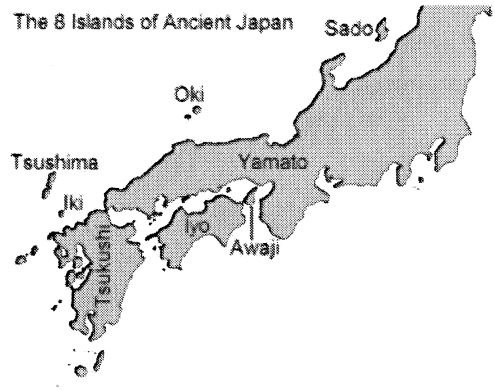
Cosmogony

Origins of Japan and the kami

Kuniumi and Kamiumi

Japan's creation narrative can be divided into the birth of the deities (Kamiumi) and the birth of the land (Kuniumi). The birth of the deities begins with the appearance of the first generation of gods who appeared out of the primordial oil, a trio of gods who produced the next seven generations of gods.[1][9] Izanagi and Izanami were eventually born, siblings, and using a naginata decorated with jewels, named Ame-no-nuboko ("Heavenly Jeweled Spear") that was gifted to them Izanagi created the first islands of the Japanese Archipelago by dipping the Naginata into the primordial waters.[1][10][11][9] Historians have interpreted the myth of Izanagi's creation of the first Japanese Island Onogoro as an early example of phallocentrism in Japanese mythology.[1][10]

The earliest creation myths of Japanese mythology generally involve topics such as death, decay, loss, infanticide, and contamination.[10] The creation myths place great importance on purification, ceremonial order, and the masculine.[10] For example, the first child born to



Izanagi and Izanami after they attempt a union ceremony is born with no limbs or bones, and the parents discard the child by sending him to sea in a boat.[10] When Izanagi and Izanami ask the older gods why their child was born without bones or limbs, they are told it was because they did not conduct the ceremony properly and that the male must always speak before the female.[10] Once they follow the directions of the older gods correctly, they produce many children, many of which are the islands of the Japanese Archipelago.[1][10] Among their children are the Ōyashima, or the eight great islands of Japan — Awaji, Iyo, Oki, Tsukushi, Iki, Tsushima, Sado, and Yamato.[12] The last child that Izanami produces is a fire god, Kagutsuchi (incarnation of fire), whose flames kill her; and Izanagi murders the child in grief-driven anger.[10] The child's corpse creates even more gods.[10] Izanami was then buried on Mount Hiba, at the border of the old provinces of Izumo and Hoki, near modern-day Yasugi of Shimane Prefecture.[13]

Scholars of Japanese mythology have noted the incestuous themes of the creation myth as represented in the Kojiki, and the first scholar to write about Izanagi and Izanami as siblings was Oka Masao.[14] Izanami is referred to in the Kojiki as Izanagi's *imo* (meaning both wife or little sister in Japanese) and other scholars dispute that the pair were siblings.[14] Hattori Asake, another scholar, argued that Masao was incorrect because he drew evidence from another myth about humans who had incestuous relations because of a great flood wiping out the rest of the human population.[14] Essentially, Asake said the myth Masao used as evidence was too different to be the origin of the Izanagi and Izanami myth.[14] In the Man'yōshū, Izanami is also referred to as *imo* by the compiler, suggesting that the compiler believed that Izanami was Izanagi's sister.[14] While scholars disagree about the nature of Izanami and Izanagi's relationships, the gods Amaterasu and Susanoo, children of Izanagi, were sibling gods who created children together in a contest preceding Susanoo's desecration of Amaterasu's home which leads to her hiding in a cave.[14] A unique aspect of Japanese mythology is its inclusion of graphic details, with disgusting and horrific images that are considered to be taboo in modern Japanese society, which has many cultural practices associated with purification and cleanliness.[10]

Yomi

After Izanami's death, the myth of Izanagi's efforts to rescue her from Yomi, an underworld described in Japanese mythology, explains the origins of the cycle of birth and death.[1] After killing their child Kagutsuchi, Izanagi was still grief-stricken, so he undertook the task of finding a way to bring Izanami back from the dead.[10] After finally locating her, he disobeyed her order to not look at her while she went to ask permission to leave Yomi.[10] He used his hair to create a flame, and when he gazed at Izanami's rotting, maggot-filled flash he fled in fear and disgust.[10] Izanami felt betrayed and tried to capture him, but he escaped by creating obstacles for Izanami's horde of shikome including using peaches to threaten them. The myth of Izanagi's journey into Yomi features many themes of food, he creates grapes to distract the shikome who stop to eat them, granting him time to escape. The peaches he uses to scare the shikome off are then blessed, and peaches appear in many other Japanese myths, especially the tale of Momotarō the peach boy.[9]

The Sun, Moon, and Storm

See also Solar deity

The origins of the Sun and the Moon are accounted for in Japanese mythology through the myth of Izanagi's return from Yomi.[1] After spending so much time in Yomi, Izanami cleansed himself with a purification ceremony.[10] As Izanami cleansed himself, the water and robes that fell from his body created many more gods.[10][1] Purification rituals still function as important traditions in Japan today, from shoe etiquette in households to sumo wrestling purification ceremonies.[10] Amaterasu, the Sun goddess and divine ancestor of the first Emperor Jimmu, was born from Izanagi's eye.[1] The Moon god and Susanoo the storm god were born at the same time as Amaterasu, when Izanagi washed his face.[1]


Amaterasu emerges from the cave.

Myths related to the Sun, Moon, and storm kami are full of strife and conflict.[10] The Sun goddess and her sibling the moon god's interpersonal conflicts explain, in Japanese myth, why the sun and the moon do not stay in the sky at the same time — their distaste for one another keeps them both turning away from the other.[1] Meanwhile, the sun goddess and the storm god Susanoo's conflicts were intense and bloody.[10] Various accounts of Susanoo's temper tantrum in Amaterasu's home depict a variety of disgusting and brutal behaviors (everything from smearing his feces across her home's walls to skinning her favorite horse alive and throwing it at her maid and killing the maid) but it is usually, in depictions of this particular myth, Susanoo's behavior that scares Amaterasu into hiding in a cave.[15][10][1][9][16] It would take the combined efforts of many other kami, and the erotic dance of a particular goddess named Ame no Uzume, to lure Amaterasu from the cave again.[15] Ame no Uzume exposed herself while dancing and created such commotion that Amaterasu peeked out from her cave.[16] The myth of Amaterasu's entering and emerging from a cave is depicted in one of the most iconic images of Japanese mythology which is shown to the right.

The sun goddess Amaterasu's importance in Japanese mythology is two-fold. She is the sun, and one of Izanagi's most beloved of children, as well as the ancestor of the Japanese imperial line, according to legend.[9][15] Her status as a sun goddess had political ramifications for the imperial family, and the Yamato state most likely benefited from the myth when dealing with Korean influences because Korea also had myths of sun god ancestors for the Korean imperial family.[16]

First Emperor Jimmu

The tale of first Emperor Jimmu is considered the origin of the Imperial family.[1] Emperor Jimmu is considered to be the human descendant of Amaterasu the Sun goddess.[1][8] His ascension to the throne marked the "Transition from Age of the Gods to Human Age".[17] After taking control of Yamato province, he established the imperial throne and acceded in the year of kanototori (conventionally dated to 660 B.C.).[3] At the end of the seventh century, the Imperial court finally moved from where Emperor Jimmu was said to have founded it in Yamato.[1]

The importance of this myth in particular is that it establishes the origins, and the power, of the Japanese imperial family as divine.[8][3] Although some scholars believe that the myths found in the Nihon Shoki and Kojiki are meant to give authority to the imperial family, others suggest that the myths in the Nihon Shoki and Kojiki are unique accounts meant to give authority to the mythic histories in themselves.[8] The Nihon Shoki and Kojiki have varying accounts of the mythic

history of Japan, and there are differences in the details of the origins of the imperial family between the two texts.[8] The Yamato Dynasty still has a role as a public symbol of the state and people, according to the current constitution of Japan.[18][19]

Jimmu Tennō

The Japanese Pantheon

Japanese gods and goddesses, called kami, are uniquely numerous (there are at least eight million) and varied in power and stature.[1] They are usually descendants from the original trio of gods that were born from nothing in the primordial oil that was the world before the kami began to shape it.[1][9] There are easily as many kami in Japanese myth as there are distinct natural features, and most kami are associated with natural phenomena.[1] Kami can take many shapes and forms, some look almost human in depictions found by archaeologists; meanwhile, other kami look like hybrids of humans and creatures, or may not look human at all. One example of a kami who looks almost human in depictions is the ruler of the Seas Ryujin.[1] On the other hand, kami like Ningi and Amaterasu are often depicted as human in their forms.[1]

Ninigi otokawa, great-grandfather of Jimmu Tennō

Shinto originated in Japan, and the Kojiki and Nihon Shoki tell the tales of the Shinto pantheon's origins.[1] It is important to note that Shintoism is still practiced today in Japan. In Shinto belief, kami has multiple meanings and could also be translated as "spirit" and all things natural have a kami according to this system.[1] Myths often tell stories of particular, local deities and kami; for example, the kami of a mountain or a nearby lake.[1] Most kami take their origins from Shinto beliefs, but the influence of Buddhism also affected the pantheon.[1] Contact with other cultures usually had some influence on Japanese myth. Although in the fourteenth century, Christianity found its way to Japan through St. Francis Xavier and other contact with westerners.[1] However, during the Tokugawa shogunate Christians were executed in Japan.[1] Twenty christians were crucified before that while Toyotomi Hideyoshi was consolidating his power after the assassination of Oda Nobunaga.[1] Christianity was banned in Japan until well into the nineteenth century.[1]

Folklore Heroes

As in other cultures, Japanese mythology accounts for not only the actions of supernatural beings but also the adventures and lives of folk heroes. There are many Japanese heroes that are associated with specific locations in Japan, and others that are more well-known across the archipelago.[1] Some heroes are thought to have been real people, such as the Forty-seven rōnin, but their legacy has been transformed into great folktales that depict the historical figures as more

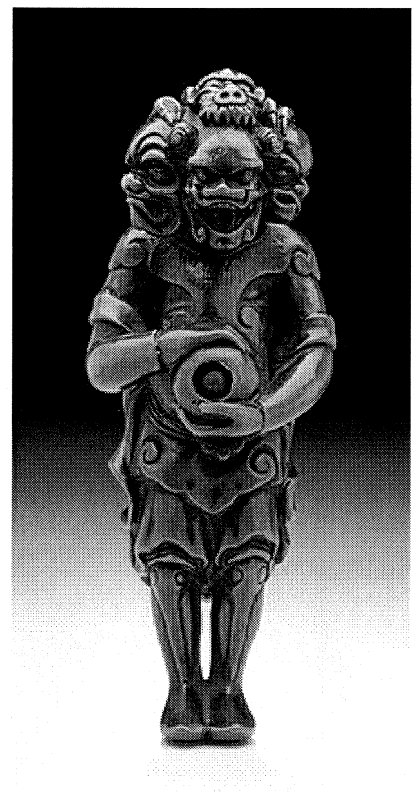
gifted, powerful, or knowledgeable than the average person.[1] The heroic adventures of these heroes range from acts of kindness and devotion, such as the myth of Shita-kiri Suzume, to battling frightful enemies, as in the tale of Momotaro. [9][20]

Themes that appear in the folklore concerning heroes are moral lessons, or stories that function as parables. The tale of Shita-kiri Suzume, for example, warns of the dangers of greed, avarice, and jealousy through the example of an old couple's experiences with a fairy who disguised herself as a sparrow to test the old man.[9] The influence of Bushido is noticeable in the behavior of heroes, and heroes often were also warriors.[1] Momotaro, born from a peach for a childless couple to raise, is a mythic hero who embodied courage and dutifulness as he went on a journey to defeat oni who were kidnapping, raping, and pillaging his home island.[1] The tale of Momotaro also shares in the themes of violence, sexual violence, and deities or demons devouring humans.[21] Stories of sexual violence are common in the Buddhist text Nihon ryōiki, while stories of people being devoured by mountain deities are found as if they are historical accounts in the fudoki.[21] In Japanese folklore, heroes like Momotaro rescue women from violent kami and oni. Although the exploits of heroes are well known, Japanese mythology also featured heroines.[1] Ototachibana, the wife of Yamato Takeru, threw herself into the sea to save her husband's ship and quell the wrath of the storm that threatened them.[1] Yamato Takeru, once safe, built a tomb for her and his mourning utterance for his wife caused Eastern Honshu to be called Adzuma[1].

Mythological Creatures

See also

- Ainu mythology
- Japanese Buddhism
- Japanese folklore
- Japanese mythology in popular culture
- Japanese urban legends
- Kami
- Kamui
- Kuni-yuzuri
- List of Japanese deities
- Philippine mythology
- Seven Lucky Gods
- Hōsōshin demon
- Shinto
- Yokai
- Yurei



Ryujin: Ruler of Seas and Tides
LACMA M.91.250.287

Spelling of proper nouns

Spelling of proper nouns

Many deities appear in Japanese mythology, and many of them have multiple aliases. Furthermore, some of their names are comparatively long. This article, therefore, lists only the most prominent names and gives them in one of their abbreviated forms, other abbreviated forms are also in use.

(For instance, *Ninigi*, or *Ame-Nigishikuni-Nigishiamatsuhiko-Hikono-no-**Ninigi**-no-Mikoto* in full, may also be abbreviated as *Hikoho-no-Ninigi* or *Hono-Ninigi*.)

In some parts of this article, proper names are written in a historical manner. In this article, underlined *h*, *y*, and *w* denote silent letters; they are omitted from modern spelling. Other syllables are modernized as follows (see also Japanese romanization systems). Note that some blend of these conventions is also often used.

- *hu* is modernized as *fu*.
- *zi* and *di* are modernized as *ji* (the distinction disappeared).
- *oo* is modernized as *o* or *oh*.

For instance, various spellings of *Ohonamuji* include *Oonamuji*, *Ohnamuji*, and others.

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External links

- Romance stories from old Japan, pre-1919 (http://www.antiquebooks.net/readpage.html#japan)—Free to read and full-text search.

- A Multilingual Electronic Text Collection of Folk Tales for Casual Users Using Off-the-Shelf Browsers (http://www.dlib.org/dlib/october97/sugimoto/10sugimoto.html)

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page 1	
Shinto	신도(神道)
Ainu	아이누(アイヌ)
Okinawan	오키나와(沖縄)의
kami	카미(神)
the Kojiki	고사기(古事記)
the Nihonshoki	일본서기(日本書紀)
the Shintoshu	신도집(神道集)
the Yamato State	야마토 국
Amaterasu	아마테라스(天照)
Ninigi	니니기(邇邇藝)

page 2	
Emperor Temmu	텐무천황(天武天皇)
Hiyeda no Are	히에다노 아레(稗田阿礼)
Nihongi	일본기(日本紀): 일본서기의 별칭
Empress Gemmio	겐메이천황(元明天皇)을 잘못 읽은 듯
Empress Gensho	겐쇼천황(元正天皇)
fudoki	풍토기(風土記)
Man'yoshu	만엽집(万葉集)
Motoori Norinaga	모토오리 노리나가(本居宣長)
Edo-period	에도시대(江戸時代)
The Jomu(o)n period	조몬시대(縄文時代)
the Yayoi period	야요이시대(弥生時代)
the Kofun period	고분시대(古墳時代)
Kamiumi	카미우미(神産み)
Kuniumi	쿠니우미(国産み)
Izanagi	이자나기(イザナギ)
Izanami	이자나미(イザナミ)
naginata	나기나타(薙刀)

page 3	
Oyashima	오오야시마(大八島)
Awaji	아와지 섬(淡路島)
Iyo	이요 섬(伊予): 현재의 시코쿠(四國)
Oki	오키 섬(隠伎)
Tsukushi	츠쿠시(筑紫): 현재의 큐슈(九州)
Iki	이키 섬(伊伎)
Sado	사도 섬(佐度)
Tsushima	츠시마(対馬)
Yamato	야마토(倭): 현재의 혼슈(本州)
Kagutsuchi	카구츠치(かぐつち)
Mount Hiba	히바 산(比婆山)
Izumo	이즈모(出雲)
Hoki	호키(伯耆)
Shimane Prefecture	시마네현(島根県)
Susanoo	스사노오(素戔嗚)
Yomi	요미(黄泉)
shikome	추녀(醜女)
Momotaro the peach boy	모모타로(桃太郎) 이야기

page 4	
Emperor Jimmu	진무천황(神武天皇)
Ame no Uzume	아메노우즈메(アメノウズメ)
kanototori	신유년(辛酉年)

page 6	
Shita-kiri Suzume	혀 잘린 참새 (일본 전래동화)
Bushido	무사도(武士道)
Nihon ryoiki	일본령이기(日本霊異記)
Ototachibana	오토타치바나(弟橘媛)
Yamato Takeru	야마토 타케루(日本武尊)

Ame-no-nuboko	아메노누보코(天沼矛)	Adzuma	아즈마(吾妻: 동일본 지역의 별칭)
Onogoro	오노고로 섬(オノゴロ島)		
page 5			
the Seas Ryujin	용신(龍神)		
Ningi	니니기의 오타인 듯		
Toyotomi Hideyoshi	도요토미 히데요시(豊臣秀吉)		
Oda Nobunaga	오다 노부나가(織田信長)		
the Forty-seven ronin	47인의 사무라이 (주신구라)		