

Chapter 4

The History of a Myth *The Sun-Goddess and the Rock-Cave*

One of the central episodes in the court histories on the Age of the Gods recounts how the sun-goddess, Amaterasu, was harassed by her brother, Susanowo, to the extent that she retired into a cave, plunging the world into darkness. In *Kojiki* the tale runs as follows:

When Amaterasu was in the sacred weaving hall weaving divine garments, [Susanowo] made a hole in the roof and threw a heavenly piebald horse that he had flayed backwards into the hall. The heavenly weaving maiden was shaken, pierced her genitals with her weaving shuttle, and died.

Amaterasu was frightened by this sight, opened the Rock-cave of Heaven, and confined herself in it. The whole of the Plain of High Heaven became dark, and all of the Central Land of Reed Plains was dark too. Because of this, eternal night reigned. The voices of the myriad kami filled [the air] like summer flies, and a myriad evils arose.

Therefore, the eight hundred myriad kami gathered on the bank of the Peaceful River of Heaven in a divine gathering. Takami-musubi's son Omoikane was ordered to devise a plan. The long-crying birds of Tokoyo were gathered and ordered to cry. [The kami] collected heavenly rocks from the upper reaches of the Peaceful River of Heaven and iron from the Iron Mountain of Heaven, and sent for the smith Ama-tsu-Mara. They charged Ishikoridome with making a mirror and Tama-no-Ya with making five hundred [strings of] shining curved beads, eight *saka* [c. 96 cm]

in length. They summoned Ame-no-Koyane and Futodama, drew a shoulder bone from a great stag of Mount Ame-no-Kaguyama, gathered heavenly *hahaka* wood from Mount Ame-no-Kaguyama, and made them perform divination [by reading the cracks that appeared in the shoulder bone when it was burnt in the *hahaka* fire]. They dug up a *sakaki* tree with five hundred [branches] on Mount Ame-no-Kaguyama, attached the five hundred [strings of] shining curved beads to its upper branches, hung the mirror of eight *ata* [c. 96 cm] on its middle branches, and let white and blue cloth trail from its lower branches. Futodama held up these goods as splendid offerings, Ame-no-Koyane pronounced splendid words of praise, and Ame-no-Tajikarawo stood hidden next to the cave.

Ame-no-Uzume tied up her sleeves with heavenly *hikage* vines from Mount Ame-no-Kaguyama, wore heavenly *masaki* vines [in her hair], and held heavenly *sasa* leaves in her hands. By the Heavenly Rock-cave they overturned a tub, and she made it thunder by stamping on it. She became kami-possessed, pulled out the nipples of her breasts and pushed her skirtstring down to her genitals. Then the Plain of High Heaven shook, and all the eight hundred myriad kami laughed together.

Amaterasu was startled, and slightly opening the door of the Heavenly Rock-cave she asked from within: "Because I have hidden myself, the Plain of Heaven must be dark, and the Central Land of Reed Plains likewise. Why then is Ame-no-Uzume dancing, and why do all the eight hundred myriad kami laugh?" Ame-no-Uzume replied: "We rejoice, laugh and dance because there is a kami superior to you." While she said this, Ame-no-Koyane and Futodama held up the mirror and showed it to Amaterasu. [Seeing her own reflection in the mirror,] Amaterasu was even more startled. When she leaned out of the cave to look at it, Ame-no-Tajikarawo, who stood hidden, took her arm and drew her out. At the same time, Futodama pulled a *shirikume* rope behind her and said: "You cannot cross this [rope] and go back inside." When Amaterasu appeared, the High Plain of Heaven and the Central Land of Reed Plains became light once more.¹

This tale is representative of the heady mix of sex and violence that pervades kami myth and ritual. Also, it has a complicated but quite well-understood history, and a rich afterlife in both premodern and modern Japan. An analysis of this tale and its trajectory

through history will illustrate many aspects of the formation, usages, and transformations of kami myth.

Origins

Kojiki and *Nihon shoki* tell about ancient gods and heroes in solemn, poetic language. The genre is instantly recognizable from other cultures across the globe, and few have hesitated to call these books works of myth. But what does that mean? What defines tales like the rock-cave legend as myths, and what happens to our reading of them when we approach them from that perspective?

There are countless definitions of myth, ranging from “simple lies” to “psychological prototypes,” and many do not apply here. Taking inspiration from Bruce Lincoln (1999), we will focus on one universal feature of myth that is equally characteristic of the Japanese case: myths tell us about the origins of things in a distant past, a time that was in some way more “true” than our own. Myths answer the question of how things came to be the way they are today, and seek to establish once and for all that this is how they should be. As is clear from *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*, in which the “Age of the Gods” fades seamlessly into the “Age of Man,” this focus on the past makes myths overlap with history; but there is also a difference between them. History is a narrative form that relativizes the present by showing that things were different before. Myths, however, present the order of things as absolute and unchangeable, hallowed by that order’s origin in a divine age.

When we approach myth from this perspective, mythology appears as a dynamic process. “Myth” is not a closed corpus of tales from a distant age before history; rather, mythmaking is a continuous practice that occurs at all times. Myths consistently present themselves as tales without an author, thus creating the illusion that they belong to a special dimension, as tales told by a divine voice – or, in a more modern view, by humanity’s collective subconscious. This is an effect of the particular rhetoric of myth, a device to establish lasting authority by transcending

the historical context in which the myths are produced and reproduced. Rather than slipping into the myths’ own rhetoric, however, we will here attempt to read the tale of the rock-cave as an example of what Lincoln calls “ideology in narrative form”: as an attempt (or, more accurately, a long series of attempts) at creating authority by means of origination legends.

At first sight, the myth of the heavenly rock-cave looks like a straightforward “nature myth” in the sense that term was employed by Max Müller, the nineteenth-century philologist who argued that all myths are in essence prescientific attempts at explaining natural phenomena. If we take such a perspective, the myth of the rock-cave can be readily understood as an explanation of sun eclipses, or of the sun’s decline in autumn and “rebirth” after the winter solstice. Indeed, this is a very widespread mythological theme right across the northern hemisphere, and as we shall see below, such a reading is confirmed by the fact that this myth was closely connected with rituals that were performed on the very day of the winter solstice.² There is no doubt that the rock-cave myth can indeed be read as an explanation for the sun’s weakening, as a recipe for reviving the sun, and as a guarantee for the success of such a procedure. Yet there is much more to this story than a “primitive” explanation of a natural phenomenon. First of all, such a simple view ignores the myth’s political and ideological aspects. Amaterasu is not only the sun-goddess but also the imperial ancestor, and the plot of this story sends the message that, without her, the world will simply stop functioning. It will soon become clear that the myth as it appears in *Kojiki* was a thoroughly historical product, shaped by political and social changes in a very specific context. If we explain the rock-cave tale as an ancient nature myth in a structuralist, static manner, the particular dynamics behind its composition become invisible.

Moreover, it is worth noting that Amaterasu is presented not only as the sun-deity but also as a weaver. This opens up a very different interpretation of the myth’s background and meaning. Michael Como has pointed out that there are striking structural resemblances between Chinese legends about the origins of sericulture on the one hand, and the tale of the rock-cave on the other.³ In Como’s reading, the rock-cave tale describes how the

weaving maiden Amaterasu died and entered a confined space similar to a cocoon, only to re-emerge in great splendor after a dangerous incubation period. This mirrors the life of the silkworm, known in China as the miraculous “insect of three transformations.” In fact, in another context *Nihon shoki* describes how “the way of raising silkworms began” when Amaterasu “put cocoons into her mouth and drew thread from them” (Aston 1972: I, 33). Como shows that immigrant groups of weavers from the continent conducted silkworm cults at shrines dedicated to a sun deity called Amateru or Amaterasu at various places in Japan. This suggests that sericulture and weaving were, at least at an early stage, at the very core of the rock-cave myth.

In the larger narrative of the Age of the Gods in *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*, however, this connection with sericulture was no longer functional. Rather, the episode of the rock-cave was carefully dovetailed into another central episode, namely the descent of the heavenly grandson, Ninigi, from the Plain of High Heaven to the Central Land of Reed Plains (that is, Japan). On this journey, Ninigi was accompanied by many of the deities that also figure in the tale of the rock-cave. Ame-no-Koyane, Futodama, Ame-no-Uzume, Ishikoridome, and Tama-no-Ya joined Ninigi as heads of occupational groups (*tomo*), serving him by performing specific tasks that were all related to ritual. In the story of the descent from heaven, they are explicitly identified as ancestors of the main priestly lineages at the court. As Table 3 shows, the priestly tasks that these lineages performed at the court coincided with the roles played by their ancestors in front of the rock-cave. Even Omoikane and Tajikarawo are mentioned among Ninigi’s

Table 3 Priestly lineages

<i>Deity</i>	<i>Lineage</i>	<i>Ritual function</i>
Ame-no-Koyane	Nakatomi	Officiating priests (recitations)
Futodama	Inbe	Officiating priests (offerings)
Ame-no-Uzume	Sarume	Dancers
Ishikoridome	Kagamitsukuri	Mirror-makers
Tama-no-Ya	Tama-no-Ya	Bead-makers

entourage, leaving little doubt that the two episodes of the rock-cave and the descent from heaven were designed to correspond. Together, they explain not only how the imperial line was established, but also how the priestly lineages of the court attained their present positions. Like the emperors themselves the court priests claimed heavenly descent, and in the rituals they represented the heavenly gods as their direct descendants. Rituals worked not only because they followed the right procedure, established in heaven, but also because they were performed by the right persons, authorized by their roots in that same heaven. Both episodes, then, can be read as origination legends of the imperial line and its priests. The tale of the rock-cave is not only about the seasonal return of the sun, or even about silk; more importantly, it staged the emperor as Amaterasu’s representative on earth.

What does this reveal about the historical context in which this myth was composed? A closer analysis of the sources suggests that Amaterasu’s rise to prominence as the main ancestor of the imperial line was a rather late development. Even in court mytho-history, her status is somewhat ambiguous. Here, *Nihon shoki* is an important source because it contains different versions listed below a “main version,” thus opening up the possibility of comparison. In some of these other versions of the episodes of the rock-cave and the descent from heaven, Amaterasu is not mentioned by name or else plays a subordinate role. In these variants, the main deity of the rock-cave episode is simply called the “sun deity,” and it is not Amaterasu but Takami-musubi (Omoikane’s father in the rock-cave myth) who orders the descent from heaven. The sudden rise to prominence of Amaterasu in *Kojiki* is one of the main differences between this text and the slightly later *Nihon shoki*.

This emphasis on Amaterasu is often seen as a direct reflection of the beliefs and preferences of Emperor Tenmu, who ordered the compilation of the *Kojiki*. Tenmu came to power by way of a coup, known as the Jinshin war (672), in which he took over the throne from his late brother by deposing his young nephew. We have already seen that these events had a great impact on the Hie Shrines; the same was true of Amaterasu’s shrine at Ise. Ise is

located some 100 kilometers east of the Yamato plain, near the shore of Ise Bay, and served both as the closest harbor with access to eastern Japan and as a source of sea products. While Ise had also been a major recipient of Yamato worship even before Tenmu, it experienced a leap in status when Tenmu came to power. Tenmu appears to have attributed his victory in the Jinshin war to Amaterasu's support, and he developed a personal relationship with this deity that found expression both in the court's treatment of Ise itself and in Amaterasu's standing in the *Kojiki*, which was commissioned by Tenmu soon after his victory.

The *Kojiki's* account of the myth of the rock-cave reflects these circumstances by incorporating a number of Ise elements (Miyake 1984: 74–112). Not only Amaterasu, but also Ame-no-Uzume, Omoikane, and Tajikarawo are deities with roots in Ise. Other elements in the myth can be traced to Ise too. The “long-crying birds of Tokoyo” reflect an Ise rite in which a priest makes a crowing noise “like a rooster” before entering the shrine; and according to the *Nihon shoki*, Amaterasu praised Ise as “a land washed by the waves of Tokoyo.”⁴ It is striking that while all of these Ise elements are echoed in the “main version” of the *Nihon shoki*, they are absent from the second and third versions recorded there. These are the versions that do not name Amaterasu, which suggests that these elements were added to an older tale in Tenmu's time, when Ise priests gained a foothold at court.

This in turn raises the question what the original context of these elements may have been in Ise. The key to an answer is hidden in Ame-no-Uzume's provocative dance in front of the rock-cave. In the episode of the descent from heaven, Ame-no-Uzume behaves in a very similar way. A version of the tale in *Nihon shoki* relates how one of the gods who had been sent in advance to clear the way for Ninigi's descent turned back and reported:

“There is a god who dwells at the eightfold crossroads of heaven, whose nose is seven hands long and who is more than seven fathoms tall. Moreover, a light shines from his mouth and his posterior. His eyeballs are like an eight-hand mirror and have a ruddy glow like lampion flowers.” [...]

[Ninigi] commanded Ame-no-Uzume, saying: “You are superior to others in the power of your looks. You must go and question him.” So Ame-no-Uzume forthwith bared her breasts and, pushing down the band of her skirt below her navel, confronted him with a mocking laugh. Then the god of the crossroads asked her: “Ame-no-Uzume! What do you mean by this behavior?”⁵

It turns out that this deity of the crossroads is called Saruta-hiko, and he has come to meet Ninigi and his entourage. After accompanying Ninigi to earth, he settles together with Ame-no-Uzume on “the upper reaches of the river Isuzu” in Ise. The shrine, called Saruta-hiko Jinja, still thrives today and is located a short walk from Amaterasu's Inner Shrine.

In both these myths, Ame-no-Uzume emerges as the deity of a lineage of female priests called the Sarume. The Sarume addressed their worship to the shining, dawn-like Saruta-hiko; or to the “sun-deity”; or to Amaterasu, depending on which version of the myths we prefer. Saruta-hiko appears to be Ame-no-Uzume's closest associate, both in the myths and in the geography of Ise, so perhaps he was the original object of Sarume worship before this lineage was incorporated into Tenmu's sun cult. Our quotation from *Nihon shoki* presents Saruta-hiko as a luminous solar deity, but he also has markedly phallic features. His long nose is one such trait; also, Saruta-hiko has been closely associated with phallic markers (called *dōsojin*) placed at crossroads. In fact, Ame-no-Uzume's sexual dance makes more sense when it is addressed to Saruta-hiko than it does in the rock-cave tale. Like Ame-no-Uzume, Saruta-hiko is a deity of sex and fertility, and his appeasement in midwinter may well have been a local rite to secure renewed fecundity in the coming spring season. The combination of the phallic Saruta-hiko and Ame-no-Uzume's exposure of her breasts and genitals makes for a striking fertility ritual. In the rock-cave myth, the only function of Ame-no-Uzume's sexual titillation is to evoke laughter and thus make Amaterasu curious enough to open the cave door.

With Ise's rise to prominence at Tenmu's court, the Sarume found a place in court ritual. The many Ise elements in the episodes of both the rock-cave and the descent from heaven can be

explained as a result of the incorporation of Sarume legends into court myth. This becomes very visible in a court ritual that is closely related to the rock-cave myth, called *chinkonsai* in Sino-Japanese or *mitama-shizume* in Japanese, both meaning the “settling of the spirit.”

Chinkonsai was performed every year at the winter solstice, one day before the rite of offering the first fruits (*niiname*, or, in case of a new emperor, *ōname* or *daijōsai*). Occasionally it was also performed at other times, notably when the emperor was ill, to strengthen his spirit. The oldest sources on this ritual date from the ninth century, so it is only partly possible to reconstruct its original form. *Chinkonsai* took place at the worship hall of the Council of Kami Affairs or, from the late Heian period onwards, in a tent pitched at the site of what had been that Council’s building. Here, court priestesses called *mikannaqi* performed a dance in which an overturned tub was struck with a *sakaki* stick decorated with bells. Music was played on *koto* zithers and flutes, and songs were intoned in praise of various objects held by the dancers to attract the deities (a sword, a bow and arrows, the stick, *kazura* vines). The last two of these songs announce the “revival” (*tama-agari*, *tama-kaeshi*) of the spirit of a deity called Toyo-hirume, the “Fertile Sun-Goddess.” Meanwhile, a court lady would shake a chest containing a set of the emperor’s clothes, while the head of the Council of Kami Affairs made knots in short threads of flax kept in another chest. The dancing, shaking, and tying of knots all served as rites of reviving and stabilizing the spirit of both the sun and the emperor, who in this ritual merged into one. The proceedings continued with a number of other dances, including one performed by Sarume maidens. They also included an offering of food to the revived spirit of the sun/emperor, and ended with a communal meal (Matsumae 1974: ch. 3).

It is not difficult to recognize the rock-cave myth in these procedures. By the ninth century the Sarume had receded into the background, but the reference to Ame-no-Uzume’s dance is still obvious. The *chinkonsai* combined a number of rites that shared the same aim of strengthening the spirit of the sun/emperor and preventing it from wandering. Matsumae Takeshi, a scholar of Japanese mythology, has proposed that these different rites can be

traced to different lineages: the tying of knots to an ancient tradition of the Yamato royal line itself; the shaking and the sword to the Mononobe from the Isonokami Shrine near Miwa; and the striking of the tub to the Sarume from Ise (Matsumae 1974: 137–8). The Sarume rite would have been the most recent of these, added after Ise eclipsed the older Isonokami and Miwa shrines in Tenmu’s time. Matsumae’s reading suggests that the rock-cave myth and its corresponding ritual, *chinkonsai*, were of special importance to Tenmu because they underscored the unity of the emperor and the sun.

Others, however, have interpreted the *chinkonsai* and its relationship with the rock-cave in a very different manner. Herman Ooms (2008: ch. 7) argues that Tenmu’s performance of the *chinkonsai* in 685 was not only the first recorded instance of the rite, but its first performance full stop. Ooms maintains that the rite actually performed for Tenmu was very different from the *chinkonsai* as it was recorded in the ninth century. Rather than assuming that Tenmu’s rite drew on the myth of Amaterasu’s emergence from the rock-cave, Ooms argues that it was a purely Daoist procedure introduced by a Korean priest conversant in Chinese medicine, at a time when Tenmu was dangerously ill.⁶ Only in the course of the eighth century, Ooms proposes, when priestly lineages such as the Mononobe and the Sarume were being sidelined at the court by the Nakatomi, did these lineages relate the Daoist rite of *chinkonsai* to the rock-cave myth, in which their divine ancestors played a prominent role, in an attempt to claim ownership over this ritual and thus strengthen their position within the palace.

With the limited sources that are available, it remains impossible to decide whether the *chinkonsai* was a Daoist ritual reinterpreted in terms of the rock-cave myth or an older ritual that is reflected in that myth. Either way, however, the tale of the rock-cave is a perfect illustration of the dynamics of mythmaking in ancient Yamato. Beneath the surface of this apparently simple tale there are many layers of different origins. These layers are traces of power struggles between lineages from various parts of Yamato’s inner sphere. At the court, these various elements were woven into a single narrative with one dominant theme (imperial

power), updated time and again on the basis of recent political developments. While we tend to think of mythology as a timeless reflection of primeval truths, the Yamato myths derived their significance from their ability to stay in tune with their own time. As soon as they lost their ability to adapt to the circumstances, they also lost much of their authority. Yet there would be other uses for the myth of the rock-cave, and it was not allowed to lie dormant for long.

The Rediscovery of Court Myth

We have seen that the tale of the rock-cave revealed the sacred origins of the court cult of Amaterasu, of its priests, and of the *chinkonsai* ceremony. Of course, that is not all. For example, this myth also relates the divine origin of mirrors as ritual objects. In particular, it introduces one very special mirror: the mirror that was cast by Ishikoridome and that was used to lure Amaterasu out of the cave. This mirror reappears in the tale of the descent from heaven; Amaterasu hands the same mirror to Ninigi with the words: “Have it with you as my spirit, and worship it just as you would worship in my very presence” (Philippi 1969: 140). Through developments that we will not pursue here, this mirror was said to have ended up in Ise already in ancient times. However, in the tenth century the same mirror suddenly appeared in the imperial palace as well, where it came to serve as the focus of new imperial rituals (Saitō 1996: ch. 5).

The appearance of Amaterasu in the palace in the tenth century marked the beginning of a renewed interest in kami myth and ritual at the court. By this time, as we have seen in Chapter 2, the *jingi* cult was fading rapidly. The emperor tended to be viewed in Chinese terms, as a Confucian monarch whose rule was in harmony with Yin and Yang and the principles of heaven. The ritual calendar was dominated by Buddhist ceremonies, including ceremonies for the kami. Why, then, this sudden interest in Amaterasu? It was not due to a revival of “Shinto”; rather, it reflected developments in the position of the emperor and his court within the political system.