

The Origins of Japanese History

Excerpted from A History of Japan by Malcolm Kennedy, 1964

In the beginning, three divinities were born of themselves in the "Plain of High Heaven". Later, two more were added. Then came seven generations of gods¹, those of the seventh generation being *Izanagi* and *Izanami*, the creators of Japan. Standing on the "Floating Bridge of Heaven", they stirred up the waters of the sea with a lance, which had been given to them by the other gods. When they withdrew it, a drop of water fell from the tip and congealed into an island. To this they descended and, on it, they gave birth to all the other islands of Japan, as well as to numerous gods. The last of these was the Fire God, who, on being born, burned his mother, *Izanami*, so severely that she died. She was thereupon buried on the borders of *Izumo* and *Hoki*, two provinces on the southwest coast of Japan facing the Asiatic mainland.

Driven to distraction by his wife's death, *Izanagi* went down to the nether regions and sought to bring her back, but after a series of dramatic adventures, he had to return to the earth without her. There, while purifying himself of his contamination with the world of the dead, he washed his left eye in the sea and thereby gave birth to the Sun Goddess, *Amaterasu*, from whom all emperors of Japan were subsequently to claim descent. In a like manner, the washing of his right eye gave birth to the Moon Goddess; and on washing his nose, *Susanowo*, the Storm God, known also as the Impetuous Male, was born.

Of the numerous and extremely complicated quarrels and reconciliation's that later took place between *Amaterasu* and her brother, *Susanowo*, only two call for mention. Both of them bear closely on the subsequent history of Japan. In one of these quarrels, the Sun Goddess was so angered by her brother's actions that she withdrew into a cave. Thereby the world was plunged into darkness, until the gods contrived a ruse to lure her out from her hiding place. Setting up a mirror outside the cave and collecting a number of cocks together to crow on the approach of dawn, they assembled in conclave while a goddess performed an obscene dance before them. Hearing the noise of the gods laughing, the cocks crowing, and the goddess dancing to the sound of a drum, *Amaterasu* looked out of the cave to see what it was all about. Observing the mirror and her own reflection in it, she stepped outside and was promptly seized by one of the gods, who had for the purpose, lain in wait close by. At the same time, a rope was hurriedly stretched across the entrance to the cave, so as to prevent her retiring into it once more. And thus, by this strategy, light was restored to the world; but *Susanowo* was expelled from Heaven for having been the cause of all the trouble. Descending to earth, he landed in *Silla*, in southeastern Korea, and from there crossed over in a clay boat to the Japanese province of *Izumo*, where his mother was buried.

The significance of this reference to *Susanowo*'s journey from Korea to Japan will be seen later, but first it is well to consider how to interpret the story of the Sun Goddess's withdrawal into her cave. It may be symbolic of an eclipse, though modern scholars think it more likely an allusion to the beginning of winter, when the storms (*Susanowo* being the Storm God) drive the sun behind the clouds. The obscene dance is thought to have an agricultural implication, as obscenity, bearing on the fertility of the fields, always has this significance in primitive religions. The agricultural aspect is seen also in the more detailed accounts given in the ancient chronicles, which tell of *Susanowo* destroying the banks of his sister's paddy fields and committing other misdeeds abhorrent to an agricultural people. But apart from

¹ It should be noted that the Japanese term *KAMI*, though translated as God or gods, is by no means synonymous with the Christian, Jewish or Moslem conception of the Deity or deities. The Japanese *KAMI* are superior beings rather than gods; they are neither omniscient nor omnipotent.

conjectures, one thing is certain; the story of the mirror has had a close bearing on Japanese history from the earliest times down to the present day, for the Sacred Mirror forms part of the imperial regalia.

The other two emblems of this regalia are the Curved Jewels and the Sacred Sword. The former are derived from the reputed action of *Izanagi*, when he ordered his elder daughter, the Sun Goddess, to rule the “Plain of Heaven” and presented her with a necklace of curved jewels. The Sacred Sword is said to be a replica of a sword found in one of the eight tails of a giant serpent slain, in the course of rescuing a maiden, by *Amaterasu’s* brother, *Susanowo*, who later gave it to his sister. The original is supposed to have remained in existence until 1185, when it was lost at sea during the battle of *Dannoura*...

One further incident concerning the relations between the Sun Goddess and her impetuous brother calls to mention, for it, too, has a direct bearing on Japanese history. This is the story of how, through strange and miraculous happenings, they became the parents of eight children. The eldest son became the ancestor of Japan’s long line of emperors; the other seven children have been claimed as the progenitors of some of the great families of the Japanese nation.

Japanese mythology goes on to tell of *Amaterasu* sending her grandson *Ninigi*, down to earth to rule the “Central Land of Reed Plains”, a poetical term for Japan. Instead of joining *Susanowo* in *Izumo*, however, he descended on Mount *Takachiho* in *Hyuga*, the southeast province of *Kyushu*. There followed various strange and fabulous adventures, combined with fighting local chiefs, and in due course he begat a son, who married the Sea Goddess’s daughter. They, in turn, had a son who married his own aunt. To this strangely assorted couple was born a male child, who carried out a series of military exploits, culminating in a victorious expedition to *Yamato*, a province in central Japan, south of what is now *Kyoto*. By this achievement, which seems to have followed the submission of *Izumo* to his leadership, he became the first earthly Emperor of Japan and, many centuries later, was accorded the posthumous name of *Jimmu Tenno*. The terminal name *Tenno*, meaning Son of Heaven, has been applied posthumously to the names of all Japanese emperors ever since...

That *Jimmu Tenno* was a historical character is hardly to be doubted; but modern research, combined with more scientific methods than were available to the early chroniclers, would seem to indicate that he was a successful chieftain who, by war and other means, contrived to bring a number of local tribes and clans under his own sway....

Because of the close bearing of Japanese myths and legends on the Japan of today, no true understanding of Japanese history is possible without some knowledge of this legendary background. Without this background knowledge, much of Japanese art and literature too, is unintelligible...

It is not without significance that the stories of *Izanagi* and *Izanami* bear a striking resemblance to similar myths in Polynesia, and that the account of *Izanagi* washing his eyes and thereby giving birth to the Sun Goddess and her sister, the Moon Goddess, has close parallel in the Chinese legend of *Pan-ku*, whose left eye became the sun and right eye became the moon.

The tenth emperor (*Sujin* 97 - 29 BC), put an end to the practice of worshipping *Amaterasu* in the imperial palace, and built a separate sanctuary for this purpose. His son, *Suinin*, carried this process one step further by sending his daughter to found what is today the sacred shrine of *Ise*, there to keep watch over the mirror, sword, and jewels inherited from his divine ancestress, the Sun Goddess.