

The Meaning of "The Beginning" and "The End" In Shinto and Early Japanese Buddhism

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INTRODUCTION

The problem of the interdependence between Shinto and Buddhism is of great importance in the history of Japanese culture because it is closely connected with many other major issues, such as formation of a state religion, literature, philosophy, development of fine arts and the like.

Western scholars have paid considerable attention to the role of early Japanese Buddhism as a state religion. Though this is indeed a very significant problem I believe nevertheless that the real meaning of Buddhism can be fully grasped only in a broader cultural context. For this purpose it is extremely important to consider how one and the same "elementary" cultural feature manifests itself in life, history and man's creativeness.

For the analysis of such fundamental elements I have chosen the notions of the "the beginning" and "the end," which are of major importance in the semiotics of culture. Basing my research on early Buddhist prose on the one hand and on Shinto-oriented texts on the other, I will try to show that the notion of "the beginning" in a Shinto interpretation and that of "the end" in the Buddhist comprehension both work as universal structure-making patterns.

This paper embraces three fields: the existential (life of man), the making of plots (in Buddhist prose) and the historical (comprehension of history).

THE EXISTENTIAL

In the existential field the problem of "the beginning" and "the end" is none other than the problem of "birth" and

"death" which naturally is of the gravest significance in any period in the history of mankind.

Shinto myths deal mainly with birth. Gods are born from the parts of the body, from water, blood, etc. This preoccupation with birth is quite natural because myths are stories about how the world was developed. So Shinto rituals aim at the reproduction of the initial order, customs and manners. As has been shown, the chronology of the gods' births contributed greatly to the self-consciousness of the society: the earlier the god was born, the greater number of clans (*uji*) considered him their ancestor and hence the more stable was his place in the Shinto pantheon. (Amaterasu is an exception—her overwhelming importance is determined by later purely political events. See Meshcheryakov 1978.)

The "death" of the gods and their existence after "death" is treated in less detail. Gods died in different ways, some of them calmly and others evoking cosmic disorder. But very little can be said about how gods behave in the netherland (*Yomi no kuni*). Nevertheless we can surely imagine that their human descendants conducted collective ceremonies in their honor to achieve their help both in the present and in the future.

The death of an emperor was regarded as a cosmic event. Ascending the throne is described as descending from heaven and his death as ascending to heaven (see *Manyōshū*, Nos. 199 and 200). The word "kamuagaru" ("to die") consists of two roots—"god" and "to ascend"—and can be interpreted as "to ascend to the gods."

The death of an emperor was, moreover, apprehended as a loss of solar light and a break in time—subjects ceased to distinguish "day and night" (*Manyōshū*, No. 200). All governmental affairs were stopped or considered to be stopped—that also means break of time. The tenth century *Ōjō gokurakki*, describing the death of Shōtoku Taishi, says: "Tillers left their mattocks, women who pounded corn abandoned their pestles. They said: 'Sun and moon are faded...'" It was also thought that the emperor had

escaped into a cave (see *Manyōshō* No. 199), an idea which clearly resembles the famous myth of Amaterasu's concealment in a rock-cave.¹

We must admit that Buddhism did not bring much that was new to the concepts of birth of the Japanese, and the idea of karmic retribution was interpreted mainly as retribution for deeds in this life, and not a previous one. But the Buddhist contribution to ideas concerning death is quite significant. Buddhism introduced the ethical notion of after-death retribution based on sin and virtue. In *Nihon ryōiki*, the first lengthy Buddhist writing of a non-official nature in Japan, this retribution is manifested at least in two ways: 1) rebirth in human or bestial form, and 2) torments (delights) in the world of Yama. (The torments are described much more thoroughly.) The idea of after-death retribution is transformed greatly in the later *Ōjō gokurakki*. In *Nihon ryōiki* the main reward for virtue is material benefit in this life but the saints depicted in *Ōjō gokurakki* tear through the cycle of life and death and ascend to the Pure Land.

As a whole, the notion of death (or of post-death retribution) is more developed in Buddhism than in Shinto. This can be explained by the ethic orientation of Buddhism, which teaches man the ultimate goal of self-perfection. In Shinto, on the contrary, everybody is revered by his descendants regardless of his faults and merits, merely because he is an ancestor. The Buddhist comprehension of death is more detailed—it regards men not only as ancestors or descendants but looks upon them in their social environment.

It is thus quite natural that the Shinto custom of committing to the earth was gradually changed to cremation. The first written evidence of this new custom traces back to 700 A.D. when the monk Dōshō was cremated

1. This tale can be found in the following sources in English: Philippi 1968, pp.81-86; Aston 1978, pp.41-50; Katō and Hoshino 1926, pp.19-23.

according to his will (see *Shoku nihongi*, Monmu 4-3-10). In 702, 707 and 721 emperors Jitō, Monmu, and Genmei respectively were cremated. Pragmatic explanations of the spread of cremation in terms of the alleged shortage of land (Matsunaga 1971, p.171) are not valid, in my opinion, because in the eighth century there was a good deal of unused and uncultivated land, and many Shinto funerals were also conducted in the mountains, where farming was impossible. I believe that Buddhist concepts of death displaced step by step those of Shinto, which led to a wide recognition of Buddhist ritual. Even now funerals are conducted largely by Buddhist priests.

At the same time, however, Shinto notions and rituals of birth dominated. Not only did these play a great role in the life of man, they also gave birth to stories which were considered by their contemporaries as Buddhist.

The story found in *Nihon ryōiki* Vol. 1, No. 3 is of much importance in this connection.

During the reign of Emperor Bidatsu, when a farmer was working in his field, it began raining. The farmer took shelter under a tree. When it thundered he raised his metal rod in fear. The thunder struck before him, appearing as a boy. The farmer was about to strike him with the rod but the boy said: "Please, don't hit me. I will repay your kindness." The farmer asked what he should do. The boy answered that he would send a son to the farmer. "Make me a camphor boat, fill it with water, put a bamboo leaf on the water and give the boat to me." The farmer did this and the thunder god could now ascend to heaven. Later a son was born to the farmer. A snake was coiled twice around his head. This son accomplished miraculous deeds: he defeated a strong prince, expelled an evil fiend from the Buddhist temple Gangōji, and defeated some princes who had stopped the flow of water to the fields owned by this temple. He was ordained under the name of Dōjō.

In this story the snake is identified with the thunder god, which is quite usual everywhere in the world. The first part of the story, dealing with the meeting of the

farmer and the thunder god and the birth of the child, is closely connected to traditional Shinto beliefs, as can be shown by the following arguments.

The farmer raised the metal rod ("kane no tsue") when it thundered. *Nihon ryōiki* says that he did this in fear, as if protecting himself. But as we know from modern folk-tales, snakes are afraid of metal things (See Dorson 1962, p.118, p.121). Besides that, the word *tsue*, which is traditionally interpreted as "a rod," is a sacred object of Shinto. According to *Kojiki*, Izanagi returned from the land of Yomi and purified himself. During the purification, when he flung down his *tsue*, a god named Tuki-taku-puna-to-no-kami came into existence (Philippi 1968, p.68). Later in the historic period, this was symbolized as a pillar or stick and was fixed by the roads. People believed that that god drove away evil spirits. We also know that the *tsue* as a walking-stick was used as a protector against spirits. *Tsue* are also often used in Shinto *kagura*. In *Nihon ryōiki* the *tsue* is certainly used to safeguard the farmer from being struck by lightning.

Making a boat for the thunder god is a ritual to renew the abilities of the thunder god which he lost on the ground. One can easily imagine that camphor-boats appearing in excavations of Yayoi and Kōfun stratas may be explained as accessories of a thunder god cult.

The appearance of a child with a snake coiled twice around his head indicates that the child was a descendant of the thunder god.

In its most archaic form, some traces of which can be seen in the *Nihon ryōiki* story, the appearance of a miraculous boy resulted from the fecundation of mother-earth by the rain (thunder) god.

The competition with a prince living in a secluded house corresponds to the motif of the test of the hero, which in fact is absolutely necessary in every folk narrative. The *Nihon ryōiki* story says that the boy made deep footprints. In another story the snake himself, not his descendant, is featured in the same manner (Dorson 1962,

p.122). One can assume that deep footprints are indicative of a snake.

The rain-making function in a highly developed agricultural society is transferred from the snake to his child: as his last deed Dōjō opened the sluice gates shut by the evil princes so that the fields of the Gangōji temple were never dry again.

Story 81 of the eleventh century *Dai nihon hokke genki* treats the snake in a similar manner in connection with his water-bringing activities. In this tale a man wishes to build a pagoda but thunder destroys it many times. The monk Jin'yū promises to help that man and starts to read the "Lotus Sutra." At that moment it begins to rain and the man is afraid that the lightning will destroy the pagoda once again. But the prayers have an effect and the thunder god, in the form of a young man, falls to the ground. He is tangled in a rope and cannot ascend to heaven. Jin'yū orders him not to destroy the pagoda and to bring water from the valley. The thunder god obeys the command but does not bring water from the valley. When he ascends to heaven a spring of the purest water gushes forth from a rock. This story turns the irregular rain-maker into a permanent source of water.

Generally speaking the common Japanese Buddhist comprehension of the snake is as a wholly harmful creature. This attitude can be traced to pre-Buddhist times, and is not connected with the snake's rain-making function—the snake is featured as a sexual trickster. Some examples will make this clear.

Hitachi fudoki relates the tale of a stranger who used to visit a woman named Nuka-bime. This stranger would appear in the evening and leave in the morning. The woman eventually gives birth to a snake child. The child speaks to his mother in the darkness and keeps silence when it begins to dawn. The mother moves him from one vessel to another but the snake grows so rapidly that one day she has no appropriate vessel for him. The mother says: "Judging by your abilities I have understood that you are son of a god

and our family cannot nourish you any longer. Go back to your father. You should not remain here." The son agrees with her but asks for a child as a guide. When his request is rejected he goes into a rage and with the help of the lightning strikes his uncle Nuka-bime's brother dead. The mother then throws the vessel the snake had been kept in at him. He loses his divine abilities and cannot ascend to heaven (*Fudoki*, pp.78-81).

Hizen fudoki says that a man once came at night to Otohi-himeko and left at dawn. When the woman traced him she found herself at a lake at the peak of a mountain. She saw a snake there. He had a human body in the water and the head of a snake on the shore. At that moment the snake turned into a man and invited Otohi-himeko to descend to his house. Otohi-himeko's maid returned home and told the story to her relatives. When they climbed the mountain they found Otohi-himeko lying at the bottom of the lake (*Fudoki*, pp.396-397).

In *Kojiki*, there is a story very similar to this *Hizen fudoki* legend, but in *Kojiki* the story ends at the moment of identification of a stranger with a snake-god in the mountain (Philippi 1968, pp.203-204).

Buddhist stories regard relationships between snakes and human women as harmful. *Nihon ryōiki* II. 41 tells how a girl was raped by a snake but cured by a magic ritual. Nevertheless she was violated for the second time and died. *Ryōiki* compiler Kyōkai ends the story in the following way: "According to the law of karmic causality, one is reborn as a snake, horse, cow, dog, or bird, or falls in love with a snake because of evil deeds in the past, or is reborn in the form of a ghostly creature."

Most stories in *Nihon ryōiki* end with a didactic moral by the compiler which serves as a powerful means for accommodation of non-Buddhist stories. The moral showed the reader how to adopt ideas which were desirable to the author.

The appearance of this moral is a fact of great significance, because in Shinto it is impossible to recapitulate the

text, which exists in Shinto only as an equal to itself. Even the author of a polemical work such as *Kogoshōi* (early ninth century) is inclined to cite the myth in full but not to point out the differences between the "official" version of the myth and the myth kept by his clan.

MAKING OF PLOTS

Now let us have a look at two very similar legends from *Nihon ryōiki* (Stories II.8 and II.12), which are quite interesting for the comprehension they show of the plot making function of syncretic Shinto-Buddhist stories. In one (II.8), a girl meets a snake who is swallowing a frog. Moved by the desire to save all sentient beings, the girl asks the snake to set the frog free, and in exchange she promises to marry the snake. Then in fear she goes to the Venerable Gyōgi (or Gyōki), but he answers that nothing can be done and that she should have faith in the Three Treasures of Buddhism and keep the precepts firmly. On the appointed day the snake appears, climbs onto the roof and drops in front of the girl. But some crabs she had also saved earlier cut the snake into shreds, saving her from what Shinto would call a sin. Thus Buddhist virtues protect the girl from evil.

In spite of the Buddhist plot of the story the snake is pictured in a Shinto way. At the girl's house he comes through the roof, which indicates his sacred origin. The following fragments from *Kojiki* show this quite clearly.

When Amaterasu was inside the sacred weaving hall seeing to the weaving of the divine garments, her brother Susanoo opened a hole in the roof and dropped the heavenly pony through it (Philippi 1968 p.80).

In another fragment the god Take-mika-duti-no-kami sends a sword to pacify the land through a hole in the roof of a store-house (Philippi 1968, p.168).

In these *Nihon ryōiki* stories "up" (= "the sky") is connected with the life of the snake and "down" with his death. Snakes are immobilized or die on the ground in four

stories.²

The presence of a frog in the *Nihon ryōiki* stories also indicates the pre-Buddhist origins of the legend. In *Nihon ryōiki* the frog is depicted only as a goal for fulfilling the Buddhist virtue of saving a living being. But in other stories to avoid giving birth to a snake's child a girl is advised to step over a tub with frogs (Suzuki 1951, pp.51-52) or put a frog in the tub which is used during parturition (Seki 1963, p.270). On the bronze *dōtaku* from Sakura-ga-oka there is a picture of a frog, a snake and a human being which also proves the antiquity of this motif (Torigoe 1975, p.29). I believe that in the *Nihon ryōiki* story we find a fragment of an unknown myth.

The meaning of the crabs in the *Nihon ryōiki* story is not clear enough. But it should be pointed out that the pair "girl-crab" is found in ancient kagura songs.³

Various folktales have inherited this opposition between snake and crab. Dorson cites the following story. A man named Hachiro was preparing meals for a wood-cutter. He caught a trout but liked it so much that he ate it himself. He then became thirsty and could not slake his thirst, so he turned into a snake and built a dam. The god of Kogage, in whose territory this happened, did not like it, and thus turned into a crab, making a hole in the dam (Dorson 1962, pp.126-127).

In Buddhist stories which appeared after *Nihon ryōiki* the motif of girl and snake falls into further decline through the introduction of a Buddhist monk. In story

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2. Stories I.1, I.3, II.8 and II.12. The motif of a snake penetrating through the roof of a house is preserved in folktales even today, but the details of his arrival on the roof are pictured very pragmatically. According to one story (Seki 1963, pp.139-142) a girl became ill because a snake was trapped in the roof of her house when it was thatched.
 3. For these songs see *Nihon koten bungaku zenshū*, Vol. 25, pp.70-71. According to *Kojiki*, Emperor Ōjin sang a song to Ya-gapa-ye-pime in which a crab is mentioned before their marriage. Philippi believes that "perhaps, crab was served at the feast" (p.277), but I believe that the crab here is clearly a sexual symbol.

XXIX.40 of *Konjaku monogatari shū* a young monk dreams that he slept with a beautiful girl. When he awakens he sees a dead snake near him. In this story we see a total decline of an original story: we now have not a male snake but a female snake; not a girl but a monk; the death not of a human being but of an animal.

Nihon ryōiki 1.5 is also very interesting from the perspective of plot in syncretic Shinto-Buddhist stories. Sounds resembling flutes, kotos and thunder are heard from the seashore. It is found that the sounds were uttered by a camphor log which had been struck by lightning. The log was transported by cart to the Court and Buddhist images were made from it.⁴

It is apparent from *Kojiki*, *Nihon shoki*, the *fudoki* and modern ethnographical observations that the koto is a sacred instrument to Shinto and was used during shamanistic trances. Such rites are depicted in *Kojiki* (Philippi 1968, pp.257-258). One preceded the campaign against the Kumaso tribe. Emperor Chūai played the koto. Takesi-uti-no-sukune was appointed *saniwa*, to seek the divine will, and the empress was the diviner. The empress became possessed and said: "There is a land in the west...I will now give this country to your hands." But the emperor did not believe these words because there was no land to the west. He pushed the koto away. The deity was enraged and said that the emperor would not rule this kingdom. The *saniwa* asked him to play the koto again and the emperor did so reluctantly. Suddenly the sound stopped and when they raised the lights they saw that the emperor was dead. After some time had passed the divination was repeated and the words of the gods were found unchanged.

The divination of Jingū Kōgō was conducted under the same conditions—the diviner became possessed while listen-

4. A similar legend is found in *Nihon shoki* in the entry for Kinmei 14/5/7. According to this story a voice that echoed like thunder was heard reciting Buddhist chants. The *Nihon shoki* version does not say that the log was struck by lightning.

ing to the sounds of the koto (Philippi 1968, pp.260-291, Aston 1978, p.225).

The koto is also featured as a shamanistic instrument in a non-official version of the famous myth about the concealment of Amaterasu in the cave. Ame-no-Uzume enticed the goddess by a dance accompanied by koto music. One of the possible ways to write the word "koto" in Japanese consists of three ideograms: "god-command-koto." There were koto players in the Jingikan who, with flute players, took part in Shinto ceremonies.

Now let us return to the *Nihon ryōiki* story about the log cited above. It is said that the sounds of the log resembled thunder. According to *Nihon shoki*, camphor trees were produced by Susanoo (the storm god) from his brows for ship-building (Aston 1978, p.58). In *Nihon ryōiki* I.3, mentioned above, the snake (=thunder god) asks the farmer to make a boat for him from a camphor-tree so that he could return to the sky.

The thirteenth century *Gukanshō* says that when in the reign of Kinmei Buddhist statues were thrown into the canal, the Emperor's residence was set on fire by lightning. Then a radiance was seen in the sea which was produced by a log from a camphor tree. Kinmei commanded Buddhist images to be made from it (Brown and Ishida 1979, p.262). The "Karano" ship was also made from camphor (*Fudoki*, pp.483-484). The *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* story says that the ship was used to bring water for the imperial table. When the ship became dilapidated it was utilized as firewood to boil thick sea brine down to salt and from the parts left over from the burning a koto was made, the sound of which could be heard from afar (Philippi 1968, pp.322-323).

The close connection between camphor trees and the koto can be seen in a *Hizen fudoki* story in which a koto that was set vertically on the top of a hill turned into a camphor tree (*Fudoki*, pp.390-391).

Thus we find a fixed set of motifs: thunder god, camphor tree (ship), koto. The first two parts of this triad are preserved in the *Nihon ryōiki* story, while the third one

is transformed into Buddhist images. The sentence about the sounds of flute, koto and thunder seems to be a reminiscence, but its origin is half forgotten.

Taking the *Ryōiki* stories mentioned above into consideration, we can arrive at an important conclusion concerning the making of plots. Shinto stories adopted by Japanese Buddhism were altered mainly in their endings, by the substitution of new Buddhist elements for the last part of the original story. The beginnings of the stories are more stable and contain Shinto beliefs more fully.

HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

The rapid spread in the Heian period of Amidist ideas at the existential level, and eschatological socio-historic notions (fixed in literature, Buddhist writings, and historic works such as *rekishi monogatari*) proves that the whole sum of the notion of "the end" (death, post-death retribution, eschatology) greatly influenced the later development of Japanese Buddhism and culture.

In this connection the stories in the *rekishi monogatari* sub-genre are of particular interest. In these works the Shinto concept of the beginnings of the world and legitimacy of the ruling house prevails. As time passes more and more Buddhist ideas are inserted in the comprehension of history, so that in its concept of the future Buddhism practically excludes Shinto. Even much later, when Shinto theology was developed, it could not produce models of the future invariably through the interpretation of myths.

Though this may seem somewhat paradoxical, folktales, historic views and life styles are isomorphous to one and the same pattern. Japanese emperors began their life and reign from Shinto ceremonies and ended, beginning with Emperor Tenmu, by ceremonies of Buddhist origin (curing by dharani invocations, becoming a monk, cremation). Thus the Shinto preoccupation with the beginning of the world and the initial stages of various processes, on the one hand, and the Buddhist concentration on eschatology and the final stages of processes, on the other, influenced many

cultural phenomena, such as plot-making, life styles, concepts of history and the like.

At first sight there exists no more contrast than between the glory of the emperor and the poor peasant or petty official who are the real creators of folktales. But as I have tried to show in this paper, their comprehension of the world and the world's comprehension of them are simply variants of one and the same mental pattern. Therefore we can claim that all these men are representatives of Japanese medieval culture.

CONCLUSION

Medieval Japan formed a syncretic Shinto-Buddhist pattern of time which influenced greatly different spheres of intellectual activities. As a result the cycle of Shinto agricultural time was straightened and a concept of linear time came into existence. But for a researcher of humanitarian problems another fact is more important. The new concept of time contributed greatly to the forming of the individual. It is well known that in Shinto the individual is of no value and patterns of behavior are collective. Japanese Buddhism accentuated "the end" of all phenomena and it made possible to evaluate the individual because only the transient can be considered the unique. Only a culture of linear time could produce the following statement (Keene 1967, p.7):

If man were never to fade away like the dews of Adashio, never to vanish like the smoke over Toribeyama, but lingered on forever in the world, how things would lose their power to move us.

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