On the Religious Meaning of a Japanese Myth:
The White Hare of Inaba

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Myths are historico-cultural documents of enormous importance. They shed light on the mentality and worldview of bygone civilizations, which ancient studies such as archaeology, dealing solely in material culture, can only unearth to a lesser extent. Therefore, one might refer to the scholarly investigation of myth as “intellectual archaeology”.

In most instances, archaeologists have to rely on ruins in order to reconstruct the original form of a building. In much the same way, the mythologist often does not know either the original text, or its corresponding cultural environment. He, too, has to reconstruct the original coherent shape of a myth by analyzing the ‘ruins’ of a narrative, i.e. a text which has been reshaped through updates and assimilation.

Here, religious history and ethnological research have yielded important results: it has been shown that a living myth always carries a religious truth. In other words, the myth represents spiritual guidance, and provides answers to existential questions for the members of a concerned group; it pertains to all aspects of culture by intellectually establishing them as a whole. Consequently, a myth loses its function if the social environment changes, because the worldview on which it was based is no longer binding.

Here, the problems of later analysis begin. Even if the religious function of a myth is lost, the bare text continues to exist, in most cases as an orally transmitted folktale, which has often been subject to arbitrary alterations. Jan de Vries characterizes this process in his statement that the fairy-tale, “could use mythological material as it saw fit” (DeVries 1954, p. 117).

To understand the original religious meaning of a narrative which has once been a myth, mere speculation, or allegorisation, does not suffice as a means of interpretation. This problem rather calls for a meticulous, historical method, which – ideally – enables the researcher to narrow down the original historical and geographical environment to such an extent that it becomes possible to draw conclusions for the narrative in question from the cultural elements of its environment.

If we turn our attention to the corpus which is normally referred to as ‘Japanese mythology’, it becomes apparent that we can only speak of an original religious

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1 This article is based on Antoni (1982) and Antoni (1983). For a recent debate of the topic, including a discussion of Antoni (1982), cf. Lévi-Strauss (2013, pp. 62-72, 118 and 125). Detailed references to all points mentioned can be found in Antoni (1982).
meaning with reservations. The dynastic reasons which motivated the compilation of the chapters in the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon shoki* characterize the official mythology in its entirety as a political document rather than a religious one. Individual myths, however, represent ideal starting-points for a meticulous “intellectual-archaeological” investigation.

The selection of the narrative which is the focus of this paper, namely the story of the White Hare of Inaba as recorded in the *Kojiki* (and the so-called *Inaba-ki*), might seem dubious at first glance, because this narrative is normally seen as a pure fairy-tale, as a merely decorative element inside the mythical plot.

The god Ōkuninushi, the central figure in the myths of the Izumo-region, who later becomes the culture hero of this mythical cycle, proceeds to Inaba as an attendant to his divine brothers who want to court the princess Yagami. On their way, the deities have a strange encounter: by the seashore, they meet a furless hare. Ōkuninushi’s brothers give the hare the perfidious advice to bathe in saltwater, which, of course, only aggravates its condition. Ōkuninushi, the youngest of the gods, however, advises the hare to roll in the pollen of a curative plant. Consequently, the animal’s health is restored. Before this happens, the hare reports how he ended up in that unfortunate situation. He had been on an island and had wanted to reach the mainland. For this purpose, he tricked the *wani* of the sea, which can probably be identified as crocodiles. Under a pretext, he made them line up in a row which stretched over the ocean. Then he jumped over on their backs. When, in triumph, he revealed his trick to the last crocodile, it tore the hare’s fur off in its anger. In conclusion, the hare declares that, since the youngest brother’s advice has restored its health, Ōkuninushi, who is a mere attendant to his brothers, will win the princess’s hand in marriage.

This episode thus determines the outcome of the subsequent fights between Ōkuninushi and his brothers. At the end of his struggles, the youngest of the brothers receives the order from the god Susanoo to become Ōkuninushi, the “Master of the Great Land”, and to begin the shaping of the human world. If the insights I mentioned at the beginning are applied to this narrative as working hypotheses, some interesting indications come to light. It is possible to separate the core-narrative about the hare and the *wani* from the Ōkuninushi-complex. There is no Japanese material which is comparable, but a vast number of variants on this core-narrative exist outside of Japan, especially in Indonesia.

Consequently, Japan-centered methods of investigation are bound to fail, because they ignore the vast distribution area of the narrative. The fact that variants to the narrative do exist was recognized relatively early on, but no more than three modern versions from Indonesia were known.3

Apart from the theory of an Indonesian origin of the narrative, there was also the theory that the story had been introduced to Japan in the wake of Buddhism. One

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exponent of the latter theory is Fritz Rumpf (1932)\textsuperscript{4}, who discards an Indonesian origin of the narrative on the ground that most Indonesian motifs of fairy-tales can already be found in the Buddhist tradition of India. As sources for the Japanese version, Rumpf cites two Jātakas of the Pali-canon. However, the variants known at that point do not suffice for the construction of a theory.

If we consult all accessible variants – almost all of them contained in publications of the Dutch colonial administration and mission at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century – there are about 22 versions in total for the Malayan archipelago which originate in the traditions of both young- and old-Indonesian peoples. These narratives are based on a plot which coincides with the Japanese version:

A weak but cunning land animal wants to cross a body of water. Under a pretext, it makes the crocodiles line up in the water. Via this ‘bridge’ he reaches the far shore and subsequently mocks the crocodiles.

However, apart from this basic congruency the narratives show remarkable differences. The deviations are due to the use of a limited number of motifs which lend the respective narratives their special character. But those motifs appear isolated in various variants, so that the individuality of a narrative is based on the distinct interconnection of particular motifs. If one compares those interconnections of motifs, it becomes apparent that – with one exception – none of the narratives is identical to one another with regard to the combination of motifs.

So the motifs are stable while at the same time the interconnection of motifs is labile.

Only with regard to the acting figures, can a clear geographical differentiation be seen. The land animal is represented by an animal called a “small deer” in the western part of the archipelago, and by a monkey in the eastern part. The water animals are crocodiles in all instances.

Most variants belong to the Javanese tradition. And the corpus of Indonesian folktales, as is well known, is generally ascribed to impact from India, i.e. to a transmission via Hindu-Javanese high culture. If this hypothesis holds true for our narrative with regard to Indonesia, it must be true for Japan as well, since a polycentric origin can be ruled out due to the identical structures.

There is a strong argument against this interpretation, however. The variants which show the largest number of parallels to the oldest version of this type – i.e. the Japanese one – belong to the old peoples of the east-Indonesian sphere. One of these narratives is even identical to the Kojiki variant with regard to the interconnection of motifs. Considering the fact that the interconnection of motifs is highly labile in the other instances, this can be no coincidence.

\textsuperscript{4} Fritz Rumpf: afterword in Zachert 1932.
If one turns to the Indian sphere, though, it becomes apparent that diffusion in the wake of Buddhism or the Indian culture can be ruled out for both Indonesia and Japan. With regard to the *Kojiki*’s date of composition, only works of old Indian literature are possible sources. But neither the Buddhist scriptures nor the many critiques of the *Pancatantra* contain a narrative with a corresponding structure.

The Jātakas quoted by Rumpf - stories relating events previous to the historical Buddha’s birth - are also variants of a widespread type: the narrative of the “Monkey who Left his Heart at Home.” (AaTh-No. 91). Though this corresponds to our hare narrative at some points, it is characterized by a distinct structure. Apart from the above mentioned Jātakas, the “monkey’s heart” type of narrative can also be found in the form of other Buddhist narratives and – in a totally different context – in the Pancatantra and the works inspired by it.

Its diffusion to Japan can be followed up almost without gap by consulting the scriptures of Chinese Buddhism. In Japan, the narrative appears in the *Konjaku monogatari* (V, 25; NKBT 22, p. 392 et seq.) for the first time. This work dates to the 12th century.

In addition, another related type exists in the surviving Indian oral literature, but this type is also characterized by a distinct structure and might be a parallel story but surely not a source for our story. The Indian versions belong to the type “The Crocodile Carries the Jackal” within the Aarne-Thompson system (AaTh-No. 58). This is the very type our story of the White Hare of Inaba is attributed to by Ikeda Hiroko (1971, 23). But there exists just one direct variant of our type in India: a Marathi-narrative from the Deccan Plateau in South India (Dexter 1938, p. 36 et seq.). However, to conclude that this one version is the origin – versus a great number of Indonesian ones, and a Japanese one, documented in the year 712 – would mean taking the preference for India too far.

In addition, there are two further variants from outside of Japan. One was recorded in Taiwan sometime between 1972 and 1985 and apparently stems from the Japanese narrative. The remaining two variants belong to the Gilyak and Koryak of Northeast Asia and can probably also be traced to transmission from Japan.

Therefore, Japan and Indonesia can be seen as the main distribution area. Findings so far point to a pre-Indian origin of the narratives in question, since variants can be dated back at least to the second century A.D.

An argument against a direct transmission from Indonesia to Japan, apart from the completely hypothetical character of such a proposition, lies in the fact that the existence of the narrative in the Indonesian language area closest to Japan, i.e. the Philippines and the early peoples of Taiwan, cannot be proved.

Consequently, the problem has a historical dimension in addition to the geographical one. The narrative must be the relic of a common cultural heritage of Japan and Indonesia. Since I have shown that the narrative cannot be
explained from the perspective of the Buddhist intellectual world, what now remains to be done is to check whether there are indications in the pre-Indian worldview of the early peoples which enable us to understand the plot of the narrative.

I base my analysis on two elements which are contained in all variants – their lowest common denominator if you like – and which can therefore be seen as constitutive:

- The water animals are always represented as crocodiles
- A land animal uses them to cross the water.

If those two elements are combined, they create the topos:

- Crossing over a body of water with the help of crocodiles.

This topic, however, leads us from the realm of oral literature in the strict sense to the religious sphere, especially to conceptions of the afterlife.

I cannot quote the relevant documentary evidence here, because it is too extensive. It should be noted, however, that the conception of the crocodile as the prototype of an ancestral animal, and as a carrier of the souls of the deceased, is extraordinarily widespread in Indonesia (Laubscher 1977, p. 239 et seq.). The crocodile emerges not only as a mere vehicle, a substitute for the ship of the dead, though, but as connected to the realm of death through its own divine nature. It is an incarnation of the otherworldly.

Furthermore – and this is of special interest in our context – according to Wolfram Eberhard’s research, the crocodile is also linked to the conception of a living carrier to the otherworld in the coastal cultures of southern China. Here it is related to ideas about chiao-dragon-serpents and dragon-boats (cf. Eberhard 1968, p. 364, 395 et seq. among others).

The relation of the coastal culture of southern China to the Malayan archipelago on the one hand, and to Japan on the other hand, are intensely discussed subjects in research on early history, and in my opinion this region also plays a key role in our context.

But let us return to the topic of the crocodile. In summary it can be said that, regardless of the diversity of the cultures in question, the crocodile is always seen as something more than a mere animal: it is a sacral being. The crocodile’s otherworldly nature can be seen very clearly in the complex of coming-of-age-rituals. For example, the Wemale novices in the Kakihan league in western Seram had, for initiation, to

“go through the mouth of a serpent or a crocodile until they reached the dark, underground realm of the dead. They themselves were dead and remained for a time with the deceased” (Jensen 1948, p. 117).

Here, the crocodile represents the whole otherworldly realm in corpore. It is the deity of both death and of return.
The motif of the devourer and the liberator is not limited to initiations, though; as the so-called Jonas-motif, it is subject to global distribution. It is an autonomous conception which is embodied in manifold forms. The most powerful animal of the respective area represents the devourer and liberator: tigers, leopards etc., or, as in our case, crocodiles.

It is essentially the achievement of one scholar, Carl Hentze, to have shown and emphasized time and again that this motif has a cosmological meaning at its core; to be more precise, that it concerns all domains of existence, the human one as well as the cosmic one. In Shang Dynasty China, Hentze’s main field of research, the devourer appears as an earth deity in the form of a tiger; in its mouth it holds the cicada, a symbol of life. However, there are also winged T’ao-t’ieh - i.e. devourers - as well as snake demons and dragons (cf. especially Hentze 1941). Interestingly, in a piece of bronze art not mentioned by Hentze, it is a crocodile which holds the cicada in its mouth (Elisseeff & Bobot 1973, D 39).

Hentze’s research demonstrates that the idea of a ritual death during initiation corresponds directly to the antagonism between life and death, light and dark; expressed in the image of a monster which devours light and life, and spits it out again.

The motif’s relation to a particular aspect of cosmic events, namely the lunar cycle, is so prominent that, in a nature-mythological interpretation, it would clearly be regarded as the factor which led to the formation of the myth in the first place. However, such a theory can no longer be maintained nowadays, as it has become apparent that the moon is only one element – though a prominent one - in the complex of conceptions associated with generation and corruption. The idea of the devouring of the moon can be seen very vividly in a myth of the Toba-Batak in Sumatra. Here, the moon sacrifices itself to the Great Snake of Heaven, and the myth concludes in the following manner:

“[The Snake] agreed, all the more because the moon promised to be available every 29 or 30 days to be devoured“ (Pleyte 1894, p. 97).

Consequently, not only humans are devoured; the celestial bodies, especially the moon, share this destiny. The human mind seems to be inclined to put abstract realities into concrete terms; in our case, this is achieved by assigning certain animals to the criteria death-life and dark-bright; animals, which seem to embody those ideas through their natural attributes. As the example of the crocodile has shown, they don’t have to be mere symbols. Therefore it is not surprising that the diametrically opposed idea – light, life, moon – is also personalized. We have seen the cicada as an impersonation of recurring life, an association which is also transferred to the snake. Furthermore, the snake is one of the animals associated with the moon; it is a typically lunar animal like the toad – or the hare.

How do those findings relate to the narrative in question?
It has been shown that the crocodile, a devouring aquatic monster, is regarded as the animal of death and darkness in certain cultures. But the opponent of this monster in these narratives is not a human but another animal. This animal embodies in all attributes the complete opposite of the water animal: it is small, weak, of bright color and belongs to the land. So the opponents represent the opposite poles of a common existential plane.

In consequence, it has to be a case of an originally cosmological antagonism. And in my opinion, the antagonism between light and dark, in our specific case - 'moon embodied by an animal versus darkness embodied by an animal' - represents the fundamental spiritual level of the narrative about the White Hare. That such a conclusion is not an expression of nature-mythological fantasizing can for example be seen in pictorial representations from China, on the same pieces of bronze art from the Shang-era which also show the tiger with the cicada, or from Mexico, which can be included in our considerations in this context.

**Fig. 1.** The Demon spits the moon hare, Bronze vessel, China, Shang Dynasty (= Hentze 1941, Tafelband I, fig. 34, cf. Hentze 1941, p. 169).

**Fig. 2.** The moon hare comes out of the jaws/throat (?) of the feathered serpent, Codex Borgia, Mexico (= Hentze 1941, Tafelband II, fig. 51, cf. Hentze 1941, p. 190).
**Fig. 3.** The feathered serpent devours a man, Codex Borgia, Mexico (= Hentze 1941, Tafelband II, fig. 52, cf. Hentze 1941, p. 190).

**Fig. 4.** The moon hare comes out of the dragon’s jaws /throat, Codex Fejervary in Codex Borgia, Mexico (= Hentze 1941, Tafelband II, fig. 53, cf. Hentze 1941, p. 190). Cf. Fig. 5.

**Fig. 5.** The moon hare comes out of the dragon’s jaws /throat (?), Codex Fejervary in Codex Borgia, Mexico (= Kreichgauer 1928, p. 369). Cf. Fig. 4.
Those images illustrate the lunar cycle by depicting it as a struggle between a demon of darkness and a lunar animal. The hare, which represents the lunar animal, is situated in the open mouth of the dragon-like creature of darkness. The myth of the White Hare of Inaba documents this antagonism both with regard to the plot and to the acting figures themselves.

So the appearance of crocodile/wani and hare is by no means an arbitrary combination, but one which not only makes sense but is even necessary with regard to a particular religious background.

We can also see the necessary action in the Japanese myth: the killing of the animal of light by the animal of dark.

That the tearing off of the hare’s skin indeed characterizes death can be seen in a great number of examples wherein the moon revives itself by changing its skin. The snake also becomes a lunar animal due to its ability to shed its old skin. The Indonesian variants sacrifice this dramatic and logical ending in favor of a happy ending: the land animal escapes its opponent. Those narratives have become fairy-tales in the fullest sense, and so fulfill a completely different function: they are entertaining and instructive. They are concrete examples of what I called the ‘ruins’ of a myth at the start of this essay.

Only the Japanese version brings this existential opposition to a consequential conclusion. The action which unfolds between hare and wani is logical in its development. It leads to the killing of the animal which embodies life. But that is not the conclusion of the existential action! The whole conception is based on a cyclical worldview which lets death be followed by new life. The moon does not perish and remain hidden forever: it emerges again from the darkness. In the same way, the initiand returns to the world of the living, and new life is released from the beyond. For our narrative, this means that the hare absolutely needs its skin back; the cyclical idea requires this conclusion.

The original creators of the Ōkuninushi-myth fifth - I am not referring to the composers of the Kojiki - must have been conscious of this meaning, because they positioned the narrative about the hare and the crocodile at the center of the plot. So this episode is actually a riddle by which the deities are put to the test. Their knowledge about the logical order of events is checked. The brothers cannot give the right answer, i.e. they give the wrong advice. The youngest brother, however, rejoins that which guarantees the correct course of events. He restores the hare’s skin and thereby sets the cycle into motion again.

Consequently, the story of the White Hare of Inaba is a real myth, a constitutive and exemplary incident. The religious truth it relates is that life has to go through the darkness of death but re-emerges from it time and again. Nonetheless, the narrative is regarded as a fairy-tale in Japan today. It is as popular as the most famous tales of the Grimms’ Collection in Europe. If it had

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not been recorded at such an early time in Japan, the story would surely have developed in a fashion similar to the Indonesian versions. In the Japanese case, the narrative itself was preserved, but due to the loss of the worldview from which it emerged, and the loss of the binding belief expressed therein, it lost its original meaning: the myth became a fairy-tale.
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