

## **The God Okuninushi and the Trifunctional System of the Indo-Europeans**

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The essential task which Japanese mythology attributes to the god *Okuninushi* is the creation of the land. Before commencing this task - making fertile the territory under his domination, so that it yields every year abundant crops - Okuninushi had to visit a nether country, called *Nenokatasukuni*, where dwelled his divine ancestor, the great god *Susanowo*. On arriving there, he married immediately a daughter of *Susanowo* called *Suseribime*. And assisted by this goddess, he succeeded in passing through ordeals imposed on him by *Susanowo*. Finally he escaped from the dwelling of *Susanowo*, carrying *Suseribime* on his back, and taking away a divine sword called *Ikutachi*, a divine bow-and-arrows called *Ikuyumiya*, and a divine stringed instrument, or *koto*, called *Amenonirigoto*. Only after returning from the nether country with these precious treasures of *Susanowo*, could Okuninushi begin the creation of the land. In this task, he collaborated closely with a curious dwarf god, *Sukunabikona*, whom he met on the seashore in the province of *Izumo*. Thus, it seems as though the treasures brought from the nether country were necessary tools for the creation of the land, as well as for the governance of that land after its creation. Among scholars of Japanese mythology, these items are generally considered as constituting Okuninushi's regalia, comparable with the famous *Sanshu-no-Jingi*, the three Sacred Treasures of the Imperial Household.

To be sure, the sword and the bow-and arrows, on the one hand, and the *koto*, on the other, both played important roles in allowing Okuninushi to begin the creation of the land. During the flight of Okuninushi, the *koto* brushed against a tree and produced a resonant sound that reverberated through the ground, so that *Susanowo*, alarmed by that noise, woke up from his sleep and started off in pursuit of Okuninushi as far as a slope called *Yomotsuhirasaka*, the border between the nether country and the upper world. But when *Susanowo* reached there, Okuninushi had already gone past that slope. So *Susanowo*, seeing him

running afar, cried to Okuninushi saying:

“Use the sword Ikutachi and the bow-and-arrows Ikuyumiya to pursue and subdue your half-brothers on the side of the hills and to pursue and sweep them down at the rapids of the rivers. And then becoming the god Okuninushi as well as the god Utsushikunitama, make my daughter Suseribime your legitimate spouse and dwell the foot of Mount Uka, installing the pillars of your palace firmly on the underground bed-rock and raising high unto the heaven the ornamental beams of the roofs of that palace, my dear fellow.”

On his return to the upper world, Okuninushi put faithfully into practice these kind instructions of Susanowo. He attacked with the sword and the bow-and-arrows his numerous half-brothers, called Yasogami or Eighty Deities, and drove them away from the land he intended to rule.

Before Okuninushi’s visit to the nether country, he had no ability to resist his half-brothers, who had him so entirely at their mercy that they slaughtered him twice. Although the mother goddess of Okuninushi revived each time her beloved son, they tenaciously continued their efforts to kill him.

It was to take refuge from these persecutions of his half-brothers that Okuninushi went to the nether country. And the ultimate point of this visit was evidently to obtain there the means which would make it possible for him to put a stop to their violence, so he could begin the task of creating the land. The treasures he acquired in the nether country constituted effective measures to achieve this aim.

The *koto*, in the first place, was used in antiquity during religious ceremonies to call deities to receive their oracles; now it fulfilled the same office. Its resonance caused Susanowo to appear at the border between the nether country and the upper world, there to pronounce for Okuninushi a solemn utterance that evidently had the effect of an oracle. And it was only by faithfully obeying this oracular utterance that Okuninushi, using the sword and the bow-and-arrows brought from the nether country, could get rid of his half-brothers from his territory, so that he could begin there the creation of the land.

It is thus quite evident that the items, he had acquired in the nether country,

greatly assisted Okuninushi in preparing his task of creating a rich and fertile land. However it seems that, once the preparations had been done thanks to the efficacious works of these treasures, Okuninushi in fact did not put them to use, either for the creation of the land or for the governance of the land which he had made fertile. After completely eliminating the half-brothers from his territory, indeed, Okuninushi is not described, either in *Kojiki* or in *Nihonshoki*, as having made any use of them during his laborious career as the creator and ruler of the land.

In *Nihonshoki* it is recounted that, when he agreed to transfer the sovereignty of the land to a descendant of the Goddess Amaterasu (whom the latter intended to send down from heaven to become the ruler of the lower world), Okuninushi showed the heavenly envoys dispatched to inquire his will “a broad spear which he had used as a staff when he was pacifying the land,” and he said, “It was by means of this spear that I could have achieved my exploit.”

From this account it is clear that the main tool of which Okuninushi made use for the accomplishment of his “exploit” – i.e. the creation of the land - was a spear, called “Broad Spear.” He used this spear not to fight against his enemies, but rather as if it were a staff, so that he stuck it in the soil during his passage, when he was travelling to create the land.

On this occasion, Okuninushi said also to the heavenly envoys that, if the divine child appointed by the Goddess Amaterasu to become the sovereign of the lower world, “would use this spear to rule the land, he would undoubtedly make it peaceful and prosperous.” These words make it obvious that this “Broad Spear” constituted for Okuninushi an essential instrument for governing the land in peace and prosperity.

The intimate relation of Okuninushi with the spear is evident also from one of the surnames of this god, Yachihoko-no-Kami; that is to say, the god who has eight thousand spears. The activities of the god with that surname are narrated only in *Kojiki*, where the god with this surname goes forth to the province of Koshi, to make love to a goddess called Numakawahime. And, pushing and pulling the door of her house, he sang all night an ardently long song to woo her. Then Numakawahime, at daybreak, called the god with this surname, and sang from

within a long song of reply, promising to put her beautiful body entirely at his disposal the following night. And she fulfilled this promise, as is recounted: “They were not united that night but had a solemn intercourse the following night.”

According to the story that follows, Okuninushi, after this marriage with Numakawahime, returned to the province of Izumo. And having completed the preparations for another journey, putting one hand on the saddle of his horse and one foot in the stirrup, he sang a long song to his legitimate spouse Suseribime (whose violent jealousy much annoyed him).

Then the goddess Suseribime approached Okuninushi with a large cup of Sake, and offering it to him, she sang a long song in reply. And in that song, after calling her spouse: “O Okuninushi,” she complained to him, saying: “Since you are a male, you may have young wives on all the islands as well as on all the promontories you visit during your journey.” Then she continued to sing that, unlike her amorous spouse, she remained always faithful to Okuninushi. She urged him to take his pleasure from her beautiful body, on luxurious bed clothes, and asked him to drink from the cup she was offering. And it is narrated that, after hearing that song, Okuninushi exchanged a solemn pledge with his spouse, drinking from the same cup. Then he embraced her firmly, and they put their hands around each others’ necks, and so one can worship them in this posture until the present day.

It is said that in the song he sang to Numakawahime, Okuninushi called the land where this goddess dwelled, “the distant province of Koshi.” By this appellation, he intended to emphasis its remoteness, and to imply that he had attained then the border districts of his territory, and that his effort to extend his domination over all that territory was about to be completed. It was apparently to achieve this end that Okuninushi married goddesses everywhere during his journeys through that territory, including in such nooks as islands and promontories, as his spouse Suseribime complained in her song.

With the marriage with Numakawahime, Okuninushi succeeded in extending his rule up to the uttermost district of his territory, so that it became unnecessary for him to continue anymore on his journeys making love to local goddesses. And this was why, after the achievement of this last marriage, Okuninushi complied so

willingly with the request of his legitimate spouse, and ceased departing on such journeys, resuming his marital tie with her, unshakable down to the present day.

In *Kojiki* it is only after these accounts about the activities of Okuninushi as the Yachihoko-no-Kami that we hear about his encounter with the god Sukunabikona, with whom he entered into brotherly relations and collaborated closely for the creation of the land. Consequently, if we understand these stories in the order of their appearances in *Kojiki*, we must admit that Okuninushi, after his return from the nether country and his victory over his half-brothers, went to the province of Koshi to marry there Numakawahime, that after this marriage he returned to the province of Izumo, renounced journeying, and confirm his marital relation with his legitimate spouse, constant until the present day. And we have to assume that it was after his pledge not to make Suseribime feel lonely anymore, that he encountered the god Sukunabikona, and began to collaborate with this curious deity to create the land, travelling with him all over his territory. It is quite apparent that such a course of events is improbable.

It is obvious that *Kojiki*, in these passages, instead of recounting events in chronological order, describes in fact the same event repetitively, considering it from differing viewpoints. In other words, the journeys that Okuninushi - surnamed Yachihoko-no-Kami - executed throughout his territory, marrying everywhere the local goddesses, were really the same event as his creation of the land.

We have seen that the essential instrument for Okuninushi to accomplish the task of creating the land was a spear, called in *Nihonshoki* the Broad Spear, while the same deity is called Yachihoko-no-Kami only during his journeys marrying everywhere local goddesses in his territory. Thus it seems that there was essentially no difference between, on the one hand, the Broad Spear, which Okuninushi used to create the land, and, on the other hand, the Eight Thousand Spears, referred to in the surname by which he was constantly addressed while marrying local goddesses.

The Broad Spear and the Eight Thousand Spears clearly refer, in fact, to the male organ of Okuninushi, which he thrust into the soil of his territory, while he achieving at the same time his union with the goddess of that locality. The

goddesses were everywhere the incarnations of the soil of their districts, so that Okuninushi, marrying them and making them pregnant, was rendering the soil of his territory fertile, so as to produce an abundant harvest as well as all sorts of other richness. The appellation “Broad Spear” was used to praise the immenseness of the deity’s male organ, while to call him the god of Eight Thousand Spears implied that his sexual power was endless, as though he had innumerable genitals.

In order to achieve his task of creating the land Okuninushi had sexual intercourse everywhere in his territory with the goddess of each district, pouring his seed (sperm) into her womb, and the seed thus distributed by his sexual power was at the same time that of the corn, whose cultivation he was propagating. The latter constituted an indispensable and inseparable companion of Okuninushi for the creation of the land, really a divine personification of the seed (sperm) of corn, whose cultivation Okuninushi was in the process of diffusing throughout the land.

Unlike the treasures which Okuninushi had obtained in the nether country (the great difficulties with which he acquired them are recounted in detail in *Kojiki*), no allusion is made in the myths about Okuninushi as to how he acquired the spear which constituted his essential tool for creating and governing the land. The reason of this is obviously that the power represented by the spear was his immense generative ability, an irresistible sexual attraction for all the goddesses he encountered, which he had no need of seeking elsewhere.

It is indeed totally clear that, before undergoing the ordeals of Susanowo in the nether country, which trained him to become a great god, the sexual capacity of Okuninushi was already quite marvellous. For it is narrated that a beautiful goddess, named Yakamihime, whom his half-brothers were visiting to propose marriage, seeing Okuninushi, forced to follow them carrying humbly their heavy luggage, fell immediately in love with him, and, refusing flatly the proposal of his half-brothers, she decided to marry him. And it is recounted also that, on his arrival at the residence of Susanowo in the nether country, the goddess Suseribime, coming out from her father’s house to meet him, loved Okuninushi at first sight, and became his spouse on the spot, even before informing Susanowo about the visit.

In an article published from 1961 to 1963 in the *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions*<sup>1</sup>, I tried to show that Japanese mythology reflects on the whole a characteristic world view originating from the Indo-Europeans, which Georges Dumézil called the trifunctional system, and that the god Okuninushi plays in that mythology the role of the main representative god of Dumézil's third function. As sexuality and fecundity are really the essential components of that function, a god representing the third function is naturally endowed abundantly with abilities relative to these spheres, so that he has no need of acquiring them a posteriori. But Okuninushi, the divine representative of the third function, was innately short of the means enabling him to be powerful in the domains of Dumézil's superior first and second functions: religion, represented by the *koto*, the musical instrument used to provoke oracles; and warfare, wherein the sword and the bow-and-arrows were important tools.

This is why, when he was in need of the virtues of the superior functions in order to eliminate the obstacles for the commencement of the creation of the land, he had to visit the other world to acquire the necessary tools, but as soon as his task as god of the third function started, thanks to the efficacy of those tools, all that was necessary for Okuninushi was to wield freely his natural abilities, symbolized by a spear, deemed as huge and innumerable at the same time.

As is well known, according to Dumézil, medicine constitutes, together with fecundity and sexuality, an essential component of the third function. And Okuninushi is famous for his miraculous medical ability. The very first wonder narrated in *Kojiki* about this deity is, as everybody knows, the cure of the famous hare of Inaba. This hare's skin had been completely torn off from his body by a crocodile. And that serious injury had been aggravated moreover, because the hare, following a false instruction given by the half brothers of Okuninushi, bathed in salt water, and, lying on the ridge of a high mountain, exposed its body to the wind.

Okuninushi, took pity on the hare, and advised it rather to bathe in the fresh water of a river-mouth and then to roll in the pollen of a certain grass called

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<sup>1</sup> A. Yoshida, "La mythologie japonaise: Essai d'interprétation structurale", *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions*, 160, 1961, p. 47-66 ; 161, 1962, p. 25-44; 163, 1963, p. 225-248.

Kama, that grew by that river-mouth. And it is recounted that when the hare executed this teaching, its body became as it was before.

Thus, this god had innately all the essential capacities to be the main god of the third function, as defined by Dumézil,, while he was, on the other hand, in need of help in the domains of the first and the second functions. He compensated for this lack of power by obtaining appropriate instruments in the other world. It is thus evident that the god Okuninushi plays the role of the divine representative of the third function in the fundamentally trifunctional structure of Japanese mythology.