

DANIJELA VASIĆ

University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philology

E-mail: [vasic.danijela@fil.bg.ac.rs](mailto:vasic.danijela@fil.bg.ac.rs)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6260-1045>

## Solar Deity in Japanese Mythology

In order to create an orderly state, the first imperial chronicles emerged in the early 8th century in the territory of modern Japan through the integration and systematization of mythical elements that proved the legitimacy of the government and the descent of the imperial Yamato lineage from the supreme deity of the Shinto pantheon - the Great Sun Goddess Amaterasu. This mythic paradigm was created on the existing mytho-historical foundations fostered by cultural and political contacts with the Korean kingdoms and the Chinese empire. There is evidence that the cult of the solar deity, originally portrayed as a male principle, originated in a corpus outside the Yamato mythological system. And since male-female pairs of rulers were common (first it was the gods, later the ruler and the shamaness), it is possible that at some point the distinction between the sexes was blurred and then the female side prevailed. However, the female ancestral deity does not indicate a period of matriarchy. This symbolic type of goddess, who initiates a patrimonial lineage with rare female exceptions, was created by members of a privileged group of powerful men to legitimize their own power structures. Moreover, the cult of the mother goddess is not limited to the solar principle, but is associated with weaving, silk production, and agriculture. Thus, the simple assertion that the Yamato imperial lineage descended from the goddess Amaterasu raises numerous questions and doubts, which this essay attempts to answer.

*Keywords:* Japan, Shinto, solar deity, the *Kojiki*, Amaterasu Ōmikami

## Соларно божанство у јапанској митологији

У сврху стварања уређене државе, на територији данашњег Јапана почетком 8. века настају прве царске хронике, и то као резултат интеграције и систематизације митских елемената којима су се доказивали легитимитет власти и порекло царске лозе Јамато од врховног божанства шинто пантеона – Велике Богиње Сунца, Аматерасу. Ова митска парадигма се формирала на постојећим митско-историјским темељима, подстакнута културним и политичким контактима с корејским краљевствима и кинеским царством. Постоје докази да култ соларног божанства, испрва представљан као мушки принцип, потиче из корпуса ван митолошког система Јамато. А како су уобичајени били мушко-женски парови владара (прво су то богови, а касније владар и шаманка), могуће је да се у неком тренутку та разлика између полова замаглила, а онда превагнула на женску страну. Женско предачко божанство ипак не указује на период матријархата. Овај симболички тип богиње, која започиње патримонијалну лозу с ретким женским изузецима, створили су припадници привилиговане групе моћних мушкараца у циљу легитимисања сопствених структура моћи. Осим тога, култ Богиње Мајке се не ограничава на соларни принцип, већ је у вези с ткањем, свиларством и пољопривредом. На тај начин, једноставна тврдња да царска лоза Јамато потиче од Богиње Аматерасу, отвара бројна питања и недоумице, на која овај рад покушава да да одговоре.

*Кључне речи:* Јапан, шинто, соларно божанство, Кођики, Велика Богиња Сунца Аматерасу

The oldest, relatively complex political units on the territory of present-day Japan emerged in the 3rd century BC and were called *kuni* (state). By the 6th century, the Yamato state stood out and gained strength, and when Empress Suiko ascended the throne in 593, it began to show conquering tendencies. The Yamato dynasty strove to create a strong state with a centralized government structure modeled on the Chinese Tang Dynasty (618–907) in all areas of socio-political and cultural life. The general Sinitization was also reflected in the area of spirituality, for example, Buddhist and Confucian ideas were added to the existing Shinto beliefs.

The state of Yamato, which changed its name to the present-day Nihon at the beginning of the 8th century at the latest, carried out the Taika Reform (*Taika no kaishin*) in the middle of the 7th century, which reorganized

the administrative apparatus and determined the structure of the government and land administration. Among other measures, there were also imperial orders to compile official chronicles to show the size and strength of the Yamato Empire to others on the Japanese islands, as well to its neighbors: the Korean kingdoms (Koguryo, Paekche, and Silla) and the Chinese Empire. This is how the *Kojiki*<sup>1</sup> chronicle came into being in 712. It is the oldest surviving written book in Japan, the source of Shinto mythology and a historical chronicle. Eight years later, the first of a series of imperial chronicles was compiled. *Nihongi*, better known today as *Nihonshōki*,<sup>2</sup> follows the chronological course of the creation of the world and then of the empire, described in the *Kojiki*, but includes all available variants of myths and legends. These chronicles are the result of the “integration and systematization of disparate mythic elements, each with its own derivation” (Matsumura 1996) that attested to the divine origin of the imperial family and the legitimacy of their rule. Chronicles characterize the “ideological aspect of a system in which politics and ritual are equated” (Sueki 2016, 68).<sup>3</sup>

According to the genealogy presented in the chronicles, the emperors (*ten`nō*) descend from the supreme deity of the Shinto pantheon, known as Amaterasu Ōmikami. Her very name – Great Goddess Who Illuminates the Heavens (*ama* – heaven, *terasu* – to illuminate) indicates that she is a solar deity. With the *Taihō Code* of 701, ritual court practices are formalized as matters of state, and the major Shinto shrines throughout the country are placed under the direct control of the imperial court. Their hierarchy is also fixed, with the Great Shrine of Ise (Ise Jingu), dedicated to the Great Goddess Amaterasu, at the top.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Kojiki – Records of Ancient Matters* (for a complete translation of the work from Old Japanese into Serbian see *Kodiki* 2008; for Japanese see e.g. Ogihara 1992). References in the text are taken from the Serbian translation.

<sup>2</sup> *Nihonshōki – Records of Japan* (for the English translation see Aston 1972, and for Japanese see e.g. Sakamoto et al. 1982).

<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the nationalist academic movement Kokugaku (18th century) used the *Kojiki* as a reliable classical Japanese text with few external (Buddhist and Confucian) influences, to emphasize the national spirit of Japan and to prove the truth of Shinto mythology, especially the age of the gods and the first emperors. One of the founders of the movement, Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801), wrote a voluminous work *Kojikiden* (*Commentary on the Kojiki*, 1798), in which he provides a scholarly translation of the chronicle into the modern Japanese language. At the end of the 19th century, the prevailing Shinto interpretation of the *Kojiki* met with initial resistance, namely in the works of Kunitake Kuma, who questioned the validity of the myths surrounding the emperor, the imperial insignia and the Isa shrine. Throughout history, the *Kojiki* has been studied by experts from a wide range of fields, e.g. folklore, ethnology, anthropology, religion, history, literature and linguistics.

However, this established idea about the origin of the entire imperial “sun lineage” (*hi-tsugi*) from the Great Goddess Amaterasu harbors numerous doubts. The analysis reveals the complex nature of the solar deity chosen by the ruling group at a significant historical moment of the formation of the state. This mythical paradigm was created on the basis of existing mythical, religious and traditional resources, apparently inspired by cultural and political contacts with kingdoms on the Korean peninsula, the activities of influential Korean settlers, but elements originating in Tang Dynasty China can also be recognized.

## THE GREAT GODDESS AMATERASU AND THE *KOJIKI*

The *Kojiki* describes the rise of the Yamato dynasty and the spread of its influence through processes of subjugation and integration. It contains “(re-formulated) central and regional myths, legends, poems, and biographical sketches of the rulers” (Tonomura 1994, 12), from the legendary Emperor Jinmu (r. 660–585 BC) to the Empress Suiko (r. 592–628 AD). The chronicle “sets up Amaterasu as the chief deity in the heavenly pantheon while making her descendants the emperors who rule here on earth” (Matsumura 1996). This means that the narrative describing the establishment and consolidation of imperial power is actually a carefully crafted political myth. And indeed, the editor of Ō no Yasumarō (?–723) compiles the genealogy of the imperial and other important families, carefully selecting a variant of a particular mytho-historical narrative that meets the actual needs of its use for political purposes. In this way, the mythological narrative that supported the developing empire arose from “existing animistic beliefs combined with a political theology that established the type of leader needed for a centralized agrarian society” (Toji 2017, 30).

The confirmation that “myths were modified and created with this aim” (Sueki 2016, 68) can be found in the introduction to the chronicle, in the words of Emperor Tenmu (r. 673–686), on whose orders this project was begun and who recognized many falsehoods in the existing writings and the need for correction and clarification (cf. *Kodiki* 2008, 14).

Everything in the chronicle is subordinated to a single political goal: unification under the sole rule of the Yamato court and the establishment of the “right to rule over the powerful clans” (Sueki 2016, 68). To this end, the chronicle presents the unification of three mythological systems. The first was cultivated in a tribal alliance around the founder of the Yamato court. It is characterized by the concept of celestial authority and rites related to agriculture, and therefore includes myths about the celestial gods ruled by the Great Sun Goddess Amaterasu. In

the second group of myths, which originate from the state of Izumo (the strongest opponent of the Yamato court), the world of the earthly gods is described. They are characterized by the cult of the god of the forces of nature – Taka Haya Susanō, and the cult of the earth creator – Ōkuninushi. The power of these gods is enviable, but not yet sufficient to compete with the celestial ancestors of the Yamato lineage. The third mythological system comes from the island of Kyushu and is made up of the beliefs of the coastal tribes. Certain inconsistencies in the myths depicted in the *Kojiki* reflect the very existence of these different sources and their mutual contamination.

The ideas of the polytheistic Shinto religion predominate in the chronicle. Shinto is described as an indigenous religion that arose from beliefs that existed before the formation of the Japanese archipelago. And indeed, the belief in indigenous gods must have existed before the arrival of Buddhism. Nevertheless, it would not be correct “to regard the myths from the chronicles as we know them today, as the religion of the pre-Buddhist archaic strata” because, as far as can be historically illuminated, Japanese deities “were formed from the beginning through interaction with Buddhism” (Sueki 2016, 72). Thus, although it is a common opinion that “the myths of the chronicles are considered independent in relation to Buddhism, it would be strange if there were no influence of Buddhism, assuming that they were largely formed from the end of the 7th century to the 8th century, which is the period of a powerful culture coming from the continent” (Sueki 2016, 72). The Buddhist influences are not the only ones, and so among the “eight million”<sup>4</sup> Shinto gods one often finds those that have parallels in other (Asian) cultures.

Today, Shinto consists of a complex system of religious ideas, rites and institutions, but from the beginning it was primarily based on the animistic belief that nature, both animate and inanimate, has something divine in it, i.e., spirits/gods – *kami*. Their appearance is sometimes anthropomorphic, but at the same time they embody certain elements of nature, human activities, an imaginary concept, etc., which are already reflected in their name. They are divided into heavenly (*amatsu-kami*) and earthly (*kunitsu-kami*).

The heavenly gods are born/created in the celestial sphere – “Plain of High Heaven” (*Takama no hara*), which is ruled by the Great Sun Goddess

---

<sup>4</sup> In Japanese mythology, eight is a sacred number that stands for a multitude, so that the expression “eight million gods” (*yaoyorozu no kami*) refers to their immeasurable number.

Amaterasu. Earthly gods are the *kami* of the “early tribal kingdoms, the deities of primitive Shinto” (Mori 1979, 524). Originally they were disobedient rulers, from whom selected heavenly gods, under the leadership of the grandson of the goddess Amaterasu, take over the “Middle Land of the Reed Beds” (*Ashihara no nakatsukuni*).<sup>5</sup> The Japanese emperors are also referred to as earthly gods. To these two spheres, a third, subterranean one was added to form the trichotomous structure of the cosmos, reflecting Chinese influences. The third sphere is embodied by the “Land of Night Darkness” (*Yomi no kuni*) and the “Land of No” (*Ne no Katasu*). The border area between the earthly and the chthonic world is marked by a one-sided permeable border, the Hill of Hira.

All three cosmic levels are united in the creation myth, in which the creator gods, Izanaki and Izanami, descend from the celestial sphere, form a solid ground and give birth to the (Japanese) islands and gods on it. The deceased goddess Izanami then reaches the land of the dead and later becomes the supreme chthonic deity. Like Orpheus after Eurydice, the god Izanaki follows his wife into the realm of the dead, but just as Persephone was prevented from returning, the goddess Izanami also remains in the subterranean realm because she has tasted the food there (*Kodiki* 2008, 34–37; more on this in: Vasić 2008, 132–152). After the ritually impure contact with the dead, the god Izanaki performs a ritual cleansing with water (*Misogi*)<sup>6</sup> that removes impurity and sin from both body and mind, i.e., brings about spiritual purification.

Izanaki’s purification produces a series of gods, and at the very end the most important ones, the “Three Noble Children” (*Mihashira no Uzu no Miko*): when he washes his left eye, the great sun goddess Amaterasu is born, when he washes his right eye – the moon god Tsukuyomi, and from his nose – the god of storms and the forces of nature, Take Haya Susanō (cf. *Kodiki* 2008, 40). The ethnologist Taryo Obayashi points out that the myth of the creation of the moon and the sun from the eyes is not the only such myth in ancient Japan, but it certainly became the best known and is also widespread outside Japan (cf. Obayashi 1986, 9–21). Campbell regards the myth of the creation of the goddess Amaterasu as a rare and valuable remnant of an ancient mythological concept (cf. Kembel 2004, 187–190), Fraser refers to the Japanese emperor as the embodiment of the sun goddess who rules the universe (cf. Frejzer 2003, 177),

<sup>5</sup> For the ancient Japanese, an area overgrown with reeds meant fertile soil with sufficient water, which was suitable for growing rice.

<sup>6</sup> It is a prototype of the important Shinto purification ritual *Harai*.

while Meletinski gives the example of widespread myths in which the sun and moon are the children of deities or the first human couple (cf. Meletinski 1976, 197).

Izanaki entrusts them with power: *First*, he gives the goddess Amaterasu power over the Plain of the High Heaven, by presenting her with a jewel<sup>7</sup> necklace with a ritual clink; to the god Tsukuyomi he gives responsibility for the Land of Night, while Take Haya Susanō is given the Sea Field (cf. *Kodiki* 2008, 41). Later, the union of the goddess Amaterasu with the god Susanō produces children, and the line of Japanese emperors begins with the goddess Amaterasu's grandson, the god Ninigi, who descends from heaven into the earthly sphere to rule it.

Although these gods emerge from Izanaki's ritual ablution, they are nevertheless counted among the children of the divine couple and are thus related to each other. Therefore, the relationship between Amaterasu and Susanō is just as incestuous as that between Izanaki and Izanami. Both divine couples are simultaneously brother and sister, but also husband and wife. This is the original sin, which is not uncommon among the gods and rulers of ancient peoples, even if it is not immorality but primitive endogamy, i.e., the pursuit of union with equals. Meletinski concludes that this is not a reminder of consanguinity, but a "natural understanding that arises from the fact that humanity is descended from one species" (Meletinski 1976, 203). In contrast, the introduction of double exogamy and thus the emergence of society implicitly expresses the tendency to transform chaos into a cosmos. The Serbian scholar Zoja Karanović deduces that the prohibition of incest became a condition of all sociality and that exogamy was introduced as one of the most important regulating factors in archaic communities. The union of the first-born couple, i.e., *hieros gamos* (sacred marriage) or divine incest, which took place in the sacred mythical period, was inevitable, although it is sinful among humans and consequently had to be forbidden (Karanović 2002, 293–305).

The incestuous relationship between a brother and a sister was mainly due to the fact that it was not possible to find a suitable spouse of equal rank outside the (ruling) family. Obayashi believes that not only social diversity influenced the practice of imperial incest in ancient Japan, but also ideology, as was the case in Hawaii (cf. Obayashi 1986, 14). In Izana-

---

<sup>7</sup> The jewels mentioned in this context as an attribute of the Sun Goddess and later as a part of the imperial regalia are actually *magatama* in the form of commas, initially made of stone and other materials, but later of jade. Although they were originally used as jewelry, they later had a purely ritual purpose.

ki and Izanami, *hieros gamos* is only possible after the divine couple was made aware that they had violated the taboo by accepting the primacy of the woman, so that they repeated the ritual correctly (cf. Vasić 2019). In this way, this episode reveals the postulates of the patriarchal system in ancient Japan, and this explanation about male supremacy was added later, as is assumed (cf. Toji 2017, 45), under the influence of imported Confucian ideas. Since sexual relations between siblings were strictly forbidden among historical emperors, as Obayashi also emphasizes (Obayashi 1986, 14–19), it is quite logical that they were avoided in the case of the divine couple Amaterasu–Susanō. In their case, conception is sinless and takes place on a spiritual and symbolic level. Thus, the goddess Amaterasu remains a pure and innocent figure, more suitable for the progenitor of the imperial lineage.

The very name of the goddess Amaterasu makes it clear that the cult of the mother goddess is equated with the solar principle. This also applies to the Japanese emperors, who in the oldest records bear the titles: Celestial (Amatsu) Descendant of the Sun (Hitsugi) or He Who Illuminates the empire. The sun was most important to the agricultural peoples, as the harvest depended on it. When the technique of irrigated rice cultivation was introduced around 200 BC, archaic Shinto prioritized the agricultural myths related to rice. As the empire was based primarily on this primitive belief, the religious authority of the emperor was consolidated by assigning him the position of high priest, who controlled the sun and rice production. The tasting of the first harvest offerings (*niinamesai*) is still the most important annual ritual of the Japanese emperor. This imperial harvest ritual, which was based on folk customs, evolved over time, and it was only “after the imperial system became established did the Sun Goddess (Amaterasu) become the deity addressed in the ritual (*saishin*)” (Ohnuki-Tierney 1991, 200).

The connection between the goddess Amaterasu and rice is also established through her direct descendants. Her son, who was created from jewels through parthenogenesis, bears the name Heavenly God of the Rich Rice Grain (Masakatsuakatsu Kachihayahi Ame no Oshihomimi). He marries the Goddess of the Thousand Looms and the Rich Harvest (Yorozuhata Tojoakitsushihime), who was a daughter of the god Takagi (another name for Takami Musuhi, or Musubi). Their son is the God of Heavenly Rice Ripeness (Ame no Hoakari). The other, who later descends to the earthly sphere to rule it, is Ninigi (his full name is God of Heavenly and Earthly Abundance, Prince of Heaven, Son of the Sun, Abundance of Rice Ears – Amenikishi Kuninikishi Amatsuhiko Hiko Ho no Ninigi). The name of



this god indicates that he embodies the spirit of rice and the abundance of grain that he brings to people from the heavenly world. One version of the myth from the *Nihonshōki* chronicle explicitly states that Amaterasu gave her grandson ears of rice from the sacred rice fields (cf. Aston 1972, 83), suggesting that the harvest festival originated in the heavenly world, from where it came to earth. Matsumura notes that cultures throughout Southeast Asia regard rice as a sacred grain and accord it a unique status among agricultural products, and many of them “personify the spirit of the rice as a goddess, calling it ‘grain mother,’ or ‘mother of the rice’” (Matsumura 1996).

*Kojiki* continues with the widely known mythical plot in which the terrified goddess Amaterasu is imprisoned in the Celestial cave, leaving the world in complete darkness. The simplest interpretation points to a solar eclipse, and this mythological tale has its parallels in cultures throughout the Asian continent. The other gods went to great lengths to lure Amaterasu out of the cave. They also made a bronze mirror (eight fathoms long) in which the goddess saw her image. This mirror represents the spirit of the goddess Amaterasu, which is later confirmed when the Great Goddess Amaterasu sends her grandson Ninigi to rule the earthly sphere and presents him with sacred objects (which are later worshipped as imperial regalia): the aforementioned jeweled necklace, the Kusanagi sword she received from Susanō, and the mirror used to lure her out of the cave with the words, “Consider this mirror as my spirit itself and revere it as if you were worshipping me” (*Kojiki* 2008, 97). The text also indicates that the mirror is celebrated as a deity in the sanctuary of Isa. The mirror is also one of the possible links between Japanese and Chinese mythology. Barnes analyzes the Chinese Queen Mother of the West (Japanese: Seiobo), who is not explicitly mentioned in Shinto mythology, but it is likely that this archaic goddess is personified in the Japanese Great Goddess Amaterasu: “Could this not be how the early Japanese conceived of the deity, given that a mirror is a reflector of light and that virtually every Shinto shrine has a mirror as deity substitute?” (Barnes 2012, 83).

After these events, the Great Sun Goddess Amaterasu permanently consolidated her position as the supreme deity of the Shinto pantheon and was granted the privilege of allowing her descendants to rule over Japan. She rules together with the god Takagi, reflecting the historic system of male-female tribal leadership: the brother-ruler and the sister-shaman. They give an order to their grandson, the god Hiko Ho no Ninigi: “We entrust the Middle Land of the Reed Beds to you to rule it. Therefore, you will

descend from heaven as you have been commanded" (*Koŋiki* 2008, 95). This proves the legitimacy of the Yamato imperial lineage, which traces its roots back to the goddess Amaterasu. In the distant past, it was decided in the celestial world that they would rule the world, and this gives them every right to assert and subjugate themselves. "And this process resulted in a theocratic government involving an orderly unification of the divine world and all of humanity" (Tsushita 1988, 193).

## THE BACKGROUND TO THE MYTH OF THE GREAT GODDESS AMATERASU

Throughout history, scholars have researched the roots of the myth of the Great Sun Goddess Amaterasu, paying attention to every detail. Doubts exist above all regarding the gender of this sun goddess in a strongly patriarchal society.

The fact that the ancestor deity is depicted as a female principle in the oldest Japanese chronicles does not mean that it is really a relic from antiquity. There is ample evidence that other solar myths also existed in Japan in the past. For example, in folk tales (*mukashibanashi*), which often contain mythological elements, there is the motif of more than one sun, which apparently originates from Chinese mythology. All but one of the suns are shot by the hero (e.g., the giant Amanojaku) with bow and arrow (cf. Vasić 2013, 127–128). Takeshi mentions a folk song from Izumo, in which the god of the rice field, Sanbai, whose father is the sun and whose mother is a dragon, is mentioned. Parallels can also be found in Southeast Asia (see e.g. Takeshi 1978, 1–2). In the well-known folk tale "The Wedding of the Mouse", the sun is "the most wonderful person in the world" (Vasić 2018, 82). The motif of the sun standing still in the tale "Lake Koyama" (Vasić 2018, 168) is also interesting, and similar plots can be found throughout Japan: the subjects have not managed to plant a rice field in one day, so the rich man waves his gold-painted fan three times to bring back the sun. However, exercising power over the sun in this way was sacrilege, which is why he was punished by heaven.

We must not forget that many scholars insist that in the original myth the ancestor of the ruling house was not the goddess Amaterasu, but the celestial ruler Takami Musuhi, who had been worshipped at the imperial court since ancient times, especially on the occasion of the harvest festival. And while the first fruits were ritually sacrificed to this god, they believe, the goddess Amaterasu "had no sanctuary in the court until the Heian period [794–1185]" (Takeshi 1983, 160). In the earliest stage of development, "the ancestors of the Imperial family held their

harvest festival and recited a simple form of the myth referring to their guardian god and to the rice spirit“ (Takeshi 1983, 160). Later, this festival developed into a major national holiday that took on an increasingly complicated form.

Numerous written testimonies have been preserved (e.g., books from the beginning of the 10th century: *Engishiki* or *Nihon Sandai Jitsuroku*) that there were shrines throughout Japan where the sun was celebrated, as evidenced by their names (e.g., *amateru* – to shine in the sky). It has been noted that some of these shrines were dedicated to male deities, and some claim that they were the same god (see e.g. Takeshi 1978, 3). Thus, by the time of the chronicles, Amaterasu was already being celebrated at the shrines of Ise and Hinokuma in Ise, but they were previously dedicated to the sun deity of the Ama people, whose beliefs were incorporated into the mythical corpus of the *Kojiki*. It is the god of fire that shines in the sky and on the earth (Amateru Kuniteru Hoakari), the protector of the descendants of the Ama coastal people – the Amabe clan. Takeshi concludes that “the original form of Amaterasu was indeed the sun deity among the Ama people of Ise”, and that therefore “many solar rituals still survive” in this region (Takeshi 1978, 4).

Another mythical being associated with the solar principle is the (earthly) god Sarutabiko, who is considered a monkey-god due to his appearance (red face and red buttocks), as well as his name (*saru* – monkey). Fearsome and majestic, Sarutabiko stood at the “eight-pointed celestial crossroads”. He illuminated the sky and the earth and waited for the grandson of the Great Sun Goddess (*Kodiki* 2008: 96).<sup>8</sup> Nakamura believes that “sunlight influences the results of agriculture, so it was quite possible that the monkey as a sun god developed into a god of agriculture” (Nakamura 1989: 55). It is even assumed that the snake and monkey gods preceded the later zoomorphic god of agriculture – the fox. The fact that the shrine of the monkey god Hiyoshi is associated with the sun is also related to this, especially as the name actually contains an ideogram for the sun. In addition, the main deity of this shrine, Sannō, is sometimes identified with the goddess Amaterasu. In other words, Sarutabiko could actually be one of the primitive sun deities that preceded the goddess Amaterasu. Furthermore, the promiscuous attitude<sup>9</sup> of the goddess Ame

---

<sup>8</sup> In Shinto mythology, Sarutabiko is the god who guides, the protector of travelers and the guardian of borders.

<sup>9</sup> She performed the dance for the first time in front of the Celestial Cave in which the goddess Amaterasu had locked herself up.

no Uzume, who exposed herself before him, could indicate that this was a man who needed to be charmed and seduced.

The controversial epic *Hotsuma Tsutae*<sup>10</sup> should also be mentioned at this point. Although it was written in the 18th century, it is considered a precursor to the official chronicle from the 8th century. Although the length and general framework are based on the official mythology, the individual myths in the book differ in content. Perhaps the most striking example is the sun deity, who in this writing is not the goddess Amaterasu, but the male god Amateru. The first part, entitled “The Book of Heaven”, describes how the goddess Izanami, after a long pregnancy, one day at dawn finally gives birth to the god Amateru, as an egg in the shell that protected him. When it was cut with a knife, a child appeared and the sun illuminated the sky and the earth (cf. *Hotsuma-Tsutae*, chapter 4).

In many cultures, it does not matter whether the sun is male or female. Matsumura explores the concept of a sun deity in areas from Northeast Asia to Siberia. The results of his research are brief: the Ainu have the sky god and the sun goddess; most Turkic ethnic groups regard the sun as a mother goddess and the moon as a father/uncle; in north-eastern Siberia, the sun is personified rather vaguely; the Samoyeds refer to the sun born from the right eye of the creator god as the “mother of the world”; the Cheremic in northern Europe and Russia have a “mother sun”. Such examples show that even if the sun is perceived as a woman, an attribute “mother” rather “express respect for heavenly bodies superior to and longer-lived than humans” (Matsumura 1996), rather than referring to an anthropomorphic goddess-demiurge.

Matsumura also compares the myth of the goddess Amaterasu with the myth of the Greek Athena and points out numerous similarities. Integrated mythical systems are formed around both female figures, organizing relations in the realm of domination as well as relations between men and women, revealing the political and social role of these mythical representations. In both cases, it was “groups of men who sought power and were responsible for desecration” (Matsumura 1996) who were to produce an “ideal type”, embodied by the virgin goddess. This virgin god-

---

<sup>10</sup> In order to suggest the authenticity of this text, it was written in “pseudo characters” (*Jindai moji* or *Yamato kotoba*), i.e., with a script that supposedly existed in Japan before the arrival of Chinese writing. Some famous scholars believed in the authenticity of this script, while others vehemently rejected it, until the story was rewritten in the mid-20th century when *Hocuma Tsutae* was reissued, not to verify its authenticity, but to look at the work from other angles (see e.g. Yoshida 2022).

dess in turn “became a symbol of absolute transcendence mutually contradictory to – and thus estranged from – real womanhood, existing at the core of a mythic system created by males, and serving to legitimate their aims” (Matsumura 1996).

And indeed, the deeper we delve into the analysis of the goddess Amaterasu, the more the image of a woman fades. Even the name itself, Amaterasu Ōmikami, does not refer to a goddess, but can refer to both genders. And how did the feminine side prevail in the end?

In ancient religious practices, the priestess/shamaness in the shrines served as the consort (*saiō*) of the male deity. Perhaps such a female consort of the sun god eventually developed into a deity herself, namely a sun goddess. “The male elements of this deity faded, while the female elements gradually increased” (Takeshi 1978, 7). Another name of the goddess Amaterasu is cited as evidence for this theory – Ōhirume, which means “woman of the sun”.<sup>11</sup> In the middle of the 5th century, the rulers of the Yamato state in Ise discovered the (already mentioned) sun god of the Ama people – Amateru. For some reason, the Yamato nobles recognized this god as their ancestor, perhaps because the shrine is located in the east of Yamato land facing the rising sun. As a result, they sent priests to the shrine to serve him, including the (high) priestess (*saio*). Over time, the increasingly influential clergy turned the god of the shrine into a national sun deity. This could be the reason for the differences between the rituals in the shrine of Ise and those at court. Furthermore, archaic elements can be distinguished in the rituals and celebrations of this shrine from those imposed by the Yamato court. Finally, the growing affection for the high priestesses from generation to generation led to a gradual change in the deity’s gender and her evolution into a sun goddess.

But the questions do not end here. We have already pointed out certain foreign influences on the mythical narratives of the Great Goddess Amaterasu. Considering that the ruling families of the Korean kingdoms were considered descendants of the solar deity, it is not hard to believe that the idea that the country should be ruled by the “children of the sun” could have originated from this side. Korean influences can be found in another interesting mythological story. Although the official mythology in

---

<sup>11</sup> There is also the interpretation that a sun goddess named Ohirume was introduced in the middle of the 6th century as a sign of resistance to the growing influence of Buddhism, while the figure of the goddess Amaterasu was only invented during the reign of Emperor Tenmu (cf. Kirkland 1997).

the chronicles accepts/prescribes a female sun deity, in the *Kojiki* we also find the sun depicted as a male principle (*Kojiki* 2008, 224–226): Rays of sunlight resembling a rainbow penetrate the pubic region of a sleeping girl, she becomes pregnant and gives birth to a red jewel (symbol of the sun). The jewel later turns into a beautiful girl who is considered the daughter of the sun. From the land of Shiragi (Korea) she came to Naniwa (Japan), as she says, “to the land of her ancestors”. The name of the prince who takes the jewel, Ame no Hiboko, means “Heavenly Spear of the Sun” and is etymologically related to the name of the spear (Ame no nuboko)<sup>12</sup> with which Izanami and Izanaki began the creation of the world. The prince’s descendant is the Japanese empress Jingu, who, according to legend, invaded the Korean kingdom of Shiragi.

In Korean mythology, we find a similar story, for example in the version from the Goguryeo kingdom: A girl is fertilized by a ray of sunlight and gives birth to a large egg, from which a child hatches, who later becomes the first king of the Goguryeo dynasty. Takeshi believes that the “story of Prince Ameno Hiboko and Akaruhime was transmitted by the descendants of Koreans that came to Japan” (Takeshi 1978, 3), and that it was they who exerted a significant influence on Japanese culture. A closer analysis reveals deep connections of the myth of the Japanese solar deity with “immigrant families such as the Hata, as well as deep roots in continental sericultural rites” (Como 2009, 191). Examples of this cultural intertwining are the “imported” deities that were already incorporated into the regular ritual practices of the court at the beginning of the Heian period and were then incorporated into the “original” corpus of the Shinto tradition (see e.g. Como 2009).

Taryo Obayashi is one of the scholars who, when examining the myths about the creation and development of the Japanese empire, have discovered parallels that support the assumption that there was a “genetic link between the ruling aristocratic culture of Japan” and the kingdoms on the Korean peninsula. Although the Ise Shrine itself contains certain elements derived from the Silla kingdom, “the kingship complex, of ancient Japan on the whole appears closer to those of Koguryo and Paekche” (Obayashi 1984, 10). Matsumae Takeshi agrees with those who believe that the origin of the myth of the solar deity, who is also the main agricultural deity, was largely influenced by Korean settlers. He notes that Amaterasu was incorporated into the mythic narrative in the 6th or 7th century when the

---

<sup>12</sup> It is a type of spear with a broad blade that was brought to Japan from China and took on a ritual character in the 3rd century.

Yamato court accepted her as a tutelary deity (Takeshi 1983, 160). As a concrete example, he cites the “five-part system” practiced in the kingdom of Paekche from 538, which was also the period of intensive (diplomatic) relations with Japan at the time. In the most developed form of the myth about the descent of the grandson of the sun goddess to earth, this “five-part system” was applied, so that the gods Takami Musuhi, Amaterasu, Ōshihomimi and Ho no Ninigi “were depicted as members of the same family genealogically” (Takeshi 1983, 175).

Of course, this does not mean that the figure of Amaterasu was created in its entirety at this time. Primitive belief in a solar deity was certainly already widespread, but it is likely that the status of the Great Goddess Amaterasu as a divine imperial ancestor was established at this time. Sueki points out the obvious influences of Buddhism, as “the depiction of Amaterasu as a radiant and luminous absolute is immediately reminiscent of Buddhist statues” (Sueki 2016, 71). In esoteric Buddhism, Amaterasu will later “merge with the Vairocana Buddha, but these elements were already present in the formative phase of her personality” (Sueki 2016, 71). Sueki refers to the *Konkomyokyo sutra* (*Suvarnaprabhasottamaraja sutra*), in which “the Buddha appears in the splendor of the resplendent Absolute” and where his “relationship with the state of which he is the protector” is emphasized (Sueki 2016, 71).

Although there is not enough information about the origin of the supreme goddess of the Shinto pantheon, it can be inferred from the surviving material that her cult was closely linked to the rites associated with weaving and silk production that came to the Japanese archipelago from the mainland. Even in the cults associated with the Great Shrine of Ise, elements from Chinese sources and from the Kingdom of Silla can be recognized. And considering that the “courtly rites and mythic paradigms of the post-Tenmu court were not created *ex nihilo*, but through the appropriation and transformation of pre-existing mythic and ritual resources” (Como 2009, 156), it is fairly certain that they are thereby also influenced by foreign cultures.

However, this creates a paradoxical situation. Namely, since the cult of the Great Sun Goddess Amaterasu has been treated as a cornerstone of Japanese identity since the Meiji Restoration of imperial power in 1868, religious historians, folklorists, ethnologists, etc. considered it a key element of a “native cultural/religious identity that was defined in opposition to the `foreign` Buddhist tradition” (Como 2009, 191). One of the consequences of this rigid approach was that “virtually all non-Buddhist cult practices were lumped together in an attempt to

create a `native` religious tradition” This means that narratives that obviously contain elements from neighboring cultures were put at the service of Japanese nationalist ideologies. One such example is the depiction of the goddess Amaterasu as a weaver or silkworm goddess (cf. Como 2009, 189–192).

## CONCLUSION

With the aim of forming a strong state with a centralized system, the imperial court of the Yamato state compiled the first chronicles at the beginning of the 8th century: *Kojiki* and *Nihonshōki*. The myths depicted in them are the result of the integration and systematization of existing mythical elements that were influenced from outside. However, a more detailed analysis raises numerous questions, mainly relating to the time of origin of these myths and their background.

The *Kojiki* was compiled primarily with the aim of proving the divine origin of the Yamato imperial line and the legitimacy of their rule over the entire territory. Subsequent historical events show that later authorities also drew on the *Kojiki*, especially at moments when it was necessary to awaken the national spirit. Through comparative studies, it is possible to discover certain influences that led to the creation of these mythical tales, in an attempt to reconstruct their original form, i.e., before they were adapted to the given political needs.

From a mythological point of view, the *Kojiki* tells how the heavenly gods subjugated the (disobedient) earthly gods. More specifically, the grandson of the supreme goddess of the Shinto pantheon, the Great Goddess Amaterasu, descends to earth to assume power, which continues in an unbroken line to her descendants, the Japanese emperors. This means that the goddess Amaterasu – the celestial ancestor of Yamato imperial lineage – “elevated by otherwise staunchly Confucian eight-century society above other, male gods” (Barnes 2012, 83).

A closer analysis reveals the complex nature of this solar deity and shows that she is much more than a randomly chosen goddess of a ruling group. This mythical paradigm was obviously created on the basis of existing myths and rituals, including those that do not belong to the dominant mythological system of Yamato. At the same time, it was clearly inspired and coordinated by external influences, including cultural and political contacts with the kingdoms on the Korean peninsula, as well as the activities of influential Korean settlers.

There are also many doubts about the figure of the Great Goddess Amaterasu herself. Although some claim otherwise, the fact that the ancestral



deity is female does not indicate a period of matriarchy in Japanese history. It is more correct to say that it is a symbolic type of goddess whose sexual prerogatives are not clearly expressed. And in contrast to the position of women in (then) Japanese society, which is also made clear by the example of the goddess Izanami, Amaterasu is given precedence over men from the moment of her birth.

And although it is clear that she is the sun, as the world remains in darkness due to her imprisonment in a cave, the cult of this mother goddess is not limited to the solar principle. It is related to weaving and silk production, which were not invented by the Japanese, revealing further influences from foreign cultures. In addition, the cult of this sun deity is closely related to the cultivation of grain, especially rice, and the analysis also shows a connection to foreign mythical and oral sources.

There was no room in this work for the multitude of other correspondences between the goddess Amaterasu and related numinous figures in other cultures, resulting from the arrival of new ideas in the Japanese archipelago. For example, the complex connections with the goddess Benzaiten/Benten (e.g., both possess magical jewels), i.e., with the goddesses Sarasvati and Dakini from Hindu mythology, and indirectly with the fox-god Inari. This work focuses primarily on the origin of the myth of the Great Sun Goddess Amaterasu, and thus on the oldest extant chronicle, the *Kojiki*.

The history of the study of the *Kojiki* shows a wide variety of interpretations based on different methods and points of view. It becomes problematic when the boundary is crossed and these mytho-historical records are placed in the position of genuine historical sources. Hitomi Tonomura warns that “excessive historical and geographical realism has sometimes characterized the use of the *Kojiki* as a historical document, leading to enthusiastic treatment of mythical names and events as representations of ‘facts’” (Tonomura 1994, 12). Sometimes, however, the explanations of the connection between the mythical and the historical are valuable and can shed new light on the question of the exact time of origin of the myths in this chronicle. For example, Sueki concludes that the basic structure of these myths is “by no means ancient”, but was designed at the time of their composition (Sueki 2016, 69). The Japanese historian finds the basis for such an assertion in an unusual situation that occurs in the myth of the descent of a divine descendant. Contrary to expectations, Amaterasu did not send her son to earth, but unexpectedly her grandson. Sueki sees a parallel in the historical circumstances when Empress Jito (r. 690–697), who temporarily inherited the throne

after Emperor Tenmu, did not hand over power to her son, but waited until her grandson had grown up and crowned him as Emperor Monmu (683–707; cf. Sueki 2016, 69 ).

The Great Sun Goddess Amaterasu, on the other hand, as a woman without pronounced physicality, “imbued with purity and divine magnanimity” (Tonomura 1994, 16), represents the ideal progenitor of the Japanese patrimonial lineage, which, with rare female exceptions, was created by members of a privileged group of powerful men to legitimize their own power structures. And in keeping with the political aims of the *Kojiki*, her name is repeated even later, “long after her textual space of action is over” (Tonomura 1994, 16).

## Sources

- Aston, William George, ed., transl. 1972. *Nihongi: Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest Times to A.D. 697*. Tokyo: Tuttle. Bock, Felicia.
- Kođiki: zapisi o drevnim događajima*. 2008. Ed. Oo no Jasumaro. Prevod sa starojapanskog (Translation from the old Japanese) Hiroši Jamasaki-Vukelić, Danijela Vasić, Dalibor Kličković, Divna Glumac. Beograd: Rad.
- Ogihara, Asao et al, eds. 1992. *Nihon koten bungaku zenshū*, vol. 1: *Kojiki – Jodai kayo*. Tokyō: Shogakukan.
- Sakamoto, Tarō et al, eds. 1982. *Nihon koten bungaku taikei*, vol. 68: *Nihonshoki*. Tokyō: Iwanami Shoten.

## References

- Barnes, Gina L. 2012. “The Emergence of Political Rulership and the State in Early Japan”. *Japan Emerging: Premodern History to 1850*. ed. by Karl F. Friday. London: Routledge.
- Como, Michael. 2009. *Weaving and Binding: Immigrants Gods and Female Immortals in Ancient Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawai`i Press.
- Frejzer, Džejms Dž. 2003. *Zlatna grana*. Beograd: Ivanišević.
- Hotsuma-Tsutae*. Translation into modern Japanese by Seiji Takabatake, and translation into English: Andrew Driver. <https://www.hotsuma.gr.jp/index-e.html>
- Karanović, Zoja. 2002. „Bratskosestrinski incest između hijerogamije i rodoskvrnog greha”. *Književna istorija* 34 (118): 293-305.

- Kembel, Džozef. 2004. *Herroj sa hiljadu lica*. Novi Sad: Stylos.
- Kirkland, Russell. 1997. "The Sun and the Throne. The Origins of the Royal Descent Myth in Ancient Japan". *Numen* 44 (2): 109–152. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3270296>
- Matsumura, Kazuo. 1996. "Josei no naka de tada hitori": Amaterasu shingaku seisei no hikaku shinwagaku-teki kosatsu" ("Alone among Women": A Comparative Mythic Analysis of the Development of Amaterasu Theology"). In *Kojiki no sekai: Kojiki kenkyū taikei*, v. 11, ed. Kojiki Gakkai. Tokyō: Takashina shoten. <http://www2.kokugakuin.ac.jp/ijcc/wp/cpjr/kami/matsumura.html#note1>.
- Meletinski, Eleazar M. 1976. *Poetika mita*. Beograd: Nolit.
- Mori, Koichi. 1979. "The Emperor of Japan: A Historical Study in Religious Symbolism". *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 6 (4): 522–565.
- Nakamura, Teiri. 1989. *Dōbutsutachi no no reiryoku*. Tokyō: Chikuma shobo.
- Obayashi, Taryō. 1984. "Japanese Myths of Descent from Heaven and their Korean Parallels". *Asian Folklore Studies* 43: 171–184.
- Obayashi, Taryō. 1986. *Shinwa no keifu – Nihon shinwa no genryūwo saguru*. Tokyo: Nichiinsatsu.
- Ohnuki-Tierney, Emiko. 1991. "The Emperor of Japan as Deity (*Kami*)". *Ethnology* 30 (3): 199–215.
- Sueki, Fumihiko. 2016. *Istorija japanske religije*. Translation from Japanese Dalibor Kličković. Beograd: Albatros plus.
- Takeshi, Matsumae. 1978. "Origin and Growth of the Worship of Amaterasu". *Asian Folklore Studies* 37 (1): 1–11.
- Takeshi, Matsumae. 1983. "The Myth of the Descent of the Heavenly Grandson". *Asian Folklore Studies* 42 (2): 159–179.
- Tonomura, Hitomi. 1994. "Positioning Amaterasu: A Reading of the Kojiki". *The Japan Foundation Newsletter* 22 (2) [https://www.academia.edu/3880900/Positioning\\_Amaterasu\\_A\\_Reading\\_of\\_the\\_Kojiki](https://www.academia.edu/3880900/Positioning_Amaterasu_A_Reading_of_the_Kojiki)
- Tsushita, Michihito. 1988. "Shinshukyo ni okeru Tennōkan to yonaoshikan - Shinsei Ryujinkai no baai". U *Ronshū Nihon Bukkyōshi 9: Taisho Showa Jidai*, Komoto Mitsugi, ed. Tokyo: Yuzankaku, 189–214. Prevod na engleski: "Emperor and World Renewal in the New Religions: The Case of Shinsei Ryūjinkai". <https://www2.kokugakuin.ac.jp/ijcc/wp/cpjr/newreligions/tsushima.html#tnote1>
- Vasić, Danijela. 2008. *Sunce i mač: japanski mitovi u delu Kodiki*. Beograd: Rad.
- Vasić, Danijela. 2013. *Mesečeva princeza: Usmeno i pisano u japanskoj drevnoj književnosti*. Beograd: Tanesi.
- Vasić, Danijela, ed., transl. 2018. *Mukašibanaši – japanske narodne pripovetke*. Beograd: Tanesi.

Vasić, Danijela. 2019. „Hieros gamos (sveti brak) u japanskoj mitologiji”. In *Orientalistika juče, danas, sutra*, ed. Anđelka Mitrović, 657–668. Beograd: Filološki fakultet.

Yoshida, Yui. 2022. “Significance of Military Power in the *Jindai Moji* Text *Hotsuma Tsutae* – with a Focus on Susanoo and Yamato Takeru”. *Religions* 13 (3): 199, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13030199>

Примљено / Received: 25. 12. 2023.

Прихваћено / Accepted: 09. 05. 2024.