Japanese Mythology and Nationalism: Myths of genesis, Japanese identity, and Familism

Merin Sever, Istanbul University, Turkey

Abstract

In the nationalism's toolbox, mythology is one of the most useful and productive tools for the construction of national identity. Mythic tales provide a sense of "essence" for the nation; in a way, they symbolize the "roots" for the members of nation. Because of this valuable meaning, pre-nationalist /nationalist thinkers revive and reproduce these narratives according to their agenda. By the revival of mythic stories, a discoursal link which works as cement between the nation and the selected ethnic group is created. Among these, especially the myths on genesis are functional for building a family-nation concept which enhances solidarity and unity between the members of the nation. Being a country with a rich culture and strong historical roots, Japan has a great variety of mythic stories in its literature. In an attempt to discover the links between the myths and the discoursal construction of Japanese nation and Japanese national identity, this study focuses on the Tale of Izanagi and Izanami, Amaterasu-ōmikami, Ukemochi-no-kami, and Jimmu Tennō. These myths were revived first by Motoori, who is a pre-nationalist thinker, and then by Yanagito Kunio, who is a Meiji period nationalist; therefore, it is also important to analyze the relations between these myths and the discourses of these nationalist thinkers. Considering that the details of the mythic stories contain many hints about Japanese *minzoku* ("nation") and *kazoku kokka* ("family-nation") concepts, a review of these tales from the viewpoint of political science can also depict the "nature" of nationalism with more vibrant colors.

Keywords: Japanese mythology, nationalism, familism, Japanese history

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

Japan has a wide source of mythology which carries Confucian, Buddhist and Shinto traces in addition to some inspirations from Chinese, Indian, Korean, and Ainu mythologies (Ashkenazi, 2003). In this study, I will focus only on the parts that are mainly used for building a national discourse. They are mostly the ones which "explain" the origins of Japanese nation, the "creation" of Japan, and the "pureness" of Japanese people.

I will start with the legends and, then, I will try to explain how they are used in nation-building process. In an attempt to discover the links between the myths and the discoursal construction of Japanese nation and Japanese national identity, it is vital to read Japanese mythology from a critical point of view.

Myths of Genesis, Japanese Identity, and Familism

The Japanese legends are taken from the ancient texts which are the main sources of Japanese legends and semi-legendary history called *Kojiki* ("Record of Ancient Matters") and *Nihonshoki* ("Japanese Chronicles") (Güvenç, 1980). *Kojiki* is written in Japanese (app. A.D. 712) and *Nihonshoki* is written by Yasumaro Omo in 720 (in original, it's written in Chinese) (Mackenzie, 1996).

According to the tale, at the beginning, there was only three gods without gender or sex and when they died, seven generations of gods appeared. These gods told young god Izanagi (means "the man who invites") and young goddess Izanami (means "the woman who invites") "to create a land on the world" and gave them "heavenly jeweled spear" (referred as *ame no tama-boko* or *ame no nubuko*) for the creating process (It is possible to consider the lance as a phallic symbol). Here, "*tama*" is a bead or any other round-shaped jewel on the spear. Gods gave the spear of *tama* to siblings, because *tama* is "the material of life (Mackenzie, 1996). Those days, earth was "floating on the water like oil". Siblings speared *ame no tama-boko* into the sea and stirred the sea with it. When they pulled the spear up, the falling drops turned into islands on the sea (Ashkenazi, 2003 and Mackenzie, 1996). These are the islands of Japan; therefore, Japan was created by these gendered *kami*s (gods and/or goddesses). Obviously, Japanese islands and Japan as a country are absolutely holy in the eyes of Japanese people for ages (and even today), because legends say so. A land, a country, created by *kami*s is strictly different and higher than all the others. This legend can enlighten a part of patriotic feelings of Japanese people about their homelands.

Let's continue with the myth of creation. After they accomplished their task, Izanagi and Izanami turned back to heaven, but other *kami*s told them to go down to the earth and create their own "descendants". By the help of a rainbow (sometimes it's described as "holy stairs"), they landed on Onogoro and then built the Eight Measure Palace around a central pillar called Heavenly August Pillar.[1] They rounded the column as a matrimonial ceremony and the siblings became man-and-wife. Their first baby, Hiruko was still unable to walk after 3 years; therefore, he was left in the river

---

[1] The central column is an "object of honour" in Japan, both at Shinto temples or at homes.

on a boat (Mackenzie, 1996).[2] Izanagi and Izanami asked the gods to find what they were doing wrong. Gods told that, in order to have a healthy baby, the man has to take the initiative; he has to invite first, not the woman. (Apparently, this myth also gives hint about the social position of women in Japanese society.) Izanagi and Izanami did as they said and Izanami gave birth to the eight main islands of Japan (*Oyashimakuni*), the other minor islands, and the main *kami*s of sea and harbor, of wind, trees, mountains, and so on (Ashkenazi, 2003). Izanagi and Izanami continued to have babies, until Izanami got burned and died while she was giving birth to her fire-child, god of fire, Kagu-tsuchi. Before her death, she created eight more gods/goddesses including Ukemochi-no-kami, the goddess of food (Mackenzie, 1996). After her death, the quantity of the *kami*s changed and Izanagi had many other adventures, but I will skip these parts and will focus on the birth of Amaterasu, sun goddess.

When she died, Izanami went to *Yomi*, the land of darkness. Izanagi wanted to save her, but it was not possible anymore, because she had already eaten the foods of *Yomi*. After his visit to *Yomi*, Izanagi left her wife there, turned back to the lands of living, and needed to wash all the dirt away: "I came from a nasty, dirty land. For this reason, I will clean my magnificent body!" While he was washing himself, two evil gods appeared from the dirt and when he dived into the lake, three water gods appeared and when he washed his left eye, Amaterasu -sun goddess- was born, when he washed his right eye, Tsukuyomi – moon god- was born. (As a female, Amaterasu comes from the "left" and as a male, Tsukuyomi comes from the "right" eye. Associating females with left is a very common cultural pattern all over the world and Japanese myths seem to be coherent with this habitude.) Then, Izanagi took off his necklace embellished with *tama,* gave it to Amaterasu and ordered her to rule "the celestial plains" (Mackenzie, 1996). Obviously, these "celestial plains" signify Japan and Amaterasu gets her legitimacy from another god, a male god. Legend also tells us the rivalry between Amaterasu and her brother Susa-no-wo, but gods decided to recognize the legitimacy of Amaterasu, and through the history, they sent many other gods for helping her grandchildren, i.e. the Emperors of Japan, during wars.

The children of Amaterasu and Dragon King of The Sea lived for generations. As a descendant, Jimmu Tennō conquered Japan app. B.C. 660 and succeeded to establish his dynasty which is widely accepted as a dynasty never broken (Güvenç, 1980). According to the *Kojiki*, the first emperor Jimmu Tennō is descendant of Amaterasu (Mackenzie, 1996). For this reason, his legitimacy is given by Izanagi, practiced by Amaterasu, and approved by the other gods. Therefore, any contradiction against the authority of emperor is considered a blasphemy, a revolt against the will of the gods. More than the authority he signifies, he is a holy human being; every mikado is a *kami* similar to the pharaohs of the Ancient Egypt. That means, Japanese people are derived from the gods as well. Although scientifically Japanese people are paragenetic having genes from people of Kuriles, Sakhalin, Kyushu-Korea, and the Ryukyus, Manchus, Chinese, Ainu and Koreans (Ashkenazi, 2003) and even archeological researches in ancient imperial tombs indicate that Japanese imperial family is originally Korean (Guthmann, 2000), the belief about the "pureness" of Japans keep its illusion-maker effect even today. The first migrations from the continent to the islands took place in very early times in the history and after people have settled to the

---

[2] This myth specifically has some similarities with the story of Moses.

islands, no new major migration has ever occurred; that could be a reasonable explanation why they do not remember any "fusion effect". The only two big threat of occupation of Mongols were gotten over by the help of stormy winds ("*kamikaze*"- "breath of gods") and, then, people of Japan have never encountered with a similar type of threat.

These myths and other similar ones that I did not mention here were revitalized in 18th century by an essentialist nationalist group headed by Motoori. This group was aiming to "turn the Japanese society back to the origins" and "purify the society from foreign effects", including Chinese words or Buddhist cults and customs.[3] In their opinion, all these non-Japanese cultural contents were weakening the Japanese society and that was the main reason of chaos in shogunate. This opinion was also in accordance with the views of defenders of isolation.

"Motoori Norinaga, the eighteenth-century scholar of the National Learning School, was, in effect, an interpreter of myths. He very strongly believed that the Japanese foundation myths were unique to Japan and they demonstrated the primacy of Japan in the world. He (and his many followers) attempted to explain the nature of Japanese myths based on linguistic associations, constructions of elaborate tables of genealogy and chronology, and relating ideas common in his own era to scraps of items found in the classics." (Ashkenazi, 2003)

The leaders of this movement, Motoori Norinaga and his follower Hirata, were strongly advising the "Revival of Pure Shinto", because Shinto was the religion/belief of masses. Although Buddhism was the official religion/belief, it could not diffuse to the lower society. In fact, it would be utterly against its own aim, because Chinese Buddhism –specifically Confucianism in practice- is a sect for warrior class, which means, for higher class. While revitalizing Shinto and Japanese culture, this movement also reinterpreted the myths about Japan's power and uniqueness. According to some historians, it was one of the main triggers which caused the Meiji Reformation, because it created a base for the idea of "a mighty emperor" by supporting and advising the holiness and uniqueness of *tennō* (Mackenzie, 1996 and Hunter, 2002).

On the other hand, Yanagita Kunio shares the idea of "uniqueness of Japan and Japanese people", but he also assumes that this kind of uniqueness and pureness can be only found "in the practices of the common people and the peasants in remote villages", because "peasant had not been contaminated by the Confucian, Buddhist, and Chinese influences that the elite writers of the Great Tradition [including, presumably, Motoori] had been touched by." (Ashkeanzi, 2003) Clearly, his opinion has the same motivation point with early German romantics. Although Motoori finds his assumption and his indirect accusations ridiculous, some other scholars shares his thoughts. Moreover, there was a cultural concept which supports his idea: Peasants are simply the producers of rice and it's one of the main nutrients of Japanese people, but also, it's a "sacred gift" from Amaterasu.

---

[3] In my opinion, this group seems very similar to "Atsızcılar" headed by Nihal Atsız, in Turkish history.

According to the tale, Amaterasu sent her brother Susa-no-wo to visit the goddess of food, Ukemochi-no-kami. Goddess of food took rice and other food from her mouth and served to Amaterasu's brother, but he considered this behavior as an insult, because "food was polluted by a female mouth". So, he killed her. (As the myth of creation, this myth gives some hints about the social position of Japanese women too.) When Amaterasu heard that Susa-no-wo killed Ukemochi-no-kami, she went to see her body: "Millet was found in her forehead, and silkworms in her eyebrows. Rice was in her belly, and wheat in her genitals. These were presented to Amaterasu, who declared they would be used by humanity for its living." (Ashkenazi, 2003) The legend points out that Japanese people clearly owe their existence to Amaterasu and her sacred gifts. "[Japanese] cosmology is based on rice culture" (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1993) and for this reason, Yanagita supports the idea which says "Japanese culture cannot be completely understood without a study of Japanese rice culture" in a way (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1993). His thoughts also clarify the social position of peasants. Traditionally, peasant rank is higher than merchant rank within the Japanese social class system, because peasants are not as "contaminated" as merchants (especially dealing with "money" is what makes merchants more "corrupted") and they produce rice – the source of life, in both material and celestial meanings.

All these myths about genesis, foundation of Japan, the origin of rice, and the main characters -as Amaterasu or Jimmu Tenno- end up with a social consequence with two dimensions. First, all Japanese people are "naturally" brothers and sisters, because they all derive from the same origin. Homogeneity creates the concept of family-nation which has a pure origin and a common genealogy. Secondly, this family-nation is built around the *tenno* who is the purest person among pure people, because Jimmu Tenno directly derivates from Amaterasu and the Japanese dynasty has never been broken. *Tenno*'s pureness is unquestionable, so is his divine authority. Nation obeys utterly and shows deep respect to *tenno*, because this is "natural" as "the obedience of children for their fathers". *Tenno* is the holy father of the nation and so, patriarchy is the final touch which completes the picture.

This two-dimensional social structure finds its expression starting from *jomin* (ordinary person) to *tenno*: *Kazoku kokka* (word by word, "family nation"). According to the Gregory Clark (1978), it looks like that Japanese society is sociologically an example of a family-tribal society. Güvenç (1980) says that it is also possible to see it as a community, a *gemeinschaft*; because it is organized as a big, well-developed family. At this point, Tessa Morris-Suzuki (1998) argues another possible term for describing Japanese society: *minzoku*. At first glance, *minzoku* is closer to the terms of "ethnicity" or "ethnic"; on the other hand it "(…) can but does not necessarily refer to a group of people who are physically related to one another. It can also refer to a community bound together by ties of language and tradition, and in some cases (as historian Kevin Doak emphasized) it is used in a sense close to that of the English word 'nation'." (Morris-Suzuki, 1998)

In general opinion, clearly there is a reference to blood relation for describing Japanese nationalism; but also, Morris-Suzuki reminds us that, for Japanese people, culture (*bunka*) is really important too. For this reason, although they are genetically Japanese, people who grew up in U.S. or Brazil are not accepted as "totally Japanese". On the other hand, members of other nations who grew up in Japan are also can't be "entirely" Japanese; because they lack the qualities of "Japanese blood". For being an

ideal Japanese, genes and culture have to match. Although genes are unchangeable and one cannot choose his own genes; still they come first; then, culture (*bunka*) completes them. This is also an explanation for why a part of Japanese people see Koreans or Chinese "inferior" who were born and always lived in Japan.

All these narratives and explanations are useful for an analysis of Japanese nationalism. First, these myths and legends on divine origins and foundation give a hint about the existence of "a Japanese nation concept" for Japanese people. Nation is a phenomenon of modern times and appears with industrialization; but as Smith (2010) indicates, existence of these myths and legends, at least, shows us that the society has some ideas about their ethnic construction. On the other hand, as Gellner (2006) says, the existence of high-culture is vital for being a nation. Japanese culture has settled and started to keep a chronology since 7th century (as mentioned before, with *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki*) and further developed after the Meiji Reforms by "modern" touches, such as first Japanese newspaper in 1868 (Belge, 2011).

Timing is also significant. The first revitalizing movement of Motoori and others occurred in 17th century; which is almost the same time of pre-nationalist movements in Europe. (Even if there was an interaction, its rapidness would be quite surprising.) Although interaction could be possible with Europe via the colonies in Japan (Belge, 2011), it is not wrong to say that the very first Japanese nationalist reactions were not a "creation" of Western world because even if there was an interaction, considering the timing, it can't be utterly a "work", a "product" of Occident (Chatterjee, 1999).[4] Though there were some similarities with Europe –especially with Germany- (Takahashi, 1984), the emerging of capitalism in Japan had its own conditions; the course of nationalism in Japan had both similar and specific conditions as well (Esenbel, 1999). At least, for the emergence of nationalism it is appropriate to say that the first movements were "genuine", not "imported" from the Occident. Although Yanagito accuses Motoori and the other leaders of the movement "being contaminated" by the non-Japanese cultural features, they were getting their ideas, aims, and ideals directly from the Japanese cultural source. They had no desire for "being Occidental"; neither for appearance, nor for inner world. Mostly, it was a seeking for the "good old days of the empire" in a mercantile, pre-capitalist age and that was a well-known reaction of a changing society who wants to stay in its own, safe inner space. But also, it was different than an ordinary essentialist rebellion or reaction; because here, there is an effort to differentiate the Japanese society from the others in all respects; the discourse of first nationalists resembles a nationalist movement and again, the discourse confirms the belief that the essence of being a nation is having a national ideal for the future. This movement has it: For the sake of Japanese society, movement declares an aim, a final destination, and a program for reaching this goal. It is a very common path for the nationalist movements; even Motoori's profession resembles the "Western" examples, because he was a linguist, and in Japan, first national "awakening" started with researches on linguistic and history, like other examples. Again, in Japan, national awakening started with the efforts of upper class; first followers were the intellectuals too. For Japanese example, social engineering was not very strong within the structure of the movement, but its impact continued in further movements: From the Meiji Reforms to militarist movements between two world wars, even in 1970's, different political movements

---

[4] Here, Chatterjee criticizes Anderson's thoughts. Although Benedict Anderson (2009) describes nationalism as a phenomenon "copiable" by non-Europeans in *Imagined Communities*, Chatterjee refuses to describe non-European nationalist movements as a "copy" or "replica".

again and again used and reproduced the myths and legends which were "revitalized" by Motoori (Wilson, 2002). Considering the social and geographical features of Japan, it was very "natural":

"By whatever definition, a consciousness of nation has been widely considered to be very important to modern Japan, especially during the pre-war period. Japan's relative cultural homogeneity, apparently natural geographical boundaries, isolation from much of the outside world between the mid-seventeenth and mid-nineteenth centuries and its ancient imperial house has seemed to indicate the inevitability of national consciousness." (Wilson, 2002)

Conclusion

Japan should be pronounced as a successful example of construction of nation and national identity by reproducing historical myths and legends. As the theories of Gellner and Hobsbawm claim, "Japanese nation" and "Japanese identity" appeared at the same time with the processes of industrialization and modernization. On the other hand, Smith also has a good point in this case: Japan's own specific conditions have made it more successful to create its own nation and identity, because in this case, invented traditions are merging with reinterpreted narratives of an imagined Japanese society. Smith is right to say that if there are any historical features that remain (such as legends or myths which can be reinterpreted or a distinct territory which is geographically separated), they make the process easier. In history, every example has its own peculiarities; therefore, Japan's specific characteristics such as its historical line, distinct location, homogeneity, its special *tennō* figure or its own family form as *ie* cannot be ignored. For this reason, for a better understanding of Japanese nationalism and the construction of Japanese nation and Japanese identity, it is vital to examine the roots of reinterpreted myths, legends, and narratives.

References

Anderson, B. (2009). *Hayali Cemaatler*, İstanbul: Metis.

Ashkenazi, M. (2003). *Handbook of Japanese Mythology*. California: Oxford University Press.

Belge, M. (2011). *Militarist Modernleşme Almanya, Japonya ve Türkiye*. İstanbul: İletişim.

Chatterjee, P. (1999). Whose Imagined Country? In Gopal Balakrishnan (Ed.), *Mapping the Nation* (pp.214-226). London: Verso.

Clark, G. (1978). The Human Relations Society and The Ideological Society. *JFN*, VI, No:3.

Esenbel, S. (1999). Japonya ve Türkiye Çağdaşlaşma Tarihinin Karşılaştırması. In S. Esenbel & A. M. (Eds.), *Çağdaş Japonya'ya Türkiye'den Bakışlar* (pp. 9-31). İstanbul: Simurg.

Gellner, E. (2006). *Uluslar ve Ulusçuluk*. İstanbul: Hil.

Guthmann, T. (2000). Pour Un Regard Anthropologique sur La Part d'Emotion dans Les Crises Politiques Modernes – Une Etude de Cas: L'Ouverture du Marché du Riz Japonais. Ph.D. Thesis, Director: Bruno Etienne, Aix-Marseille 3: L'Institut d'Etudes Politiques.

Güvenç, B. (1980). *Japon Kültürü Nihon Bunka*. Ankara: İş Bankası Kültür Yay.

Hunter, J.E. (2002). *Modern Japonya'nın Doğuşu*. Ankara: İmge.

Mackenzie, D.A. (1996). *Çin ve Japon Mitolojisi*. Ankara: İmge.

Morris-Suzuki, T. (1998). *Re-inventing Japan - Time, Space, Nation*. New York: An East Gate Book.

Ohnuki-Tierney, E. (1993). *Rice as Self*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Smith, A.D. (2010). *Millî Kimlik*. İstanbul: İletişim.

Takahashi, K. (1984). Tartışmaya Bir Katkı. In R. Hilton (Ed.), *Feodalizmden Kapitalizme Geçiş* (pp. 72-107). İstanbul: Metis.

Wilson, S. (2002). Rethinking nation and nationalism in Japan. In S. Wilson (Ed.) *Nation and Nationalism in Japan*. (pp. 1-20) London: Routledge.

Contact email: merinsever@gmail.com