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The Lapidary Sky Over Japan

Abstract

The Japanese sun-hiding myth implies that the early Japanese believed the sky was made of stone. Gravel-beds at Shinto temples might have been physical manifestations of the belief. Comparative studies show that such a belief was common throughout the world prior to the advent of modern science. One plausible explanation for the widespread belief in a stone sky might be cross-cultural observations of a common natural phenomenon: meteorite falls.

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I HAVE LONG BEEN intrigued by the Japanese myth of the hiding sun. According to this myth the sun-goddess, Amaterasu concealed herself in a sacred rock-grotto in the sky. I had wondered why the grotto should so emphatically be of *rock*, and why the rock should be in the *sky*, that overhead pool awhirl with the celestial torches. The first question (Why should it be of rock?) I answered in a paper titled “To Be Dead or Not to Be: Stones and Immortality in Japan,” which I presented at the Thirtieth International Conference of Orientalists in Japan (METEVELIS 1985). This paper concluded, among other things, that stone served as a symbol of the eternal other world, and that the very substance of stone afforded a mechanism for attaining to that world. For the second question (Why rock in the sky?), I shall advance a hypothesis at the conclusion of the present essay.

To begin with, I observe that the Japanese sky—which the myth implies to be of stone—has much company throughout the world. As the great Italian historian of religions Raffaele Pettazzoni (1883–1959) has observed, the idea that stone or precious stone gives substance to the sky extends from Polynesia to Persia and on to Madagascar and southern Nigeria. PETTAZZONI noted that such peoples as the Ao-Nāga, the Andamanese, the Semang, and the Southeastern Australians thought their principal deity haunted a cave or, what amounts to the same thing, a stone house in this lapidary sky (1954, 40–41). The “sky of stone” motif appears also among beliefs of the California Indians (BLACKBURN 1975, 36, 93, 95). Intimations of such obtained also among the Navaho, even for the sun’s house in the sky (REICHARD 1977, 15, 16, 17, 211, 238, 295). It appears further in Chinese myths and folktales, where the sky can be jade and studded with the throne of the divine Jade Emperor. A Seric creation myth preserved in the *Shu-i-chi*, a chronicle of the Liang dynasty (fl. AD 502–556), has the demiurge P’an-ku (whose name means “to secure the basin”) chisel the sky out of chaotic rock, thus causing the sky to be formed and at the same time to recede from the expanding earth as he chipped away, opening the cosmic hollow with hammer and chisel. And the motif appears seemingly in the Old Testament

(Ezek. 1:26, 10:1), where we find a sapphire throne in the sky for the Deity reminiscent of the quartz-crystal throne in the Australian sky.¹ The Sumerian sky was of lapis lazuli; the Egyptian sky (apparently) of turquoise; and at least one Muslim text suggests an emerald sky. Muslims call the house in the sky “*al Durâh*,” believing it is built on the pattern of the Ka’ba (WENSINCK 1916, 5, 48, 49).

I do not know of what the sky was made in India, west of the Nāga peoples. However, it, too, has been from Vedic times a solid vault or firmament, called *nāka*. The underside of this firmament, called *div* or *vyoman*, forms the sky visible to the phenomenal world, while the upper-side supports the invisible, transcendental world of heaven, called *parama vyoman*, where dwell the immortal deities and numinous entities (SRINIVASAN 1975, 141–42, 175–76). The ancient Indian firmament was solid enough that it, too, perhaps might have been formed of stone or gemstone.

Now, lest we gain the false impression that the “sky of stone” motif is non-European, I should mention that in the geocentric cosmography of Europe the academic notion that planets revolve along the solid surfaces of hollow crystalline globes might well be a subtly reworked vestige of popular sky-of-stone lore. To be sure, the European idea of nested celestial globes ostensibly developed in the academic mind of the Greek geometer Eudoxus of Cnidus (408?–355? BC), as an extension of the spherical cosmos that was postulated a few generations before Eudoxus by Parmenides (b. 515? BC), and it was handed down via Aristotle (384–322 BC) and Ptolemy (ca. 100–165 AD). Yet surely these Greek thinkers were exposed to the old sky-of-gemstone idea in age-old popular lore, and their academic inspirations might very well have had roots of some sort in that lore. In any event, the polyspherical model of Eudoxus suspiciously does resemble the archaic mythic view of the visible sky as the underside of a set of nested domes or layered heavens.

The crystalline spheres persisted in Western thought long enough to saddle the Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe (1546–1601) with theoretical problems in the late sixteenth century. They were not abandoned until after 1576, when Thomas Digges (ca. 1546–1595), the first English astronomer to convert to the new heliocentric cosmology, offered a translation of cosmological passages from Copernicus’ *De Revolutionibus Orbium Cælestium, Libri VI* (Nuremberg 1543), to which he appended an illustration showing the stars not affixed to a confining shell, but strewn out to infinity. Although the influential German theologian, philosopher, and cardinal Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464) had earlier anticipated the concept of a boundless universe, this English illustration represents the final transition in scientific thinking from a closed to an open universe. The mythical shell of the sky at

last had shattered, exposing the physical universe to scientific view. Of course, the European peasantry were slower to be emancipated from the old belief. It is truly amazing how late the influence of the sky-of-stone belief persisted in Europe!

Not only the sky itself, but also things of the sky were thought in numerous cultures to be made of stone or to have something to do with stone. Among the Andamanese, thunder was explained as the rolling of a huge stone around on the lapidary sky, or the heating of that stone (RADCLIFFE-BROWN 1964, 145), lightning being produced by the storm deity hurling a pearl shell down. An Australian explanation was that “rainmen” roll stones around the sky to make thunder but hurl down stone axes to make lightning (ELKIN 1970, 182). Many peoples on the Eurasian continent thought lightning to be a fiery stone hurled from the sky. A view of the Navaho is that the solar orb is of turquoise, as are things associated with it, while the lunar orb, along with lightning and stars, is of rock crystal (REICHARD 1977, 17, 209, 212).

Even at the personal level people in various parts of the world have concluded that the sky is made of a mineral substance. I deal with this topic in another place (METEVELIS 2000), but here is one example. The Greek atomist philosopher Anaxagoras (fl. ca. 500–428 BC) believed a large iron meteorite, the deposit of a fireball that fell near the Aegospotamos river in Thrace about 467 BC, derived from the sun. On the basis of his observations he reasonably, but incorrectly, considered the sun to be a fiery mass of iron bigger than the Peloponnesus. I probably would have arrived at such a conclusion, myself, had I, in his day, seen a sun-rivaling fireball drop a chunk of iron.² Anaxagoras also considered the moon to be a stone wheeling with the æther.

Thumbing through mythology sourcebooks for a variety of cultures, one finds that many a deity, too, had to do with stone, often in some connection with the sky. The Hurrian monster Ullikummi (GÜTERBOCK 1948; FONTENROSE 1959, 211–14) and the Chinese monkey³ deity appearing in the sixteenth-century literary religious legend, *Hsi-yü chi* (YU 1977, 67) were both actually *made* of stone. An old Japanese story has it that a white stone changed into the goddess of Himegoso Temple at Naniwa (ASTON 1956 I, 168). A folktale of the Tinguian of northwestern Luzon has the sun-god manifesting himself as a rolling stone (MACKENZIE 1930, 342). Africa, too. Gu, god of war in Dahomey, was, like the Chinese monkey deity, a solid stone at birth. The Yoruba storm-god Shango bears the epithet Jacuta (“stone thrower”); lightning bolts projected by this deity are spears tipped with stone. The American Pawnee deity Paruxti hurled lightning bolts that reputedly were tipped with a stone (arrowhead, spearhead, or perhaps axe-head) having divine fire inherent within. An ancient Roman representation

of Jupiter is a great aniconic flintstone, while Nordic Thor was reputed to have a flint in his forehead—in both cases the flintstone represents the power to produce the celestial phenomenon, lightning.

The sky was not everywhere and always of stone. The Shoshoni thought of the sky as a dome of ice against which the rainbow (a giant serpent) rubs its back to produce rain or hiemal snow (BOYER 1987, 25). Other explanations of the sky include the Buriat idea of a turning tub of wood, the Yakut idea of several animal skins spread over one another, the Egyptian idea of an overarching goddess or cow, and on and on. Many of these ideas seem to be more in the nature of a metaphor than an engineering description of the sky's structure and substance, for which parallel explanations might be available, as in the Egyptian case where the sky seems to have been of turquoise. In some parts of the world the sky was reputedly made of metal, which of course has natural form in ores.⁴ An example is yet another Egyptian idea, one of a flat iron plate from which stars were suspended; the plate spread over the Nile Valley like a lid over a rectangular box (KRUPP 2000). In later traditions showing a bent for contemplative speculation, the sky-world becomes a many-splendored amalgam of assorted gems and precious metals, as in the New Testament, or late strands in the Judaic tradition (e.g., MANUEL and MANUEL 1971, 96). This amalgam was but an aspect of a more general cosmographic trend in which "...complex cosmologies are associated with large, stable, and sedentary societies" (TUAN 1977, 88). Stone and gemstone, however, were the most common celestial substance around the globe. And the stone sky always appears to have been regarded as an expression of the sacred otherworld—the spirit world.

The Japanese sky-grotto clearly agrees with this widespread pattern of belief concerning the otherworld. Its name, Ame no Iwaya 天岩屋, is written with ideographs that literally mean (if we throw in the unwritten genitive particle) "celestial craggy-stone house."⁵ Indeed, a stone nature seems to inhere in many items associated with the Japanese firmament, as is plain to see in the native universal chronicles of the eighth century, where we find such appellations as "Celestial Rock-Seat" for the throne in the Japanese sky (PHILIPPI 1969, 141), "Celestial Bird-Rock-Camphor-Wood Boat" or "Heavenly Rock-Boat" for the celestial soul-boat that plies that sky (ASTON 1956, vol. I, 20, 110), "Rock-Quiver of Heaven" (ASTON 1956, vol. I, 86), and so forth. We can also discover the stone element in the name of the subcelestial world's first post-mythical sovereign in the sun-line, Emperor Jinmu. His given name was Kamu-Yamato-Iware-Hiko, or "The Prince, Divine-Yamato-Rockling." The element Iware, which I have translated here as "Rockling," appears to indicate, via the stone symbolism, that, like the Chinese monkey deity, he derived from on high, or rather from celestial forbears on his

father's side (cf PHILIPPI 1969, 488–89). Of all the Japanese emperors, he was the closest to the gods.

Of course, stones of Japanese tradition arise often in non-celestial contexts, too. Nonetheless, religious *iwa* never seem to lose their reference to divinity, and the fountainhead of divinity rests in the otherworld, of which one important expression is the sky-world.

One way of verifying that the Japanese sky was thought to be of lapidary substance is to find representations of it in Shinto temples, which are topo-cosms, or representations of the cosmos that are installed on the face of the earth. According to historians of religion (e.g., ELIADE 1965, 6–7), various peoples believed that heaven and earth are mirror images of each other. Evidence in the universal chronicles suggests that this belief also existed in Japan, for instance in the sun-hiding myth assertion that Mount Kagu had a counterpart in heaven. So can we in fact find mirror-image representations of the lapidary sky in Shinto temples? Yes, I think we can: in the bed of *tama-jari* (“spirit-stones,” or “sacred gravel” depending on the interpretation) used as ground-cover and to demarcate and distinguish the sekos or inner sanctuary area of the compound. *Tama-jari* beds are inverted cosmic ceilings.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

So, the “sky made of stone” motif was widespread around our planet. But what significance does the historian of religions or the specialist on historical-folklore find in its wide distribution? This question turns out to be non-trivial. It augments the two questions with which the present essay opened.

As the point of departure, I note that, unless they have survived their original cultural milieu isolated in fragmented and fossilized form, motifs never stand alone. Be they openly expressed in tales or tucked away in ineffable belief, they always have contexts and associations—and many synapses with other motifs. In the present case, I observe that the “sky of stone” motif belongs with another motif: the one of a stone dropping from the sky, which I know from many examples in Europe, China, the Ryūkyū archipelago, Oceania, and the New World.⁶ In flood myths of Mesoamerica and Africa, the entire sky collapsed and came crashing down, crushing people beneath its rubble (e.g., HORCASITAS 1988, 195; KÄHLER-MEYER 1988, 251). And my observation leads me to advance the hypothesis that the “falling stone” motif offers one key to understanding both the significance and the wide presence of the “sky of stone” motif.

As everyone knows, stones do indeed drop from the sky all the time. And chunks of metal as well. Countless numbers of these objects arrive all over the world each year, some of them observed as they fall. Occasionally

they can even be collected in the strewn fields of brimstony meteorites—sometimes while still hot from atmospheric passage! And the ice of the Shoshoni sky? How about hailstones?⁷

NOTES

1. Eastern Australians gave accounts of medicine men receiving samples of this sky-stuff during their spirit journeys to the sky. There, "...they saw the All-Father and received magical substances. These included quartz crystals, which enshrined the colors and essence of the rainbow. In some regions the [quartz crystals] were obtained by medicine-men in pools at the foot of the rainbow, a great snake who linked earth and sky, and who was a source or channel of life-giving power" (ELKIN 1970, 181).

2. In its form as Thompson's Motif A1031.4 ("Fall of sun causes world-fire"), the "Plummeting sun" theme mimics what fireballs actually do in nature, since fireballs reaching earth's surface might give the ground an incendiary thermal pulse. Many of its expressions involve "superfluous suns" (e.g., Motifs A716.1, A720.1, F961.1.3), the "hyperthermal sun" (Motifs A720.2, A727.1, A733.5), or the "ekpyrosis" (world-blaze, Motif A1030). For some examples, see HO 1967, vol. I, 33–48, II: Tales 1–31.

3. The species is the mountain-dwelling (at altitudes of 2,000 to 3,500 meters) "golden monkey," which has long golden fur and presently is rare.

4. The relation between terrestrial ores and metals appears to have been discovered by the fourth millennium BC in West Asia.

The word firmament, according to the late Isaac Asimov, is a Latin translation of the Greek *stereoma*, meaning "solid dome." The Greek word, in turn, is a translation from the Hebrew *raḳia*, meaning "thin metallic sheet" (ASIMOV 1992, 4–5). ASIMOV continues in a vein of humor: "To the...Biblical writers, the sky seemed a small and rather intimate semispherical solid dome that covered the flat Earth, coming down to meet it all around the horizon. Thus, when the Book of Revelation (written about AD 90) speaks of the destruction of Earth and Sky, it says, 'And the stars of heaven fell unto the earth.... And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together' (Revelation 6:13–14). In other words, the thin metal out of which the sky was formed rolled up (spro-o-o-ing) and all the spangly little lights that had covered it fell off" (1992). Note that Saint John used the rolling of a scroll as a poetic simile to suggest the lifting of the walls of the Christian firmament, which was domical and hence vertical at its rim (where it abuts the earth).

In passing, I must note that the incident Asimov refers to is the famous opening of the sixth seal. In Revelation verses 6:12–13 the sun and moon are eclipsed and the stars fall from the sky, meaning that the turning of time stops, liberating the antithesis of time: atemporal eternity. In verse 6:14 heaven and earth are structurally withdrawn into their antithesis, restoring the chaos. The next three verses specify the end of carnal life; verse 6:16 makes this quite clear, for "hiding within rock" is the symbolic equivalent of death to mortal people. Taken together, these verses imply the reversing of the cosmogony, or the obliterating of the cosmos.

5. I have added craggy to the translation of *iwa* attempting to indicate the special nature of the stone. Other writers have observed that stones in religious contexts, in Japan as elsewhere, often assume weird shapes and that they are imbued with mystery. My own study of East Asian materials concludes that rough, rugged, craggy shapes were generally preferred to smoother ones and that in addition to the dimension of mystery there is also a dimension of fantasy. I have a photo of a Western Han dynasty (202 BC–AD 9) censer found at Mancheng,

Hopei (FOREIGN LANGUAGE PRESS 1974: illustration on seventh page from title page leaf). The censer is formed into the shape of a craggy elysion with what appears to be a boat arriving in the foreground. The artisan has fashioned the island's cragged and many-spired stone mountain with an obvious tinge of fantasy. The same aesthetic was still operating during the Sung period (960–1280), evoking the following comment from Jacques GERNET concerning odd-shaped garden stones that represented miniature magical mountains: "This is a particular form of expression of the Chinese aesthetic sense which comes from an ancient magical conception of the art of representation, and which is also to be found in the landscape painting and in the art of landscape gardening" (1962, 118). Cf. the poem describing the "Flower-Fruit Mountain" in YU 1977, 66–67. Whatever it was that set the requirement for weird shapes it certainly harks back to remote antiquity and certainly persisted for long in tradition.

6. In Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* (THOMPSON 1975), the "sky of stone" motif curiously goes unlisted, although the related motif, "sky of solid substance" (Motif A669.2), with which I should put the Biblical firmament, does appear. "Stone falling from sky" is listed in Thompson's *Index* as Motif A1009.3.

In a seeming reverse example of a stone falling from the sky, the Chinese deity Nü Kua (the sister and wife of Fu Hsi; she bears resemblance to the Japanese deity Izana-mi and the Greek deity Hera) smelted a five-colored stone to repair a breach in the vault of sky (BIRRELL 1993, 69–72; WERNER 1922, 225; FERGUSON and ANESAKI 1928, 31–32; MACKENZIE 1923, 151–52, 220). The five colors seem to imply a gemstone-like quality of otherworldliness (MACKENZIE 1923, 163, 187), so I suspect the components of the variegated stone might have been celestial matter to begin with. Note that afterwards Nü Kua created the substance of jade.

7. The literature of culture-history contains some discussion of meteorites engendering ideas about the celestial substance, but the discussion took place in the early part of the twentieth century and now is in sore need of updating. My own hypothesis is advanced independently in METEVELIS 2000.

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