

Myths about giving birth to the land and myths about making islands: the deity who stirred the sea

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Two different types of myth

At the start of the section on ‘the Age of the Gods’ in *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*, there are the myths about Izanagi and Izanami giving birth to the land, and they are associated with Awaji Island. Recent research plausibly suggests that these myths can be broadly divided into two types, the myths of the latter part being myths of giving birth to the land, but the first half are so-called myths of making islands. Following this line of thinking, I would like to distinguish between the two, and consider in particular maritime festivals that reflect in them myths about the making of the islands.

To start with, the essence of myths about giving birth to the land is taken to be tales of the birth of territory under the control of the king (*ōkimi*) through the sexual union of a male and a female, such as the myth of ‘Ōyashimaguni’ (‘Land of Eight Islands’). We learn here of the political intent to justify magically and genealogically the king’s rule over the land. This myth is also said to be an origin myth for the Yasoshima Festival, the ritual held on the shores of Naniwa for appointing the king. Either way, the myths of giving birth to the land bear strong elements of myths about the emperor system.

In contrast to this, the myths about creating the islands preserve traces of folk stories passed down among the *ama* people (divers, fishermen and seafarers) of Awaji Island. Notably, when the deities Izanagi and Izanami stood on the Floating Bridge of Heaven [putatively a rainbow], lowered ‘Ame no Nuboko’ (the Marsh Spear of Heaven) into the sea and stirred the water, ‘they stirred the brine with a rumbling sound (*gōrogōro*), and when they pulled out the spear, the brine dripped from its tip and piled up to form an island’ (*Kojiki*, Kuniumi section), and that was Onokoro Island.

This narration is clearly different from the myths of giving birth to land in which there is the motif of the physiological marriage of a male-female deity couple resulting in parturition. It is one of the myths of land creation by local deities that can be seen in many of the *Fudoki*, such as land pulling, land building, the making of a sandspit (*hashidate*), etc. On the one hand there is land that is ‘born’, and on the other there is that which ‘becomes’. So what kind of beliefs, worship and rituals lay behind this ‘becoming’ type of myth among the *ama* people of Awaji Island?

The theory that this reflects salt manufacture

Hitherto this story has been thought of as originating from the ‘salt boiling’¹ of the *ama* people of Awaji Island. The prototype of the Onogoro Island myth is said to have been the mythification of the salt-making process carried out by the *ama*, and that that was combined with belief in Izanagi and Izanami. For example, it is explained that the froth from stirring seawater in a salt pot is (or resembles) the maelstrom of the tidal whirlpools in the Naruto Strait; the stone rod which prevents the water boiling over in salt-making is the Marsh Spear of Heaven that ‘stirred the brine with a rumbling sound’; and the crystallised salt in the pot denotes Onokoro Island. The theory that this myth reflects the process of salt manufacture has gained support among many archaeologists.

At any event, what is produced by the solidification of the drops of brine in the myth is taken to be an ‘island’ (shoal or sandbank). But this is not the tale of a small world such as that within a pot. Surely it represented a much larger space, i.e., some kind of ritual on the sea, that formed the prototype for this myth. The ceremony on which it centred was no doubt the stirring of the sea with a spear, said to have been first carried out by the deities Izanagi and Izanami.

¹ Translator’s note: salt in ancient Japan was manufactured by boiling off seawater and seaweed in large pots over a fire on or near the beach to concentrate the salt, and allowing excess water to evaporate, leaving salt crystals.

The Ame no Hiboko legend in *Harima no Kuni Fudoki*

What comes to mind here is the legend of Ame no Hiboko in the Ihibo Hill entry in *Ihibo Kōri*, *Harima Fudoki*. Ame no Hiboko is generally thought to have been a deity that an immigrant group based at Izushi in Tajima worshipped.

Historian Ken'ichi YOKOTA [1916–2012] comprehensively analysed the Ame no Hiboko myths, including the tales in *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* about his tribute of sacred jewels; lineage; the story of his lineage and migration; and the tales in *Harima Fudoki* about his strife with local deities over possession of the land. As a result Yokota surmised that the family in Tajima who worshipped him were originally a clan of mariners, and that their influence was exerted in a north-south line from Tajima on the Japan Sea coast, through western Harima, to Awaji Island. It is an interesting inference.

In the passage about Ihibo Hill in *Harima Fudoki*, there is a tale of a territorial dispute between Ame no Hiboko and the local deity Ashihara Shiko no mikoto. 'Ame no Hiboko said, "You are the lord of this land. I want a place to stay." Shiko granted him the sea. Thereupon the foreign deity stirred up the waters of the sea with his sword and ensconced himself upon it. The local deity feared the bold conduct of the foreigner. Wishing to stake his prior claim to the land, he rushed about, and stopped to eat at Ihibo Hill. Rice grains fell from his mouth here, so it was called Ihibo (Rice Grain) Hill.'

According to this, Ame no Hiboko faced down the local deity Ashihara Shiko, and demanded a place to settle. Ashihara Shiko admitted him only as far as 'in the sea'. Ame no Hiboko was able to make himself a place to stay by whipping up the water. When Ashihara Shiko saw that, he was awestruck by the strength of his opponent's divine power and authority. In order to stake his claim to occupation of the land, he ate some rice at Ihibo Hill, but some of it dropped from his mouth there.

There is a difference between a spear and a sword, but here, likewise, the crux of the story is the action of stirring the sea with a weapon. This is the vestige of a myth with more or less the same motif as the myth of the formation of Onokoro Island. It is highly likely that the marine family who worshipped Ame no Hiboko was closely connected with the *ama* people of Awaji Island, and that this was expressed in their religion. We learn that they esteemed weapons such as swords and spears as ritual objects with spiritual power, and that they held some kind of ceremony at sea in which it was believed that when they stirred the sea's waters with those objects, it conjured the formation of some kind of supernatural thing on which it was possible to 'lodge' on the sea itself.

If that were so, what exactly was denoted by the place to 'lodge' that was obtained by the divine power of Ame no Hiboko's sword? That place has been assumed to mean either 'in the water' or 'at the bottom of the sea', on the grounds that in *Harima Fudoki* it says, 'Shiko granted him *in/the midst of the sea*.' However, in several examples in *Fudoki*, 'in the sea' does not necessarily mean literally 'in the water' but rather, *at sea*, *on the sea*, on the surface of the water. In the Inami passage in *Harima Fudoki*, for instance, it says, 'There is a small island *in the sea* to the south of the *Kōri*. It is called Nabitsuma'; and in the Taka Sato passage in *Matsura Kōri* in *Hizen Fudoki*, we see that when King Keikō toured the district and gazed at the sea to the west from his royal lodge, he said, 'There's an island *in the sea*. It is covered in smoke.'

Stirring of the sea with a weapon and the appearance of a sandbar

On this basis it can be inferred that the place where Ame no Hiboko stayed through his mystical power of stirring the sea was not the seabed but something that appeared at the surface of the sea: in short, an 'island.' But this was not an outcropping island or rock, as such. Judging by the fact that in the tale something appeared as a result of stirring the sea that had not been there previously, it was most likely some kind of sandbank that appeared and disappeared with the tides in the tidal flats or a lagoon along the shoreline. The coast of Harima Bight has many tidal flats and sandbanks, such that even nowadays it is famous for the gathering of shellfish there at low tide.

Of course, sand formations along the beaches, such as sandbanks, sandbars and sandspits, are not really formed by the stirring of the sea with a sword or by the distillation of seawater: they are formed by natural phenomena such as outwash of alluvial material from the rivers, the characteristics of the currents along the coast, and by the ebb and flow of the tides. But people in ancient times seem to have regarded such sandbanks and sandbars—that alter daily and repeatedly sink and reappear—as mystical places where deities and spirits 'lodged.'

In the record of deity names in volume 9 of *Engishiki*, it is written that the original name of the deity enshrined at 'Kisaki no Kami Ame no Hiri no Me no Mikoto Shrine' in Awa *Kōri*, Awa Province, was 'Su no Kami' ('the deity of sandbanks'). It is a deity name that confirms that at the time it was thought that 'a deity lodged in the sandbanks at sea'. In many cases sandbanks were worshipped in ancient times for being full of life force.

The ceremony of stirring the sea with a spear

If we return to the story of the making of the island of Awaji, on this basis, it can be seen that Onokoro Island which was formed by the stirring of the sea with a spear denotes a sandbar or sandbank that appeared and disappeared in the tidal flats of Awaji. Judging by the present landscape, likely candidates for the location of a ceremony on the tidal flats are Narugashima in Yura or Kei no Matsubara.

For the *ama* of Awaji Island and the maritime family who worshipped Ame no Hiboko and who had encroached into western Harima, weapons such as spears and swords were ritual objects that conjured a certain spiritual power by means of stirring them in the seawater. They probably believed that the act of thrusting them in the sea and stirring them at high tide promoted the formation of many sandbank islands, and that these gradually turned into *terra firma*, eventually producing land (islands) that were their own home territory. They conducted rites based on that.

The *ama* people of Awaji Island probably rowed out on the tidal flats in small boats at high tide on the day of a spring (king) tide. First they would have conducted a ceremony at the place where they were to lower the weapon from the boat and stir it. Then they would have waited for the appearance of sandbanks at low tide. Then perhaps they would have erected a post or pole on any sandbanks that appeared, and carried out *utagaki* festivities between the men and women there. The myth of making the islands that we see in *Kojiki* is the rationale for the existence of this ceremony, and it would originally have been recited by the *ama* people for elucidating its origins.