

RESEARCH NOTE

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A Striking Tale of Weaving Taboos and Divine Retribution A Reinterpretation of the Asauchiyama Myth in *Harima Fudoki*

THE AIM of this essay is to review previous scholarship on the Asauchiyama 麻打山 myth in the document known as *Harima no Kuni Fudoki* 播磨国風土記 (hereafter *Harima Fudoki*), and to suggest an entirely new interpretation of its meaning. First, I shall outline the context of the recording of this myth, then I shall review the literature and commentaries on it to date; and lastly I shall provide evidence to support my own fresh reading of it. My analysis reveals four new observations.

THE CONTEXT OF THE MYTH

In the early eighth century, shortly after the transfer of the Imperial Court and the capital to the new city of Heijōkyō (later to be known as Nara), an order was issued by a ministry to bureaucrats in the provinces. They were directed to compile records describing the regions under their jurisdiction. We know this because it is recorded in *Shoku Nihongi* 続日本紀 (completed 797 CE) that the government of Empress Genmei issued a decree on the second day of the fifth month of Wadō 6 (713 CE) that each of the provinces (*kuni* 国) should carry out a survey of its territory and report back its findings. It should be remembered that this is only one year after the completion of the *Kojiki* 古事記. The wording of the decree was as follows:

Express in writing the names of the *kōri* and *sato* of the Home Provinces, the seven circuits and the various provinces with pleasant Chinese characters.¹

Record individually the silver, copper, dyestuffs, flora, birds, fauna, fish, insects, etc that are produced within [the various] *kōri*.

Also record whether the soil is fertile or not, and the origins of the names of the mountains, rivers, plains and grasslands.

Also record in history books the old tales and strange events related by the elders.

Report back.

(Translated from AOKI et al., 1989, 196–99)

In other words, the decree concerning the content of the survey covered five items:

- 1) provincial officials should apply auspicious Chinese characters to each place name;
- 2) they were to record all naturally occurring local resources;
- 3) they were to report on the fertility of both arable and potentially arable land;
- 4) they were to record the derivations of the names of physical features such as mountains, rivers, and plains; and
- 5) they were to record the heritage of oral tradition as handed down by the elders.

We do not know how thorough the provincial officials were in carrying out this order. Only one of these documents appears to have survived intact to the present, which is the description of Izumo 出雲 Province. Substantial portions of four others remain: for Hitachi 常陸, Harima 播磨, Bungo 豊後, and Hizen 肥前 Provinces; and there are many fragments (*itsubun* 逸文) of others. These documents later became known collectively as *Fudoki* 風土記.

Harima Province comprised the southern half of present-day Hyōgo Prefecture centered on the city of Himeji, where the document was compiled. The text is dated by scholars to between 713 and 715, making it probably the earliest of the extant *Fudoki*, but the only extant copy of it is the *Harima no Kuni Fudoki Sanjōnishike-bon* 播磨国風土記三條西家本 scroll dating from the late Heian Period (866–1185). This sole-surviving manuscript is estimated to have been at least a fourth-hand copy of the original, with the result that it contains several copyists' errors and omissions (UEGAKI 1986, 71–72).

The ways in which the provincial officials interpreted the order from the central government seems to have differed from province to province; in the case of Harima, the compilers paid least attention to the second of the guidelines (recording natural resources), emphasizing instead the origins of place names through orally transmitted stories (the first, fourth, and fifth of the orders). The result is a document rich in local myth and oral history.

THE ASAUCHIYAMA ENTRY IN HARIMA FUDOKI

The tale of Asauchiyama appears in the entry for Hiroyama-sato 広山里, Ihibo-kōri 揖保郡, translated by AOKI (1997) as follows:

Asauchi Yama. Once upon a time, Marahi of the Izushi no Kimi, a resident of Tajima, lived on this hill. Two women from this man's household died one night while beating hemp. They died with beaten hemp on their chests, giving rise to the name Asauchi Yama (hemp-beating hill). Today the

residents around this hill never beat hemp after nightfall. People say that in Sanuki.... (AOKI 1997, 192)

The location of this hill was possibly present-day Aso 阿曾, Taishi-chō 太子町, about one kilometer south of Hiroyama, but there is no hill there now (AKIMOTO 1958, 293, n. 16).

The man, Marahi 麻良比, appears to be from an Izushi 出石² family that allegedly descended from the legendary immigrant from the Korean Peninsula, Ame-no-Hiboko (AKIMOTO 1958, 293, n. 17). I follow the premise, repeatedly stressed by Lévi-Strauss, that myth never contains superfluous or insignificant information (LÉVI-STRAUSS, 1970, 111; 1973, 121). From this, then, we might infer that the myth itself has been transmitted to Japan by *toraisha* 渡来者, which is to say, migrants to Japan from the Korean peninsula throughout the Yayoi and Kofun Periods (ca. 1000 BCE–650 CE).

Asa means “flax” or “hemp,” probably *Cannabis sativa*. The leaves were soaked to soften them and then pounded with a pestle to extract the fibers for later spinning and weaving. The verb *utsu* basically means “to strike hard with the hand” (NAKADA et al., 1983, 210). Here, therefore, it can be taken to refer to the pounding of the flax, and this is the sense in which Japanese commentators consistently interpret it. AOKI (1997) follows this orthodox interpretation, as noted above.

There are various theories about the meaning of this strange and enigmatic tale. Akimoto suggests that the women’s deaths are the resentful deed of the spirit of a previous settler (AKIMOTO 1958, 293, n. 18). Such an interpretation is, however, without foundation.

Yoshino makes connections between Marahi and metal smithing, and therefore takes this to be a cautionary tale related to taboos of smiths: the women died an untimely death due to the wrath of the moon deity for not heeding the custom of staying indoors on the night of the full moon and abstaining from work (YOSHINO 1969, 109, n. 85). In other words, he regards this tale as involving a taboo against working at night, and makes a connection with the moon.

UEGAKI (1990; 1997) agrees that the newcomers from Izushi, probably of Korean descent, brought superior technology. In his view, by working at night they broke with local custom and thereby incurred the wrath of the local deity (UEGAKI 1990, 75; 1997, 56–57, n. 10).

Yet another theory propounded for why their “pounding” of flax at night was taboo is the suggestion that the fibers were to be reserved for weaving into cloth to be made into sacred vestments used as *yorishiro* 依代 (an object used as a medium for calling down a deity) in shamanic rites (UWAI 1975, 86–87; SHIDA 1981, 69). Here we see the introduction of a connection with weaving. It is noteworthy that in the *Hizen no Kuni Fudoki* 肥前国風土記 entry for

Himekoso-sato 姫社郷, a malevolent female spirit is wreaking divine retribution (*tatari* 祟り) against humans (AKIMOTO 1958, 383; UEGAKI 1997, 315; AOKI 1997, 254). She is pacified by the offering of a device that functioned like a niddy-noddy, stick reel, or skeiner (*tatari* 絡罫: a small wooden frame with pegs in it for winding yarn into skeins), and a warp-controller cord (*kutsubiki* 馱機). Apart from any other significance, this is no doubt a pun on the word *tatari*—and this *Harima Fudoki* entry might obscurely be so too. I should perhaps point out that in ancient Japan, as in other oral cultures, puns were not necessarily mere verbal toys for joking and entertainment: as in the case of *tatari*, this verbal device was associated with *kotodama* 言霊, the “spirit of speech,” and word plays could have deadly as well as amusing connotations.³

Nevertheless, as I noted above, no elements in myths are irrelevant. None of the foregoing theories explains why the women died with the flax on their chests. I therefore propose a new interpretation. While the basic meaning of *utsu* 打つ is “to strike hard with the hand,” there are many other definitions extrapolated from that, including “to forcefully insert a needle, etc; to thrust in” (NAKADA et al., 1983, definition 1.17, 209). Weaving was done during the Yayoi period, and probably often later, by means of a body loom, whereby the weaver used the feet as a loom frame on which to stretch the warp threads, and a shuttle was used for interweaving the weft threads (ŌSAKA FURITSU YAYOI HAKUBUTSUKAN, ed., 1991, 24). I have been unable to confirm any similar usages, but *utsu* here may refer to the action of “striking” the shuttle across the body. In other words, I believe it means that the women in the tale were using body looms and were actually weaving cloth rather than pounding leaves to extract fibers. Moreover, flax pounding would have been unlikely to result in the flax resting on their chests at any point in the process, even if the pounders died, as the workers leaned forward over the flax while holding the pestle. On the other hand, in weaving with a body loom, their semi-supine posture was such that they would obviously have died with the flax (yarn/cloth) on their chests. If my hypothesis is correct, their activity is therefore not pounding flax at night but weaving it at night. This is a more likely scenario here, especially in the context.

AOKI (1997) rightly notes the play on *asa* meaning “flax” and “morning;” thus her interpretation is “beating [hemp] in the morning” (AOKI 1997, 192, n. 81). However, she appears to miss the play on *uchi*, which also means “being punished by a deity” (NAKADA et al., 1983, definition 11.2, 210). Thus *asauchi* could also be interpreted as “divine retribution in the morning,” which certainly makes sense in the context of this tale. In short, the women are found dead in the morning as divine retribution for having broken a taboo about weaving during the night.

This appears to be the vestige of an ancient myth. It is instructive to look beyond Japan for the origins of this taboo and for corroborative evidence that

my interpretation is more plausible than those previously presented. Threads and cords are almost universal symbols of connection with deities and the divine (ELIADE 1965, 160–88). Spinning and weaving were crafts taught to adolescent females in diverse cultures, especially during periods of seclusion in huts for menstruation.

It is the Moon that spins the Time, she who “weaves” the lives of humanity: the goddesses of fate are spinners. Creation or re-creation of the World, the spinning of Time and of destiny, on the one hand; and, on the other, nocturnal work, feminine work that must be done far from the light of the sun and in secret, almost in hiding.... In certain places—as in Japan—one can still discern the mythological memory of lasting tension, and even a conflict, between the secret societies of young women and the societies of men, the *Männerbünde*. The men and their gods, during the night, attack the spinsters, destroy their work, break their shuttles and weaving tackle.... We must underline the ritual character of this occupation; spinning is very dangerous, and that is why it can only be done in special houses and only during certain periods and before certain hours.... In short there is a secret link between the feminine initiation, spinning and sexuality.

(ELIADE 1960, 211–12; see also 1961, 112–15)

Segawa confirms that until the end of the nineteenth century menstruating women were secluded in special huts or at least separate rooms at night throughout Japan: “Elder ones spent the time spinning thread or darning clothes and young girls played cards” (SEGAWA 1963, 245).

For a woman to weave using a body loom, she must maintain the tension on the warp and weft threads by sitting with her legs stretched forward and slightly splayed. She would thus have been at risk of indecently exposing herself. This was so even after a more sophisticated loom was introduced later in the Yayoi period with a wooden end crosspiece (TAWARAMOTO-CHŌ KYŌIKU IINKAI 2004, 35). It was perhaps therefore for socio-sexual practicality that weaving was an activity from which males were excluded. And it may be partly for this reason that folk tales with a similar theme often contain the motif of some kind of “Peeping Tom” who defies the ban on looking at the woman while she works at night.

What exactly was the nature of the taboo in this Asauchiyama tale? The *Fudoki* does not explicitly tell us. As noted above, previous scholarship has tended toward the supposition that the women should not have been working at night. However, my analysis has revealed that, on the contrary, it was the norm for women to spin or weave at night, especially while menstruating. A more likely explanation in my view, then, is that the women had broken the “universal” taboo of prohibiting entry to men during the night while they worked and/

or menstruated. To an audience in ancient times, this implication would have been so obvious as to need no recounting. That the local people (here, meaning women) “now never weave at night” is as a result of their shock at the deaths, not as a result of the taboo. The implication is that they were put off working at night, but we can assume that they continued to spend periods in seclusion from other members of the community.

There are many such myths and folktales in Japan about spinners or weavers working at night; in most cases they are females; and in most cases there are prohibitions against males spying upon them while they weave (cf. *Hitachi no Kuni Fudoki* entry for Ōta-sato, Kuji-kōri [AKIMOTO 1958, 84–85; UEGAKI 1997, 411; AOKI 1997, 70]; HATTO 1961; MILLER 1984, 1987a, 1987b). The tale that was recorded most contemporaneously with the Asauchiyama myth, and is also arguably the most sexually explicit, is that which appears in Book One Chapter Sixteen of *Kojiki*. The raging storm god Susanowo commits aggression against his sister, the sun goddess Amaterasu. Among his outrageous acts, he breaks a hole in the roof of her “sacred weaving hall” (*imi hataya* 齋機屋)⁴ and drops from above a piebald colt that he has skinned alive backwards. The maiden weaving below is so shocked that she jabs her genitals with the shuttle and, as in the Asauchiyama myth, dies (PHILIPPI 1968, 80; see also MILLER 1984, 1987a, 1987b). This tale becomes more explicit if we interpret her activity as weaving with a body loom.

Hatto’s analysis of “Swan-Maiden” myths, that are clearly related to Japanese myths of spinning and weaving women, posits that they emanate originally from northern and central Siberia (HATTO 1961, 340). This certainly accords with the now well-attested view that Yayoi period immigrants to Japan were descended from Altaic peoples in central Asia. In short, the Asauchiyama myth is likely a version of a more ancient weaving myth derived from Siberia and taken to Japan in the Yayoi period via the Korean peninsula.

Finally, the last section of the Asauchiyama myth makes little sense in the sole extant manuscript scroll. Possibly a line of text—about twenty *kanji*—has been omitted by a copyist (AKIMOTO 1958, 292, n. 9; 293, n. 19). UEGAKI (1997) argues that since there is no proof either way whether this is a lacuna, it should stand as: “The local people [also] say they were from Sanuki Province” (UEGAKI 1990, 70).

CONCLUSION

On the basis of the above analysis, my revised translation of this myth is as follows:

Asauchiyama [Hill]: Long ago, Izushi-no-kimi Marahi, a man from Tajima Province, lived in a house on this mountain. When two women in his family wove flax one night, they died [just like that], with the flax on their chests.

Hence it is called Asauchiyama. Even now the people of the neighborhood never weave flax at night. The local people say Sanuki Province.

This analysis has revealed four main points that have hitherto gone unremarked. First is the interpretation of the word *utsu* as meaning “weaving” (with a body loom), rather than “pounding” flax for extracting fiber. Second, there is the richness of the play on words in this passage. The place name Asauchi is a pun on *asa* meaning both “flax” and “morning,” and it is a pun on *uchi*, meaning “passing a shuttle, weaving,” and “divine retribution.” As I have observed elsewhere, in the oral tradition of ancient Japan (as in other oral cultures), words did not necessarily have to be uttered explicitly for audiences to make mental word associations of punning (PALMER 2000). In this myth, therefore, it is also quite possible that listeners would have caught the unspoken allusion to *tatari*, meaning both “niddy-noddy” and “divine revenge.” Thirdly, I have inferred that the taboo was not against *working at night*, as some previous commentators have assumed, but against *being observed by men* while they worked. Fourthly, despite the local setting and adaptation of this tale, it derives from a long and more widespread oral tradition. As may be inferred both from the name of the protagonist and from the fact that body looms were introduced by *toraiisha*, this myth—perhaps of north central Asian provenance—may have been taken to Harima Province in Japan by immigrants from the Korean peninsula during the Yayoi Period, probably several centuries before its recording in *Harima Fudoki*.

NOTES

1. Local government was conducted at several layers: *Kuni* 国 were provinces; these were divided into smaller units called *kōri* 郡 (the forerunners of later *gun* 郡), and these in turn were divided into smaller administrative districts called *sato* 里 or 郷. *Sato* originally comprised a group of approximately thirty or fifty households that would often have contained one or more natural hamlets, *mura* 村. The Home Provinces were the five provinces near the capital (Gokinai 五畿内). The seven “circuits” were regional divisions of the country based on the main roads that ran through them.

2. Written in the manuscript with phonogram notation as 伊頭志.

3. A vestige of this kind of ancient oral taboo remains in English in the expression “Speak of the devil [and he will appear].”

4. *Imi* in old Japanese is closer in meaning to *tapu*—the Polynesian word from which English derives “taboo”—than to PHILIPPI’s (1968) translation of “sacred.” It contains a sense of spiritual awe at the extremes: either that something or someone is exceptionally blessed or that it/he/she is spiritually polluted. Sometimes the two concepts combine, as here: menstruation is awesome because of the associated pollution by blood but it is also awesome as a sign of blessed fertility.

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