

The Underlying Mentality Seen in Japanese Mythology: Some Considerations in Light of Izumo's Particularities

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1. Introduction

Research into Japanese mythology continues even today to produce ever greater numbers of works in all fields and from various academic perspectives, making any attempt to grasp this work in its entirety a difficult one.

One such approach that is well represented here at this comparative mythology conference and invoked as a methodology for analyzing Japanese myths is the trifunctional hypothesis offered Georges Dumézil, developed based on his studies of myths in Indo-European languages.

The first of the functions—that of sovereignty, with its biphasic relationship between magico-religious sovereignty (sacred authority) and legal-administrative authority (secular authority)—presents an effective tool for analyzing kingship in ancient Japan (including the authority of local chiefs). However, while classification may help clarify our general understanding of matters, there always remains the possibility that some elements may escape our attention.

We should also bear in mind that the collection of myths that emerged in the Japanese archipelago and are available to us in written form are—whether we are talking about historical, typological, or motific relationships—the selective, conscious product of the historical activities of humans in the archipelago. We must accept as historical fact the idea that the mythological context in which these were compiled and recorded as Japan's myths reflects a conceptual framework constrained by the mentality that provides the foundation for the people of the island chain where those myths formed and developed.

My starting point for what follows does not come from comparative mythology. Rather, I would like to present a basic understanding of Japanese myths as the product of historical activities in the Japanese archipelago, considering them in light of the mentality of the times in which those works formed and developed. For even as we acknowledge the accomplishments of comparative mythology in analyzing lineages and motifs, when it comes to the myth formation—as is the case with culture generally when cultural exchange occurs—the subjective mentality of those who take up the myths can be expected to mediate how they are received either immediately or after the fact.

2. Numerical Thinking as an Example of the Mentality of Relatedness

To understand this underlying mentality, consider how numbers were voiced in ancient Japanese, a point raised by the noted historian of ancient Eurasia Kurakichi Shiratori (1865-1942) (see Shiratori, *Genealogy of Japanese language, especially regarding numerals*, published posthumously in 1950).

Exhibit 1

1 = *hito*, 2 = *futa*, 3 = *mi*, 4 = *yo*, 5 = *itsu*, 6 = *mu*, 7 = *nana*, 8 = *ya*, 9 = *koko*, 10 = *towo*

(Note that *h*-vowel and *f*-vowel, and *ts*-vowel and *t*-vowel, respectively, are phonologically related in Japanese.)

Japanese is characterized by many examples of words that share similar meanings being generated with shared root consonants and changing vowel sounds. For example, consider this set of words formed by changing the vowels attached to the root consonants of “h” and “r”: *harai* = purification, *haru* = spring, *hare* = fine weather, *hiru* = to thresh (thrash), *hire* = a kind of magico-religious sash, *furu* = to wave, and *haramu* = to become pregnant. Viewed in terms of underlying mentality, we see their meanings share in common a sense that suggests bringing about a “desired situation” such as the revival of life force, resurrection, vitality, deliverance, fertility, and so forth.

With respect to numbers, Shiratori points out that, excepting 7 and 9, the numbers from 1 to 10 are in paired relationships, expressed through changes in vowel sounds. That is, 1 (*hito*) x 2 = 2 (*futa*); 3 (*mi*) x 2 = 6 (*mu*), 4 (*yo*) x 2 = 8 (*ya*); and 5 (*itsu*) x 2 = 10 (*towo*).

Such examples illustrate the ideational background—that is, the mentality of ancient Japanese—the meanings of these words embodied. The ancient Japanese apparently had a sense of value that was based on plurality (including duality) rather than singularity. This suggests a mentality based on communal concepts, and a conceptual framework that sees everything as related and allows for no “absolute aloneness.”

If we accept the symbolic meaning of numbers and further accept that such symbolic meanings are not just limited to linguistic cultural phenomena but also are shared by various aspects of Japanese culture, then it is reasonable to assume that a similar “relatedness” mentality may have played a role in the formation and development of Japanese mythology.

Since we will have the chance to observe Shintō rituals during this symposium, let us explore this through the common Shintō worship behavior of hand clapping. At Izumo Shrine where I serve, we clap our hands four times in commonplace rituals, but

eight times for special rites. While it is not clear when these patterns were established, it is thought that in ancient Japan clapping hands eight times constituted one basic clapping set while a set of four claps or less was regarded as an abbreviated form.

At issue here is the number eight. In the numerical series from one to ten, ten is the largest number with the highest value. It signifies “completion” and completion also carries the meaning of “finality.” However, if we see the mentality of ancient Japanese as expressed in their myths as one that longs for foment and development without end, then we can surmise that “10” with its sense of completion and finality is the kind of number they would avoid choosing. The next largest doubled number after 10 is 8. The gap between this “incomplete” 8 on its way toward the “completed” 10 establishes the concept of infinity; stopping at 8 symbolizes that limitlessness. The expression “8 million gods” is used when referring to the existence of gods, who are created in the infinite, in Japanese mythology for that reason.

Accordingly, if clapping hands is a symbolic act through which we honor and worship gods in a Shintō context and express thanks, welcome, or excitement in other contexts, then the visible act of clapping hands eight times itself also carries an invisible symbolic meaning that suggests there is no limit to whatever honor, worship, thanks, and the like being expressed. Viewed in this light, ancient Japanese numbers may be seen as not just simple markers or signs, but also as highly symbolic entities that connote the value of relatedness.

3. Pantheon of Heavenly Gods and Earthly Gods: A Pairing of Concentric Circles

This mentality stressing relatedness as symbolized by Japanese numbers can also be seen in how gods are described and understood in Japanese mythology.

The gods that appear in Japanese myths presented in *Kojiki* (CE 712), *Nihon-shoki* (CE 720), and other works over the course of the tales tend to be assigned to one of two categories—either that of heavenly god (*amatsu-kami*) or that of earthly god (*kunitsu-kami*). (One could also discuss these particular terms in light of the debates over kingly myths in historical scholarship or over the ancestor myths of prominent clans, but it is not my intention to do so here.) The purpose of classifying the gods into these two groups is not to suggest the *oppositional* pairing of an absolutist black and white framework pitting good against evil, but rather a *complementary* pairing of the two in a mutually supportive relationship where each group is valued for its relative merits.

Several such complementary pairings of heavenly and earthly gods and goddesses may be seen in Japanese mythology, including Susano-o and Kushi-inada-bime, Mihotsu-bime and Omono-nushi (i.e., Okuninushi), and

Hono-ninigi and Konohana-sakuya-bime. Regardless of the various different interpretations that these “marriage myths” may allow, they symbolize a relatively harmonious pairing of divine characteristics through the “act of bonding” that marriage represents and arise out of the expectation that a valued complementary pairing will form, as in an actual marriage.

The following passages, though not a myth, offer a glimpse of the mentality on this point around the time when the myths to be found in *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* were written down.

Exhibit 2

Passage 1, dated the 3rd month, CE 659, during the reign of Empress Kōgyoku [later Saimei]:

“In this month, Abe no Omi was sent in command of 180 ships on an expedition against the Yemishi country. Abe no Omi assembled a selection of the Yemishi of the two districts of Akita and Nushiro to the number of 241 persons with 31 of their captives, 112 Yemishi of the district of Tsugaru with 4 captives, and 20 Yemishi of Ifurisahe, in one place, feasted them, and gave them presents.

“Accordingly he made an offering to the Gods of that Land of a boat and silk stuffs of various colors. . . .”

W.G. Aston, trans., *Nihongi: Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest Times to A.D. 697* (Tokyo: Tuttle, 1972), p. 260.

Passage 2, dated to the 10th month of the same year:

“On the 30th [envoys sent to China] had an audience of the [T’ang] Emperor, who inquired of them, saying: ‘Is the Empress of your country in good health?’ The Envoys answered respectfully: ‘Her virtue is in harmony with Heaven and Earth, and she therefore naturally enjoys good health.’ [. . .] The Emperor inquired of them, saying: ‘Is there peace within your country or not?’ The Envoys answered respectfully, saying: ‘The Government accords with Heaven and Earth, and therefore there is nothing untoward among the multitude.’”

Nihongi, p. 261.

The first passage describes how the victorious side of the empress—a descendant of the heavenly gods—acknowledged the local earthly gods of the defeated Ainu and paid them honor. Such an act, also described in another ancient chronicle (*Hitachi fudoki*), would be inconceivable if an absolutely monotheistic logic obtained.

The second passage concerns a Japanese embassy sent to the court of the T'ang Chinese emperor. Their statements on the political situation in Japan suggest there was a shared consciousness or mentality that saw the cosmos of “peace” (*heian*) in Japan as having been formed not by the heavenly deities alone, but rather out of a harmonious relationship rooted in the heavenly and earthly gods existing in parallel.

These examples provide direct historical evidence regarding how the heavenly and earthly gods were seen as interrelated in the mentality of the time. I see in this the perception of a value among the peoples of the Japanese archipelago that held the cosmos to have been formed by the heavenly deities in cooperation and harmony with their counterparts, the earthly deities, rather than on their own.

Evidence from Izumo supports this interpretation. From the late 7th century through the 10th century, whenever a new emperor was seated or a new chief priest installed at Izumo Shrine, the shrine's chief priest—known as the *Izumo kokuzo* (“Izumo country maker”], held to be a descendent of Okuninushi)—would conduct a ritual at the imperial palace that centered on the recitation before the emperor of a sacred mythic history of the Izumo region called the *Izumo-kokuzo-kamu-yogoto* as a form of valedictory address.

Consider in this light a passage from the *Engishiki* (927), a compendium of rules and procedures (**Exhibit 3: not available in English translation.**). Note the reference to Asuka—at one time the seat of the emerging Yamato government and the site of the imperial palace—in what today is Nara Prefecture. The passage indicates that the Japanese expected the “peace” the emperor and the imperial palace represented would be preserved not by the heavenly gods but rather the outsider earthly gods of Izumo. This suggests the two groups of gods must be understood not as standing in binary opposition, but rather as paired up in a mutually complementary framework. Shrines in the Asuka region continue to perform the aforementioned ritual reading to this day.

The 7th century during the reign of Empress Kōgyoku (cf. Exhibit 2) was a crucial period in the history of Izumo Shrine, as Exhibit 4 suggests.

Exhibit 4

“In this year, the Kuni no Miyakko of Idzumo was commanded to repair the shrine of the Itsuki God.” (*Nihongi*, p. 263.)

The passage tells of the reconstruction of the Izumo shrine, dedicated to the earthly god Okuninushi. The question here is why it was felt necessary to record the building of a shrine dedicated to the earthly gods of Izumo in a chronicle produced by a central government associated with the heavenly gods. Though any number of reasons suggest themselves including Izumo's being the foremost shrine associated with the

earthly deities, I wish to stress here the powerful impact of the mentality illustrated by the previous exhibits suggesting a belief that peace and security could not be guaranteed by internal powers alone and required supplemental guarantees from outside to be achieved.

This passage suggests much of the history of the earthly gods found in the Izumo myths was already well established by the time the *Kojiki* and *Nihon-shoki* were compiled. At minimum, ideas regarding complementarity between the heavenly and earthly gods appear to have deeply colored and been reflected in Japanese mythology. This idea did not emerge in the 7th century, but rather fomented over time out of the environment in which people on the islands lived; we should appropriately see it as having formed the basis for the mentality that sees the gods of the Japanese islands as living complementarily to one another.

This mentality appears to have emerged throughout the Japanese islands and was held in common by everyone, not just people in court and educated circles.

What, then, was the nature of the worldly relationship between the heavenly and earthly gods? The crucial work of compiling the *Kojiki* and *Nihon-shoki* took place in the late 7th century just as Japan, under the influence of Tang China, was taking its first steps toward becoming a full-fledged nation governed by the rule of law. As is well known, under the *ritsuryō* (“penal and civil codes”) state that resulted the heavenly and earthly gods were organized into a pyramid-like structure with the sun goddess Amaterasu at the apex governing the rest. Yet, while the creation of the *ritsuryō* state was contemporaneous with the two chronicles’ compilation, I understand the actual historical conditions that shaped perception of the gods in Japan as a separate matter. That corresponds more closely to the latter part of the 8th century and later, which as is well known was the period when the annual calendar of rituals performed at major shrines throughout the country to pray for good harvest took shape. Those rituals were one means for expressing that pyramid structure in a visible form.

Furthermore, the contexts in which the kingly myths are presented in *Kojiki* and in *Nihon shoki* differ. In particular, the myths related in the main *Nihon shoki* text are rather indifferent toward the earthly gods compared with those in the *Kojiki*; they stress the pyramid structure dominated by the heavenly gods with Amaterasu on top. However, the *Nihon shoki* also includes variant tales alongside its main text that present other versions of stories in that text such as *Kojiki*-style legends stressing myths related to the earthly god Okuninushi among others.

The issue here is why the *Nihon shoki* was not composed of this “main text” alone. The very fact that it includes these variant tales that contrast with the main text demonstrates the relatedness of the myths in that “main text.” We may surmise that there were strains in creating the pyramid-like structure as the intentional artifact envisioned by the main text. The situation may be understood in theological terms as a concrete instance of polytheistic relatedness.

Such examples have led me to believe the ancient Japanese perceived the divine world as a place where the heavenly and earthly gods were not arrayed in a pyramid-like structure but rather comprised divine communities arranged in concentric circles, and furthermore they saw the gods as unique divinities who stood in contrast to one another.

This interpretation allows us to see Amaterasu of Ise Shrine as the preeminent deity standing at the center of a community of heavenly deities arranged in concentric circles around her, and Okuninushi of Izumo Shrine standing in a similar position with respect to the earthly deities, based on the divine relationships and mythical structures of Japanese mythology as recorded in *Kojiki*, *Nihon shoki*, and the like. This also supports the view that the myths related to Okuninushi occupy an overwhelming position quantitatively in Japanese mythology.

The being who linked this mutually related pair of deities was Susano-o-no-mikoto, who descended from the high heavenly plain of Takamigahara to the earthly world, and went on to the netherworld of Ne-no-kuni. The location, act, and existence of “linking” or “joining” is indispensable for the significance and value it grants to mutuality as mutuality. Such a meaningful background may be surmised from the tales associated with Susano-o. The netherworld of Ne-no-kuni Susano-o is said to rule in *Kojiki* is connected to the earthly world, while the sea plain he was ordered to rule joins Takamigahara and the earthly world. Susano-o might be called a god of the second function under a Dumezilian interpretation, but from my point of view we should stress his “linking” or “joining” functions. The place Susano-o occupies is a pivotal one.

4. Foundation and Cession Myths: Avoiding Perfection and Completion

The most important of the myths in *Nihon shoki* and *Kojiki* related to Izumo’s Okuninushi are the foundation and cession myths. (These passages and all that follow from the *Nihon-shoki* come from the “Age of the Gods” section of the chronicles.)

Exhibit 5

Passage 1:

“Before this Oho-na-mochi no Mikoto (i.e., Okuninushi) spake to Sukuna-bikona no Mikoto, and said: ‘May we not say that the country which we have made is well made?’ Sukuna-bikona no Mikoto answered and said: ‘In some parts it is complete and in others it is incomplete.’ This conversation had doubtless a mysterious purport.

“Thereafter Sukuna-bikona no Mikoto went to Cape Kumano, and eventually proceeded to the Everlasting Land.

“Another version is that he went to the island of Aha, where he climbed up a millet-stalk, and was thereupon jerked off, and went to the Everlasting Land.

“After this, wherever there was in the land a part which was imperfect, Oho-na-mochi no Kami visited it by himself, and succeeded in repairing it.”(*Nihongi*, p. 60)

Passage 2:

“Now Taka-mi-musubi no Mikoto sent the two Gods back again, and commanded Oho-na-mochi no Mikoto, saying: ‘Having now heard what thou hast said, I find that there is profound reasons in thy words. Therefore again I issue my commands to thee more circumstantially, that is to say: Let the public matters which thou hast charge of be conducted by my grandchild, and do thou rule divine affairs. Moreover, if thou wilt dwell in the palace of Ama no Hi-sumi, I will now build it for thee. I will take a thousand fathom rope of the (bark of the) paper mulberry, and tie it in 180 knots. As to the dimensions of the building of the palace, its pillars shall be high and massy, and its planks broad and thick. I will also cultivate thy rice-fields for thee, and, for thy provision when thou goest to take pleasure on the sea, I will make for thee a high bridge, a floating bridge, and also a Heavenly bird-boat. Moreover, on the Tranquil River of Heaven I will make a flying-bridge. I will also make for thee white shields of 180 seams, and Ame no Ho-hi no Mikoto shall be the president of the festivals in thy honor.’”(*Nihongi*, p. 80)

Passage 3:

“The Great God Ohonamuchi, when he walked along Mt. Nagaye on his return from his campaign to pacify Yakuchi in the land of Koshi, said, ‘The land that I have opened up and governed shall hereafter be entrusted to the Imperial Grandson for his peaceful administration. As to the land of Izumo, however, it alone shall be kept as my territory in which I will dwell forever. I will protect it like a precious jewel. The green hills and mountains shall surround Izumo, and I shall protect it. Therefore, the place is called Mori 文里, meaning ‘to defend.’ [The graphs Mori 母里 were adopted in 726.]”

From the Community of Mori section, District of Ou chapter, in Michiko Yamaguchi Aoki, trans. and intro., *Izumo Fudoki* (Tokyo: Sophia University, 1971), p. 83.

The first passage contains a scene from the foundation myth in which the gods Okuninushi and Sukuna-bikona discuss the creation of the country. Sukuna-bikona says that the country is complete in parts and incomplete in others and then departs. The book's editor then comments: "This conversation doubtless had a mysterious purport." The comment suggests the editor recognized there was meaning and value in that incompleteness.

Parenthetically, this discussion brings to mind the painting "Picture of Eight Clouds" on the ceiling of the main building of Izumo Shrine. Only seven clouds are depicted in the painting. Six are about the same size, while the remaining one is almost twice as large. Six are painted facing east while one points west. The clouds are of various colors, but the large cloud also contains a patch rendered in a gray color not found in any of the others. Lastly, while the main building is built in what is known as the *taisha* fashion, the inner shrine where the god resides is built in different style.

All of this may be understood as the intentional avoidance of perfection, completeness, absoluteness, or uniformity, and as an attempt to force different things to coexist. The painting and the structure visually manifest the ideas of "imperfection," "incompleteness," "non-absolute," and "non-uniform." They provide evidence that the relation-oriented mindset of ancient times this notion of incompleteness represents lives on in the undercurrents of history and tradition. Our discussion on avoiding the number 10 lends further weight to this thesis on the value of "imperfection" to the ancient Japanese, showing how such limits express eternity and the creation of the cosmos. In my view, they directly observed from a myriad of phenomena in everyday life that many elements were "finite." They accepted the "incompleteness" of these elements as something "good," and by joining those finite elements together tried to give form to and make manifest the eternal and the cosmos.

This stress on finite elements being joined together was expressed particularly through religious observances. I will discuss these observances later, but for now I note that this is why Sukuna-bikona no mikoto is so important as he is the "connective being" who bridges the respective communal worlds of the heavenly and earthly gods.

The second of the *Nihon shoki* passages contains the Cession Myth. This story tells of the division of responsibilities, leaving the imperial descendents of the heavenly god in charge of public affairs while the earthly god Okuninushi was charged with divine affairs (it also tells of the building of Izumo Shrine). The role assigned to the imperial line is clearly premised by the existing state of affairs in the real world. We pause here to note how the myth is related in *Izumo fudoki*. While one might expect the myth in that collection to be unrelated, we see in fact that the myths in *Izumo fudoki* seem to be in accord with those at the core of *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*.

Passage 3 illustrates that the basic elements of this pattern are apparent in the Cession Myth.

However, while the passage acknowledges the basic intent of *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* in stressing that the descendents of the heavenly gods should be charged with public affairs, the *Izumo fudoki* version also declares that Okuninushi (“Ohonamuchi”) has established the “green hills and mountain” as boundaries of Izumo that he alone has pacified. In short, he has not given up Izumo, at least not in the heavenly realm. This occurs nowhere else in the *Izumo fudoki*, and also reminds us that nowhere in this collection is there any discussion of place names as having originated as a result of an “imperial tour” through that land.

Consider also the fact that the stories of Japan’s origins say they were birthed by the heavenly deities Izanagi and Izanami, not that Okuninushi created them. Okuninushi was in a sense an “adoptive parent,” one who returned the “child” he had raised at the request of the descendents of the “birth parents.”

Assuming we are correct in saying that the Cession Myth in *Izumo fudoki* reflects this core mythical context, then that context must have been well known in Izumo as well. Be that as it may, Izumo is nonnegotiable because it is the true home grounds of Okuninushi and will be defended to the last as the home base of the earthly gods. The passage also reflects a desire in Izumo to avoid a one-dimensional state of completedness under absolutist divine control. One surmises from the existence of shrines in the Asuka region where the mythic Izumo history is recited that the center acknowledged this situation as well.

Thus the pairings we find among the myths about founding and ceding the country (or not) illustrate the mutually dependent ties between the heavenly and earthly deities. The mythical logic of linkages between them all is also supported by the myths of the earthly deities’ Izumo Shrine. The Izumo belief that all of Japan’s gods come together one month out of the year (*Kamiarizuki*, corresponding to the 10th month in Japan’s old calendar) is grounded in this logic as well.

5. The Infinite Generated from the Finite: Rituals of “Connection”

Thus, we can see that Japanese mythology was formed in a mental world that sees the relatedness of and finite in everything. The marriage myth of the heavenly deity Ninigi and the earthly deity Konohana most clearly illustrates this. This myth, classified as a “banana-type” myth on the origin of death in comparative mythology, expresses the finite in individual life.

Exhibit 6

“Therefore Iha-naga-hime was greatly ashamed, and cursed him, saying: ‘If the August Grandchild (i.e., Ninigi) had taken me and not rejected me, the children born to him would have been long-lived, and

would have endured for ever like the massy rocks. But seeing that he has not done so, but has married my younger sister (i.e., Konohana sakuya hime) only, the children born to him will surely be decadent like the flowers of the trees.’

“One version is: ‘Iha-naga-hime, in her shame and resentment, spat and wept. She said: ‘The race of visible mankind shall change swiftly like the flowers of the trees, and shall decay and pass away.’ This is the reason why the life of man is so short.” (*Nihongi*, pp. 84-85.)

In this myth, the finiteness of individual life is expressed as the choice between a stone and a flower or tree. The idea of stone as a symbol of the infinite is found throughout the world. However, the contrast of that with the finiteness of flowers or trees brings to mind how Japanese shrines are made of wood, as opposed to, say, the Greek Parthenon made of marble. For rather than through the use of such an “infinite” material, a shrine’s continuity comes through repeatedly constructing exact reproductions of these same buildings, made of finite, perishable materials though they may be. Creating “infinity” through the chain of renewals of that which is finite carries the same significance of the notion of keeping something alive. *Sengū*, the periodic rebuilding and rededication of new shrine buildings that is one of the unique characteristics of Shintō, is an expression of this.

The idea can also be seen in the *hitsugi-shinji* ritual, “the divine rite of passing on the flame,” performed by the *Izumo-kokuzo* as a rite of succession. The regalia the priest wears are tools used for starting fires (the *hikiri-kine*, or fire bow and drill, and the *hikiri-usu*, or fireboard) handed down from generation to generation. The ritual entails the lighting of a (holy, sacred) flame with these implements—which no one else is permitted to use—and sharing with the deities a meal cooked with that flame. The ritual expresses the spirit (*hi*) of the priest’s predecessors being passed down symbolically through the flame (also *hi*; though written with different characters, the two words were related in ancient Japanese). The *Izumo-kokuzo*, we should recall, is held to be a descendent of Okuninushi, and the ritual therefore finds a parallel in the enthronement rites of the imperial line (the *Daijō-sai*).

This ritual is not the only succession rite for the *Izumo-kokuzo*. Another rite is performed annually, and the priest also conducts a more personal rite every day; each is meant to renew the spirit handed down to him from his predecessors. By repeatedly refreshing that spirit, the priest likewise refreshes his own qualities and spirituality as the master of the shrine. The *Daijō-sai* and other regular events associated with the imperial line parallel this pattern.

The *sengū* and *Izumo kokuzo* rituals thus stand as “connection” rites meant to turn the finite into the infinite. They arise out of a fundamental mentality that sees the relatedness of all things.

6. Conclusion

Discussions of Japanese mythology in comparative or political terms aside, it must be acknowledged that Japanese ideas of the divine took shape in a context structured by a mental framework shaped the idea of relatedness through history.

I believe this relation-oriented mindset underpinning Japan's polytheistic mythology gains new importance in a world where people now speak of "the limits of development" and "environmental crisis." It sounds the alarm over statements that place too high a value on a single human being, such as "one person's life is more weighty than that of the entire earth" or "energy that goes easy on the earth" heard in today's Japan, where people basically approve of those who are successful in modern industrialized society.

The choices we have faced throughout human history have not changed: the earth holds absolute power over humanity's ability to survive, and we humans must seek its forbearance. Human life depends on the earth's existence, but the earth's existence is not wholly dependent on the presence of humanity.

Today we need to consider with open minds the polytheistic mythological worlds created not just in Japan but elsewhere as well—worlds that grew from mindsets conceived of by long-gone communal societies and nurtured over the ages that saw nature as something to be maintained and preserved for eternity. Societies that saw themselves not as "killers of forests" but rather as owing their lives to them. Comparative mythology has a role to play in the efforts to reconstruct such societies and their ways of thinking, which can have a positive impact on how we live today as well as those who are to come.

* 千家和比古「日本神話にみる基層心意——“出雲”の姿相・位相を踏まえて——」
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