

Cataclysm and Divine Scapegoats in the Japanese Imaginary World :

The example of Susanoo-no-mikoto and Kashima-Daimyôjin.

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« Mauvais à l'intérieur de la communauté, le sacré redevient bon quand il repasse à l'extérieur. Le langage du pur sacré préserve ce qu'il y a d'essentiel dans le mythique et le religieux ; il arrache sa violence pour la posséder en entité séparée ».

René GIRARD – *La violence et le sacré*.

In the Japanese ancient chronicles of the Kojiki and Nihonshoki¹ it is said that Susanoo-no-mikoto was born from the nose of the deity Izanagi-no-mikoto². Unlike his sister, the sun goddess, Amaterasu-ômikami (born from her father's left eye), Susanoo was depicted as impetuous and rebellious. Blessed with great courage and extraordinary physical capacities, the young warlike deity commits, however, unforgivable offenses to the divine order and among other things, throws the carcass of a horse from a roof into his sister's palace³ for which he is banished from Heaven.

Thus Susanoo comes down to Izumo, not far from the *Hi* river, in a place called *Tori-kami*. On the way to the nearest village, Susanoo encounters an old couple and a young woman weeping. When the deity asks the reason of their sadness, they explain that the young maid, Kushinada-hime⁴, is about to be given as a sacrifice to the eight-headed dragon Yamata-no-Orochi. Falling immediately in love with the young virgin,

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¹ ASTON W. G., 1972, *Nihongi : Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest Times to A.D. 697*, Rutland, C.E. Tuttle Co., 407 pages

² He also destroys rice fields, forces horses to lay down during the harvest season and defecates while attending a ceremony. This resulting to Amaterasu retreating in a cave turning day into night.

CHAMBERLAIN Basil Hall, *The Kojiki : records of ancient matters*, (1936) 1982, Rutland, Vt., C.E. Tuttle Co., 445 pages, Vol. 1, chap. XVI

³ Ibid., I, Chap XVI, 7.

⁴ 奇稲田姫

Susanoo decides to marry her and to slay the monster who symbolizes destruction, pain, and sorrow. He transforms Kushinada-hime into a comb and asks the old couple to brew alcohol into eight barrels and display them where the sacrifice was supposed to take place. Later, the creature finding no victim to devour, turns to the barrels filled with alcohol and empties them. Taking advantage of the situation, Susanoo decapitates the eight-headed beast and in the dismembered tail, the hero finds the legendary sword *kusanagi no tsurugi*⁵ which will later become one of the three regalia of the Japanese imperial power⁶.

This story which was often underestimated was however the object of some interpretations. In his own translation of the Japanese chronicles, Nobutsuna Saigô, suggested that Susanoo's confrontation with the dragon represented man's conquest over Nature⁷. Nevertheless, the study will focus on the theory which argues the fight between Yamata-no-orochi and Susanoo is an act of expiation. By slaying the creature, the deity washes away the sins of his past allowing him to return to Heaven and be forgiven⁸ and no matter the divergences between those interpretations, both actually demonstrate the heroic character of Susanoo. In fact, the exile from Heaven to Earth could be considered as Susanoo's transition from god to human, a new state which could enable him to hold the role of a hero.

Thus, within the Japanese imaginary world, the character of Susanoo and his adventure would represent a keystone and a trigger event, building the future heroic representations of the Japanese culture and collective unconscious; a confrontation that would be echoed from past to present.

On November 11th 1855, a devastating earthquake hit Edo⁹. The epicenter near the center of the city caused incommensurable damages. The number of victims was estimated at 7000 to 10000 people. The material damages were also very severe since the seism and the fires caused by it destroyed 14000 buildings. Among the large number of casualties and persistent threats of new blazes, the fact that the catastrophic event occurred in the capital city of Japan which exacerbated the psychological trauma of this disaster.

Consciously or not, only one question stuck in everybody's mind: Who is to blame?

Theories of cosmic interventions within societies exist in many philosophies such as Confucianism or the *tentô*¹⁰ thought, however, the general idea that divine forces could intervene in order to correct human mistakes was not clear in Japan until the late 18th century. At the beginning of the 19th century, the

⁵ 草薙の剣

⁶ CHAMBERLAIN Basil Hall, *The Kojiki : records of ancient matters*, I, Chap XIX, 16.

⁷ Ô no Yasumaro 太安万侶 et SAIGÔ Nobutsuna 西郷信綱 (Trad.), 1947, *古事記 Kojiki* (Record of ancient matters), Tokyo, 日本評論社 Nihon Hyoronsha, 294 pages.

⁸ In his translation, the author explain that before his exile, the other deities ask Susanoo to cut off his beard, remove his finger and toenails (*Kojiki* 1-17-25)

PHILIPPI Donald L., 1969, *Kojiki* (Record of ancient matters), Princeton, Princeton University Press, 655 pages.

⁹ Edo 江戸 (« Door of the Bay », former name of the actual Tôkyô, used from 1180 to 1868).

¹⁰ 天道 (Syncretic system based on religious and philosophical ideas).

Japanese government consisted of a military organization claiming a total hegemony facing the emperor who only held religious and cultural power. While the gap between moral and politics was widening, storms, bad harvests, famines and epidemics became the cement of a « divine wrath ».

Established in the first year of emperor Jimmu¹¹, the Kashima¹² shrine has been always considered as a kind of portal, a passage between the human world and the realm of gods. The eponymous warlike deity¹³ is enshrined and worshipped there along with a monolithic stone believed to maintain the world in place. Thus, within the imaginary world of Japan, this *kaname-ishi*¹⁴ served as a bulwark of defense against the evil forces of Nature. Moreover, as earthquakes were associated for a long time to the wriggling of a malicious giant catfish, it appears logical that popular belief found in this god and his *foundation stone* the hero they needed to fight this scourge. It is just after the Edo earthquake and especially on a new kind of print called *namazu-e*¹⁵ that one can witness the first representations of Kashima fighting the monster. In the figure 1 for example, we can see the deity bringing the catfish to a standstill by placing the foundation stone on the creature's head. Furthermore, on the front-left corner there are four smaller anthropomorphic catfish kneeling in front of the god begging him for his mercy.



(Fig. 1) あら嬉し大安日にゆり直す
« Let us rejoice that order is restored »

¹¹ 神武天皇 First emperor of Japan (660 – 585 BC)

¹² 鹿島 (Ibaraki prefecture, east of Tōkyō).

¹³ Kashima daimyōjin 鹿島大明神

¹⁴ 要石 *Kaname ishi* (foundation stone, keystone).

¹⁵ 鯰絵 *Namazu-e* (catfish print)

Later, similar motifs would appear in images like the one above but would diverge on certain points; in fact, figure 2 called *jishin o-mamori*¹⁶, represents a kind of talisman to avoid new tremors which was a first draft of the catfish prints production created a few days after the disaster. In the upper-left corner, right above the name of Kashima¹⁷, the Ursa Major constellation, considered as a sign of luck at the time¹⁸ is represented. Nevertheless, what seems to be the most important change is that the rock has been replaced by a sword which seems to have the same effect on the giant fish. However, it focuses attention on the powerful and invincible nature of the deity who appears to subdue the *namazu* very easily in figure 3¹⁹. Moreover, if we look more carefully at the catfish himself in figure 2 the monster does not have a fishtail anymore but a dragon tail instead.



(Fig. 2) 地震御守
« Protection against Earthquake »



(Fig. 3) 鯰を押える鹿島大明神
« The catfish subdued by the god Kashima »

Thus, beyond this warlike nature which surrounds Kashima-Daimyôjin, it is obvious that this symbolic pattern of the benevolent god crushing the Beast echoes directly to the myth of the deity Susanoo slaying

¹⁶ 地震御守 *Jishin o-mamori* (Protection against Earthquake).

¹⁷ Written in a very specific font associated to Taoism

MIYATA Noboru 宮田登 et TAKADA Mamoru 高田衛監修, 1995, *鯰絵震災と日本文化 Namazu-e : shinsai to Nihon bunka* (Namazu-e : earthquakes and japanese culture), Tokyo, 理文出版 Ribun Shuppan, 369 pages.

¹⁸ ÔMORI Takashi 大森隆史, 1997, *不老不死を目指す先導祝術の世界 furofushi wo mezasu sendô jutsu no sekai* (The world of the esoteric technics to reach youth and immortality), Tôkyô, 道教の本 Dôkyô no Hon, 398 pages. pp. 164-171.

¹⁹ The character seems indeed to use only one of his hands to subdue the fish.

the dragon Yamata-no-orochi. While Amaterasu-ômikami²⁰ was still undeniably considered as a very powerful deity anchored within the collective unconscious of the imperial figure, these *namazu-e* prints relaunched one of the most ancient myths of Japan in the popular iconography using several strong themes: the divine savior, the frightening monster (dragon like) and even the sword²¹. As Susanoo-no-mikoto in the Kojiki chronicles, it is Kashima's turn to be seen as powerful deity close to the terrestrial realm, bound to mankind, saving mortals.



(Fig. 4) 鯰と要石
« The Catfish and the Foundation Stone »

Among these widespread heroic images, there were also some prints showing a discontentment and disgust towards the deities in charge of controlling disasters. In figure 4, fire is raging and the earth is

²⁰ 天照大神 Amaterasu-ômikami (Great deity illuminating heaven) Main deity of the shintô beliefs, symbolizing the sun and light.

FREDERIC Louis, *Le Japon : dictionnaire et civilisation (Japan : Dictionnaire and Civilization)*, 1996, Paris, R. Laffont, 1419 pages

²¹ We can see clearly a reference to the the legendary sword Murakumo no tsurugi (叢雲劍) found by Susanoo-no-mikoto in the tail of Yamato no Orochi :

«[...] So when he cut the middle tail, the edge of his august sword broke. Then, thinking it strange, he thrust into and split the flesh with the point of his august sword and looked, and there was a great sword within. So he took this great sword, and, thinking it a strange thing, he respectfully informed the Heaven-Shining-Great-August deity. This is the Herb-Quelling Great Sword. ».

CHAMBERLAIN Basil Hall, *The Kojiki : records of ancient matters*, (1936) 1982, Rutland, Vt., C.E. Tuttle Co., 445 pages, Vol. 1, chap. XVIII

shaking around a dreadful catfish²². Resting on the foundation stone, the god Ebisu²³ seems to be dozing off. Meanwhile, above him, Kashima rides in great haste back to town²⁴. On the *namazu's* head, the city of Edo is burning because of these incompetent gods who were not able to prevent the disaster. Sometimes, this disgust towards Kashima manifested itself by « erasing » the deity and replacing him by the sun goddess, Amaterasu. Before the earthquake, everything seemed to indicate that Edo's inhabitants were showing little interest for the Imperial family tutelary deity who was definitely more famous in Kyôto. However, in some *Namazu-e*, we can witness the first hints about the Sun goddess' increase in popularity among the Japanese imaginary world; in fact, figure 5 is a very good example of this popular will to see Amaterasu as a divine savior²⁵.



(Fig. 5) 鯰を蹴散らす伊勢神宮神馬
 « The Catfish is knocked over by the Ise Shrine White Horse »

The white horse of Ise Shrine, carrying a *nusa*²⁶ on his back, chases away two catfish with his hooves. Horsehairs which were supposed to be the ultimate protection against evil are floating around (represented

²² MIYATA Noboru 宮田登 et TAKADA Mamoru 高田衛監修, 鯰絵震災と日本文化 *Namazu-e : shinsai to Nihon bunka* (ref 44)

²³ 恵比寿 Popular deity, considered as a god of luck and prosperity, worshipped by fishermen and shopkeepers.

FREDERIC Louis, *Le Japon : dictionnaire et civilisation* (*Japan : Dictionary and Civilization*), 1419 pages

²⁴ Ebisu hold the role of *rusuigami* (留守神), a secondary deity supposed to replace an other deity during his or her absence. This task seems to find its roots in the belief that major deities had to leave every year in October to travel and gather at Izumo. This period was called *kannazuki* (神流月) or *kaminazuki* (神な月) : « The month without gods ».

For more details about this matter, see :

OUWEHAND Cornelius, 1964, *Namazu-e and Their Theme : An Interpretative Approach to Some Aspects of Japanese Folk Religion*, Pays-Bas, Ed. Leiden, 270 pages. pp 16, 82-85.

²⁵ MIYATA Noboru 宮田登 et TAKADA Mamoru 高田衛監修, 鯰絵震災と日本文化 *Namazu-e : shinsai to Nihon bunka* pp. 257-258 (Ref. 30).

²⁶ 幣 Also called *gohei* (御幣) or *Shimenawa* (標縄) symbolizing the sacred nature of a place and the presence of a deity.

by the thin strings surrounding the animal)²⁷. In the background, Kashima, who is wearing his typical samurai armor attempts to rein in the horse.

Other prints show Kashima playing a subordinate role next to Amaterasu or in an antagonist relationship with her. In figure 6 for example²⁸, Amaterasu, Kashima, and Hachiman²⁹ are riding above the city of Edo in ruins. Turning her back to Kashima, the sun goddess commands the catfish « to leave at once³⁰ » and distributes horsehair over the city. Kashima, assisting her, holds the foundation stone above his head which appears pointless while in the air. Although Kashima is submitting his savior function to Amaterasu, allowing her to act as the main character, the image depicts both gods with approximately the same size, riding at the same height. That is, the sun goddess is still part of group, in the center but not leading for now.



(Fig 6) 天駆ける八幡宮、太神宮、鹿島大明神
 «Amaterasu, Hachiman and Kashima galloping in the sky»

In figure 7, Amaterasu called « The Imperial Ancestor of Great Japan » illuminates the sky and rides above the character of Kashima, now smaller, assisting the sun goddess in distributing the horsehair with four other deities³¹. In this image, Kashima has been clearly demoted and the text surrounding the characters depicts Japan as a « Divine Country » whose inhabitants are « lucky to have Amaterasu and the emperor to worry for their wellbeing³² ».

²⁷ NOGUCHI Takehiko 野口武彦, 2004, *安政江戸地震 Ansei Edo Jishin* (The earthquake of Ansei during the Edo period), Tokyo, Chikuma shobō 筑摩書房, 283 pages, p 194.

²⁸ MIYATA Noboru 宮田登 et TAKADA Mamoru 高田衛監修, *鯰絵震災と日本文化 Namazu-e : shinsai to Nihon bunka* (Ref. 29).

²⁹ 八幡 Popular deity of wellbeing connected to Buddhism.

³⁰ Text surrounding the three characters.

³¹ MIYATA Noboru 宮田登 et TAKADA Mamoru 高田衛監修, *鯰絵震災と日本文化 Namazu-e : shinsai to Nihon bunka* pp 258-260, (Ref. 32)

³² Ibid., Page 258-260.



(Fig. 7) 大日本帝祖大明神靈驗万民を助け給ふ之図
«Distribution over the great Japan»

Thus, people from Edo apparently seemed to trust Kashima to subdue the giant catfish and to balance the cosmic forces. However, even in the least explicit *namazu-e* criticisms towards the warlike deity were obvious. Then, it appeared evident that within the collective unconscious Kashima was considered responsible for the disaster because he failed to fulfill his duty. For this reason, in front of this imperfect deity, fallible like a human would, it seems that iconographic response was to replace Kashima by the almighty Amaterasu³³. In reality, because of the growing influence of the *namazu-e*, this confrontation between the warlike hero and the sun goddess within the imaginary world of Japan seems to have reproduced the conflicts which were going on between the Tokugawa shogunate et the imperial household. People scarified Kashima, a strong and benevolent god, and used him as a scapegoat for two reasons. First, to give a reason to this unexpected and dreadful disaster and secondly to recuperate from the trauma this disaster had caused. Thus, even if it is indirectly, by blaming this divine scapegoat, the catfish prints born from the earthquake contributed undoubtedly to the overthrow of the military regime and to the restoration of the Meiji emperor in 1886.

³³ This also recalls a part of the myth in the Kojiki chronicles where Amaterasu is clearly favoured over her brother Susanoo : At this time His Augustness the Male-Who-Invites greatly rejoiced, saying: "I, begetting child after child, have at my final begetting gotten three illustrious children." With which words, at once jingly taking off and shaking the jewel-string forming his august necklace, he bestowed it on Amaterasu, the Heaven-Shining-Great-August deity, saying: "Do Thine Augustness rule the Plain-of-High-Heaven." With this charge he bestowed it on her [...] Next he said to His-Brave-Swift-Impetuous-Male-Augustness: "Do Thine Augustness rule the Sea-Plain. [...] So while the other two deities each assumed his and her rule according to the command with which her father had deigned to charge them, the Storm-God, His-Swift-Impetuous-Male-Augustness, did not assume the rule of the dominion with which he had been charged, but cried and wept till his eight-grasp beard reached to the pit of his stomach".

CHAMBERLAIN Basil Hall, *The Kojiki : records of ancient matters*, (1936) 1982, Rutland, Vt., C.E. Tuttle Co., 445 pages, vol. 1, chap. XI, XII

In the aftermath of March 11th 2011, in utter destitution and pain, grief stricken Japan began slowly to recover from the natural disaster and its nuclear collateral damages. In view of the situation, politicians and CEOs³⁴ quickly became the main targets of anger and fierce criticism forcing most of them into resignation. In the middle of this social turmoil, the voice of the emperor was heard, first on television, then among people helping and comforting the victims³⁵. The Japanese who, for a long time, relegated him to a lesser political symbol, the sovereign was indeed seen from a grander perspective.

Perhaps, this event is an echo of the 1855 disaster? An echo of the ancient myths where gods were sacrificed, used as scapegoats, allowing human to keep on living. Whatever the answer is, this recurrence of the ancient sacred time where gods became human because of their failures allowed us to better understand the fact that humans facing death and destruction are searching for hope. A search which apparently leads them towards something above their own condition, something « greater » beyond human understanding to be able to move forward and rebuild.

³⁴ Especially Prime Minister Naoto Kan and TEPCO C.E.O Masataka Shimizu.

See, *Prime Minister visits Fukushima*, Journal Ouest-France, August 5th 2011.

³⁵ 天皇皇后両陛下、福島入り東北の被災地歴訪3カ所目 (« *The emperor and empress visit three destroyed place in Fukushima during the north-east earthquake* ») in Asahi Shinbun 朝日新聞2011年5月11日 (May 11th 2011),