

NEW LIFE IN THE OLDEST EMPIRE

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New life in the oldest empire by Charles F. Sweet

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CHARLES F. SWEET

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Quis nescit primam esse historiae legem, ne quid falsi dicere audeat? Deinde ne quid veri non audeat? Ne quae suspicio gratiae sit in scribendo? Ne quae simultatis? Haec scilicet fundamenta nota sunt omnibus.

CICERO: DE ORATORE, II. 15.

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CHAPTER I

THE Japanese think that no one can comprehend Japanese history or the Japanese mind unless he, as a basis, perceives the inseparability of the Land and the Imperial House. They think that their very mythology is different in nature from the mythology of all other lands in that it ascribes every important phase to the Imperial Ancestors and to the Fatherland.

It is likely that there is no such fundamental difference in these mythological concepts as they suppose, but it may be wise to begin by accepting them provisionally, as our view-point.

The special thing upon which they insist is that the *Land* and the *Goddess of the Sun* were both born from the same parents, *Izanagi* and *Izanami*, the two self-generating, creative deities. An integral element of the same basic concept lies in their belief in the distinction in *rank* (not in being or nature) between the sovereign and the subject,—a distinction which they hold to be necessary and inalterable.

The earliest of their dated writings, the *Kojiki* (Book of Ancient Things) which appeared in 712

A. D., contains a recital of their national traditions from the origin of the world up to the year 628, passing through all conceivable shadings between pure myth and actual history. The *Kojiki* is quite artless in style and affords, by its childlike candour as well as by its unconsciousness of criticism and its freedom from shame, a revelation of the Japanese mind at a primitive or very early stage; which is an undesigned proof of its own honesty. The conceptions which issue here reach to all parts of Japanese literature and are still full of life and vigour.

The *Kojiki* is the foundation of the religion and history of Japan. It is also a treasury of myths and legends and of primitive emotions and ideas upon which literary artists have drawn so freely that allusions to it in poetry, essays, and history, as well as in artistic representations, abound wherever we look.

I give some extracts from the *Kojiki*, taken substantially from Mr. B. H. Chamberlain's version, published in the Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan.

When Heaven and Earth began divinities were formed (or formed themselves — began to be) in the Plain of High Heaven, whose names were *Lord of the August-Heaven-Centre*, then the god *High-August-Producer*, then the god *Divine Producer*. These three divinities, all self-formed, hid their persons (disappeared, or, perhaps, died). Afterwards, when the earth, still young and like floating oil and moving itself like a sea-nettle, from a thing which rose like a reed-

bud, divinities were born whose names were *Charming-Shoot-from-the-Reed-Elder-Prince*, and the *God-Who-keeps-himself-eternally-in-Heaven*. The five divinities thus spoken of, are the *Heavenly Separate Divinities*. [After them came seven more divine generations, including the god *Izanami*,—Female-God-who-invites, and *Izanagi*,—Male-God-who-invites. These two are the creative agents of the heavenly divinities. The recital goes on:]

Up there all the heavenly divinities speaking augustly to the two divinities *Izanagi* and *Izanami*, ordered them to create, engender, and consolidate this moving earth, and bestowed upon them a heavenly precious Lance, deigning to entrust this charge to them. Thus the two divinities standing upon the Floating Bridge of Heaven (the rainbow) and groping in the salt sea with the precious Lance and moving it about in the water *koworo-koworo* (as if to make a coagulation) and then lifting up the Lance, the drops of water which fell from the Lance-head heaped themselves together and became an island *Onogoro* (self-coagulated). *Izanagi* and *Izanami* descended to this island and were united in marriage. They brought forth a child whom they abandoned, putting it into a boat made of reeds, and an island of foam. Having learned from the heavenly gods that if the generations were not good it was because the woman had spoken first in the marriage ceremony, they began the work of creation under more favourable conditions and engendered the Island of the Road of Foam, and then the other islands (of the Japanese group of islands).

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In the same way they give birth to nature-gods,—the gods of Water, of Fuel, and of Fire. Unluckily, the god of Fire, the latest born of Izanami, burnt his mother so severely that she died. Izanagi in despair crept around the body of his wife and from his tears was born another god. After burying his wife, Izanagi in his rage tore in pieces the god of Fire, from whose blood and scattered members came still other gods. At last, in order that he might see his sister-wife, he went down into *Yomi tsu Kuni* (Land of Shades).

When Izanami came to the threshold to meet him, the august Izanagi spoke to her, saying: "O my august charming young sister, the countries which you and I were making are not yet finished,—deign to return to me!" To which august Izanami responded: "It is sad that you did not come sooner; *I have eaten in Hell!* Nevertheless, O my august and charming elder brother, I am touched by your coming hither and I desire to return. I will take counsel with the divinities of Hell. *Gaze not upon me!*" With these words she re-entered the abode of the dead, and Izanagi waited for her return until his patience wore out, and then, tearing out one tooth from the comb which kept his hair in a knot, he kindled it for a torch and entered the region of the dead, where he found her body undergoing corruption. At her head was *Great-Thunder*; in her breast was *Fire-Thunder*; in her body was *Black-Thunder*; beneath her was *Thunder-peal*; in her right hand was *Earth-Thunder*; by her left foot was *Rumbling-Thunder*; by her right