

# Giving birth to Fire: The Japanese cosmogonic myth of Izanami and Kagutsuchi in transcontinental perspective

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper reflects on the Japanese cosmogonic myth of the primal goddess Izanami giving birth to the Fire God Kagutsuchi. In the process she is said to sustain such burns that she dies and becomes a, or the, death goddess – an unexpected development, for at this point she has already given birth to islands, mountains, trees, etc. without noticeable difficulty. I will outline six different registers whose interplay governs the myth, and of these I will only explore one: that of a transformation cycle of elements. Here, like in Izanami's plight, destruction and production are the two basic relations. This cosmological model surfaces, for instance, in a late, streamlined form in late 1st mill. BCE China: as the *yi jing* cosmological system of changes based on the 64 combinations of the eight trigrams two taken at a time; and as the five-element cosmology of Taoism in general – but with convincing parallels – which I have explored in detail elsewhere – in sub-Saharan Africa, Ancient Egypt, India, Ancient Greece – Empedocles and other Pre-Socratics – and North America). Fire, of course, is among one of the basic elements or positions, and so are water, earth, air, often also metal and wood. Without wishing to reduce the complexity and literary grandeur of the myth of Izanami giving birth to Kagutsuchi / Fire to just one of the varieties of the transformative cycle of elements, my argument explores what rich insights this perspective yet may offer. The final part of the paper explores to what extent the myth under study may be illuminated from the perspective of the comparative study of flood myths worldwide.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a greatly revised and shortened version of my paper presented at the Third Annual Meeting of the International Association for Comparative Mythology, Kokugakuin Shinto University, Tokyo, Japan, 23-24 May 2009 (van Binsbergen 2009). I have reduced to a few paragraphs the extensive discussion of the elemental transformative cycle, which originally ran into dozens of pages; this transcontinental comparative argument is meanwhile being published elsewhere (van Binsbergen in press [2010] ). I am indebted to Michael Witzel and to the Harvard Department of Sanskrit and Indian Studies, Harvard University, Cambridge Ma, USA, for inviting me to participate in the conference and for making available most of the necessary funds; to my Japanese hosts Professors Inoue Nobutaka, Hirafuji Kikuko and Kazuo Matsumura, for the charm with which they have accommodated the original, highly deficient version of my argument; to the Japanese colleagues, and moreover to Michael Witzel, Steve Farmer, Klaus Antoni, Nick Allen, Václav Blažek, Patricia Saegerman, Peter van der Mede, Ineke Suijkerbuijk, Hannah van Binsbergen, and Arthur Eaton for illuminating discussions on the topic of this paper; and to the Nkoya people of Zambia, for introducing me, over the decades, to a clan system that in many ways was an enigma also to themselves. With the present argument I am, as usual, venturing into fields for which I have no specialist training nor authority. While I hope that the specialist feedback I have sought will prove to have somewhat reduced the extent of my blundering, I am solely responsible for such errors as my argument will no doubt continue to contain, and I can only hope that the exciting long-range vistas it opens up somewhat compensate for these shortcomings.

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Synopsis of the myth of Giving Birth to Kagutsuchi / Fire

Point of departure of my argument is the myth of the Japanese goddess Izanami (イザナミ, also given as 伊弉冉尊 or 伊邪那美命, meaning ‘she who invites’) giving birth to the Fire God Kagutsuchi (カグツチ), also called Kagutsuchi no kami (迦具土の神), Hinokagutsuchi (火之迦具土), or Ho musuhi (火産靈). Izanami is the sister and spouse of Izanagi (イザナギ, recorded in Japanese classic histories (early 8<sup>th</sup> c. CE) as 伊弉諾 – in the *Kojiki* 古事記 – or as 伊邪那岐 – in the *Nihon Shoki* or *Nihongi* –, also written as 伊弉諾尊, meaning ‘he who invites’). These two creation deities of the eighth generation have, geomythically, produced the islands, sea, rivers, mountains, trees, herbs, of the Japanese archipelago. Although many instances of procreation in the early phase of the ‘Age of the Gods’ are indirect and non-genital – with numerous clusters of gods springing from implements, acts, conditions etc.), the earliest geomythical phase of this process is implied to have taken place in the normal manner of human birth, from Izanami’s womb and via the natural birth channel (which marks her as a great Mother Goddess). Yet, amazingly enough, considering the diverse nature of this offspring, no obstetric problems presented themselves (apart from some highly significant miscreants to which we shall return) until Izanami gives birth to Kagutsuchi / Fire. Then (at least, according to the *Kojiki*, and one alternative version cited in the *Nihongi*) her genitals are lethally burnt, and she retreats to Yomi 黄泉 / ‘Yellow Springs’, the land of death, where her dealings with Izanagi constitute a dramatic and moving parallel to the Orpheus and Eurydice theme from Ancient Graeco-Roman mythology.<sup>2</sup> Fleeing from Yomi and pursued by Izanami and the eight Thunder gods that have sprung from her putrefying body, Izanagi erects a number of boundaries between Yomi and the land of the living, separates from Izanami who thus become the Death goddess, kills Kagutsuchi / Fire, and engages in elaborate purificatory lustration, – in the process all the while generating new clusters of gods, including the two protagonists of the next mythical episode: the Ocean/rainstorm god Susanowo スサノオ, and his sister the Sun goddess Amaterasu-ōmikami (天照大神 / 天照大御神) or Ōhiru-menomuchi-no-kami (大日靈貴神).

## 1.2. Central question and disclaimer

My argument seeks to answer the central question as to *why, after giving birth to islands, mountains, rivers and trees for which the human womb and the human natural birth channel are equally unequipped, giving birth to Kagutsuchi / Fire should be so utterly disruptive, both to Izanami and her sibling spouse, and to the narrative sequence of the canonical Japanese cosmogony?*

I am an outsider to Japanese studies, have no access to modern scholarship in Japanese, and therefore my answer to this question can only be tentative and partial; my

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Ovidius, *Metamorphoses* 10; Apollodorus, *Bibliothēkē / The Library*, 1.3.2; Pausanias, *Descriptio Graeciae*, 9.30; Vergilius, *Georgica*, 4.453.

answer must necessarily rely on a comparative theoretical framework, some of the groundwork for which I explored in previous meetings of the Harvard Round Table and of the International Association of Comparative Mythology (van Binsbergen 2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2010a, 2010b; van Binsbergen with Isaak 2008). What informs the present argument is a view – perhaps somewhat unusual in circles of Japanologists and mythologists – of intensive transcontinental interactions since at least the Neolithic, if not much earlier. The extensive genetic, archaeological, linguistic, comparative ethnographic and comparative mythological empirical, methodological and theoretical background for such a view (indebted to the work of Martin Bernal and Michael Witzel)<sup>3</sup> I have extensively discussed elsewhere; they cannot be set out in any detail here for limitations of space, but they include the following empirically-supported theoretical perspectives (van Binsbergen 2010c, 2011a; van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011):

- the Out-of-Africa' hypothesis, according to which Anatomically Modern Humans (the sub-species to which all humans living today belong) emerged in sub-Saharan Africa c. 200,000 year (200 ka) ago (BP, 'Before Present'), and subsequently spread to other continents in the Out-of-Africa Exodus, 80-60 ka BP;
- Fleming's and Starostin's \*Borean hypothesis, claiming that nearly all languages spoken today retain, in their reconstructed proto-forms, substantial traces of a hypothetical, reconstructed language arbitrarily named 'Borean' and supposed to have been spoken in Central Asia in the Upper Palaeolithic;
- my hypothesis of a succession, in the Eurasiatic Upper Palaeolithic, of two rival cosmogonies: one hinging on the Separation of Water and Land (hence: Flood myths as a cataclysmic mythical return to the pre-cosmogonic state), largely supplanted by one hinging on the Separation of Heaven and Earth;
- my Pelasgian Hypothesis, according to which a significant package of cultural traits and achievements (arbitrarily and admittedly confusingly labelled 'Pelasgian') emerged in Neolithic West Asia, spread West towards the Mediterranean during the Bronze Age (largely on the wings of horse-riding and chariot technology), and from the Late Bronze Age spread on in all four directions along what I have called the *cross-model*, including east across the Eurasian Steppe, ramifying all the way to South, South East and East Asia, and South into sub-Saharan Africa (both across the Sahara and along the Indian Ocean).

Let one, in the present context highly pertinent, example suffice to indicate the orientation of the overambitious *tour de force* of which the present argument consists – highlighting the kind of transcontinental continuities this theoretical baggage allows us to perceive and take seriously. My first professional identity is that of an historicising Africanist anthropologist, and much of my research has been in and on the Central African country of Zambia. In a Western Zambia myth (van Binsbergen 2010c) the creator god Nyambi (with widespread West African counterparts and near-namesakes), when still walking on earth, feels threatened by the First Man, and flees to heaven. In the latter endeavour Nyambi is attended to not only by a spider (which has remained Nyambi's implicit animal identity) but also by a wagtail bird (*Motacilla capensis*). This opens up an interesting comparative angle. In the main Japanese creation myth virtually the same bird (*Motacilla grandis*) showed the first creatures

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<sup>3</sup> Bernal 1987; Witzel 2001, 2010; van Binsbergen 2011; van Binsbergen & Venbrux 2010.

Izanami and Izanagi how to engage in sexual intercourse by the suggestive, incessant up and down movements of its tail, after which it is named ‘wagtail’ (*Kojiki*, cf. Philippi 1968). It is as if the wagtail in the Western Zambia story signals that, implicitly, we are in the presence of the invention of sexuality – as if not the First Man’s impudent attitude towards Nyambi, but his sexual discovery of his wife, chase God from earth. And in fact, many flood stories world-wide (Isaak 2006; 2010a) reiterate the theme of the Flood being caused by the discovery of sexuality – or reverse the account and introduce the discovery of sexuality (often of an incestuous or bestial nature, even the mating with plants is recorded) as the only solution to repopulate the earth. We hit here upon a controversial but logical and crucial implication of the idea of transcontinental continuities: *if the latter can be taken for a fact, then in principle well-attested, studied and understood symbolic relationships in one location may be used to illuminate less explicit similar relationships in another location belonging to the same complex, even though in another continent - not just on the basis of a formal analysis and an appeal to inherent convergent properties of the mind of Anatomically Modern Humans, but on the basis of real historical cognateship.* This methodological claim is basic to my work in the field of comparative mythology, geomantic divination, transformative cycles of elements, astronomical nomenclature etc.

## **2. Six registers together informing the ancient texts of the myth of Giving Birth to Kagutsuchi / Fire**

A formal and hermeneutical analysis of the principal ancient texts presenting variants of our myth (*Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*,<sup>4</sup> 8th c. CE, available in scholarly English translations with extensive critical apparatus) suggests that, in each of these variants, the narrative oscillates between a limited number of registers:

1. *The ‘Sinising’* (‘*Chinese-ising*’, ‘*Chinesing*’) register: As a superficial embellishment, the peripheral respect for, and emulation of, classical Chinese cosmology and philosophy, as mediated via Korea – major themes in which were: the cosmic egg, the myth of P’an-ku 盤古 (implied), the correlative systems of 8 trigrams 八卦 *pa gua* and 64 hexagrams of *yì jīng* 易經 (commonly known in the West as ‘I Ching’) as a metamorphic cosmology, and the distantly kindred correlative system of 五行 *wǔ xíng* Five Elements. As the beginning of the *Kojiki* has it (the entire book was written in classical Chinese, as a convincing demonstration of Korean-mediated Chinese cultural domination over early Japan):

‘At the Great Palace of Kiyomihara did he ascend to [9] the Heavenly seat: in morality he outstripped Ken-Kō, in virtue he surpassed Shiū-Ō. Having grasped the celestial seals, he was paramount over the Six Cardinal Points; having obtained the heavenly supremacy, he annexed the Eight Wildernesses. He held the mean between the Two Essences [i.e. *Yin* and *Yang* 陰陽 / Japanese *In* and *Yō* ] and regulated the order of the Five Elements [ 五行 *wǔ xíng* ]’ (Chamberlain 1919: 3).

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<sup>4</sup> The *Kojiki* gives only one integrated version authored by one identified narrator, but the *Nihon Shoki* often cites (albeit without identifying sources) a considerable number of variants of the same episode.

A little further down is an explicit reference to two of the sixty-four configurations of the *yì jīng* system.

2. *The geomythical register*: Much more centrally, a geomythical account of the origin and unity of the Japanese archipelago.

3. *The 'bureaucratic-proliferation' register*: Equally centrally, a charter of the early Japanese state bureaucracy, by attributing a specific god to each constituent aristocratic unit – on this point there are obvious parallels with Chinese theology and mythology.

4. *The bodily register*: Often hidden under layers of Chinese-induced 'civilising' prudery,<sup>5</sup> a strongly lingamic/yonic theme, befitting an account of origin and procreation, and apparently (cf. Buruma 1983) affirming a *longue-durée* orientation of Japanese culture. In addition to the obviously sexual passages, numerous oblique allusions could be cited, e.g. the 'pillar' and 'hall' as the scene of our divine sibling's wedding; or the smith god called to make the metal mirror with which the Sun goddess is to be lured out of her hiding: Chamberlain interprets the smith's name as 'Celestial Penis'. This body part is more frequently alluded to the first part of the two Japanese traditions, for instance informing the symbolism of Izanagi's 'Jeweled Spear' (Aston 1896: 4f, 'male pillar' – on authority of the 18<sup>th</sup>-c. CE Japanese commentator Hirata) that is instrumental in the creation of the islands...<sup>6</sup> In this connection it is most remarkable<sup>7</sup> that the least attractive aspects of human corporality (urine, faeces, death and putrefaction) are mainly illustrated, in the text, on *female* bodies, whose dying is almost depicted as essential for the continuity of life – not only in the case of Izanami, but also of the food goddess Ukemochi 保食神 – with many parallels worldwide. Yet it is not exclusively women's bodily functions that are depicted: some of the ungendered bodily functions of male bodies are also evoked but then in contexts stressing not vulnerability but prowess: Izanagi urinates a boundary river between the land of the living and Yomi; male Susanowo like a naughty boy stealthily defecates on the throne of Amaterasu,<sup>8</sup> with dramatic consequences – this being one of the reasons cited for her seclusion which plunges the entire world in darkness.<sup>9</sup> Female anatomi-

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Elias 1939.

<sup>6</sup> For extensive comparative aspects of such a name, cf. Allegro 1970, although I am aware of the bad reputation of that book.

<sup>7</sup> Although hardly surprising, from a depressing comparative perspective on literate misogyny ranging from the Christian Church Father St Augustine to traditional Jewish and Islamic conceptions of womanhood.

<sup>8</sup> Or is this simply a peasant's matter-of-fact observation on the use of human manure to fertilise the Sun goddess' cherished rice fields?

<sup>9</sup> More frequently mentioned is that Susanowo flays a live piebald horse backwards (from tail to head) and, through a hole he has made in the roof of the celestial weaving room, lowers it amidst the weaving ladies-in-waiting, who are so disturbed by the act that the weaving-shuttles hit them in the vulva, as a result of which they die – another powerful evocation of the Bodily Register, 4, in its sexual aspects. The piebald horse is full of associations, of which however I cannot ascertain to what extent they may have existed in the conscious minds of the ancient Japanese editors of our texts. In the course of my world-wide explorations of leopard-skin symbolism (van Binsbergen 2004), I have given considerable thought to the meaning of variegation and speckledness. In the first place variegation may be an evocation of the star-spangled sky, as it is clearly and explicitly in the symbolism of the leopard skin in Ancient Egyptian ritual, especially in the context of the *imiut* portable shrine that consists of a bowl

cal characteristics, although not conspicuously inspiring respect,<sup>10</sup> yet at least can invoke laughter to the extent of saving the world: the pulled-out nipples and denuded vulva of the dawn goddess *Ame-no-uzume-no-mikoto* 天宇受売命, 天鈿女命 ‘Heavenly-Alarming Female’ are apparently so incomparably funny that the laughter they incite lures the Sun goddess out of her fatal seclusion.<sup>11</sup>

5. *The natural-phenomena register*: An evocation of natural phenomena not at the level of extreme abstraction as in the elemental system shortly to be discussed, but at the phenomenological level the way they present themselves to the naïve observer: sunshine, rain, storm, volcanism, inland and seashore waters, etc. It is remarkable that the Rainbow, which in many other cosmologies features as an active element notably as the implacable enemy of Rain/Thunder, in the Japanese mythical account plays only a very passive and incidental role, as the bridge by which Izanami and Izanagi approach the world to begin their creative work; we will come back to this point. Nonetheless, the same kind of cosmological enmity plays a very central role in the Japanese account, notably as the struggle between the sibling Amaterasu the Sun goddess, and Susanowo the Ocean/Rainstorm.<sup>12</sup> A-typical is here that the latter is

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filled with (human sacrificial?) blood, a pole erected in the bowl (the world axis), and a leopard skin hanging from that pole (heaven) (cf. Stricker 1963-1989; Köhler 1975). Moreover, variegation is usually a sign of ambivalence, and in many comparative contexts, e.g. in sub-Saharan Africa (cf. Werbner 1989) variegated skins are the typical attributes of the diviner, whose work makes him straddle the boundary between upper world and underworld. Again we may have to do with a ‘cross-model’ trait here, extending not so much to Japan but perhaps to China, where the culture hero Fu Xi 伏羲 is associated both with a deer skin (usually interpreted as merely a sign of primeval primitiveness; however, unmistakably with shamanic connotations – and many deer species have a variegated skin) and with an (apparently variegated) ‘river horse, dragon or turtle’, on whose skin he discovered the Eight Trigrams 八卦 *pa gua* that form the basis of the 易經 *yì jīng* correlative system. Scapulimancy with deer shoulder bones is mentioned in our two classic Japanese texts, and shortly after his birth Kagutsuchi / Fire is, by his very name, associated with the Mt Kagu wooded mountain god Kagu 香 (modern (Beijing) reading: xiāng, ‘fragrance’), whose name also has ‘deer’ connotations but (apart from the connection which also Chamberlain makes – 1919: 33, Fire being produced from Wood) few closer parallels can be discerned from my remote position as a non-reader of Japanese – except perhaps for the fact that a deer skin (inevitably from the celestial deer haunt Mr Kagu) is the standard material to make the Heavenly Bellows, without which Amaterasu’s mirror could not have been forged. (One is distantly reminded of the Uralic > Finnish theme of the Sampo, a miraculous mill producing endless fortune, and also the masterpiece of the primal smith, there called Ilmarinen, ‘Son of She of the Sky’).

<sup>10</sup> As they have been claimed to do in specific, ceremonialised contexts in modern Japan, cf. Buruma 2000 / 1983.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Witzel 2005 and references cited there.

<sup>12</sup> The parallel goes even so far that Amaterasu and Susanowo, siblings of a later generation, emulate the marriage of Izanagi (their father) and Izanami (whom Susanowo repeatedly calls his mother, although according to the narrative she died before Susanowo and Amaterasu emerged during Izanagi’s acts of purification; according to some variants in the *Nihongi*, however, Izanami is simply the Sun goddess’ mother and is also Susanowo the child of both Izanagi and Izanami, born immediately after the leech child). There are a few indications in the ancient texts that the distinctions between these generations is blurred and artificial, so that in fact there is considerable overlap (e.g. in ownership of divine weapons) between two male, and between the two female, protagonists, respectively.

Amazingly, Amaterasu and Susanowo’s marriage is meant as a form of divination: if the male partner produces children of his own gender, that will indicate that his intention vis-à-vis his spouse (and her kingship of Heaven) are good, and the other way around. That people in their interaction with the supernatural gamble on the basis of the gender of as yet unborn offspring, is not limited to the Japanese narratives. For instance, in the highlands of North-western Tunisia in the late 1960s, peasants would constantly engage in wagers with the invisible, deceased saints associated with the major shrines what

depicted not as the central supporter of agriculture which Rain is in most Old World cosmologies, but as its destroyer, corrupting food and upsetting the rice fields whose responsibility is the Sun goddess' (as the patron, not so much perhaps of agriculture, but of order and justice – a role the sun also plays in West Asian, Egyptian and Graeco-Roman cosmologies). Japan shares this atypical position with Ancient Egypt and Ancient Mesopotamia, and the explanation may well be that all three regions have largely relied on irrigation rather than rain-fed agriculture, with rain-storms in Japan being notorious for their destructive effects on crops out in the fields.<sup>13</sup>

6. *The elemental-transformative-cycle register*: Totally implied, hidden from the contemporary authors' consciousness and likewise unnoticed, apparently,<sup>14</sup> by most modern commentators, and not consciously making contact with the *Sinising Register 1* of which the Taoist and yì jīng correlative systems make an integral and self-evident part, there is the register of a transformative cycle of elements. This system is akin to, but quite distinct from, the classic Chinese ones mentioned under Register 1; to my mind, the system has constituted an integral part of Japanese culture from the oldest times on, and as such is continuous with a widespread, underlying cosmology of a transformation cycle of elements, surfacing not only in Ancient China but also in Ancient Egypt, Ancient Greece, sub-Saharan Africa, and even in North America.

I can safely leave the elaboration of registers 1-5 to specialists on the culture, language, history and literature of Japan and of East Asia in general. My claim however is that the answer to the obstetric puzzle signalled lies largely in register 6, a comparative discussion of which will form the central part of my argument. Izanami is centrally involved in the production of the world, and in the process meets her destruction. In my opinion the details of this dramatic fate can only be understood as a distorted application of the widespread proto-historic model of the transformative cycle of elements.

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are dispersed all over the land: through a prayer, a (typically very small) herd of cattle, sheep or goat is put under the protection of the saint for the duration of the season, and any male offspring that will be born from the herd in that season will be ritually sacrificed for that saint, but any female offspring will remain the inalienable property of the human owner (van Binsbergen 1971 and forthcoming; Köbben 1975).

<sup>13</sup> If one were pressed to identify a single parallel for Izanagi and Izanami in the Western part of the Old World, it would be the divine twins Shu ('Air') and Tefnut ('Moisture'), the first creatures to be produced parthenogenetically by Atum, the first being, through an act of masturbation (although other Egyptian versions claim that in this he was helped by a female goddess whose name translates as 'Hand' ...). Interestingly, Shu and Tefnut may also be identified with the Sun and the Moon, and with the eyes of Horus – which would suggest that the Izanagi of our Japanese myth come close to Horus – Sun and Moon are born from his eyes at purification, and both mythical males display a violent, unyielding nature. Below we will also recognise, in both the Egyptian and the Japanese sibling pair, a parallel with the post-flood surviving twins charged with the repopulation of the world.

<sup>14</sup> Again, with all the reservations of the non-specialist who has only seen a tiny fraction of the relevant Japanological literature.

## **2. Long-range, transcontinental contents in the Japanese myth of Giving Birth to Fire: The widespread model of the transformative cycle of elements**

### **2.1. Cosmological systems worldwide**

Worldwide, there are most instructive parallels, in the story of Izanami's death when giving birth to Kagutsuchi / Fire. These may be identified in the first place in East Asia especially classical Chinese culture; but also in Ancient South Asia, in Ancient Egypt; in Ancient Greece, in sub-Saharan Africa, and even in (reconstructions of) pre-conquest North American cultures. Having elsewhere (van Binsbergen, in press [2010]) described and analysed the transformative elemental cycle in considerable detail and having traced its pre- and protohistoric attestations, I will here limit myself to the shortest summary.

It is a widespread idea that the entire universe is composed of a handful of essences, which are combined and dissociated so as to produce the myriad concrete manifestations of reality. Four elements (Ancient Greek: *ρίζωματα rizomata*, 'roots') were identified by the Pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Empedocles of Acragas / Agrigentum in Southern Italy (first half of the fifth c. BCE), who in the Western tradition has been regarded as the inventor worldwide of a cosmological scheme recognizing only a handful of elements.<sup>15</sup> The model was subsequently reformulated and divulged by Aristotle, and became the cornerstone of Western astrology, medicine, psychology, literary and artistic symbolism, until well into Early Modern times. However, I have elsewhere advanced the thesis that, in his Western periphery of a Greek world that had always been highly indebted to Asia and Africa, Empedocles reinterpreted a thought system which, in various local variants, had been circulating throughout Eurasia for at least centuries and probably millennia.

The local varieties of this system may be distinguished along a number of dimensions:

1. Number of elements.
2. Nature of the difference between elements.
  - a) full transformation cycle.
  - b) Intermediate forms between (i) the full transformation cycle and (ii) the idea of immutable element as fixed, parallel categories.
  - c) immutable categories without transitions or transformations from one into the other.

As far as the number of elements in the transformative cycle is concerned, Empedocles' four-element system presents almost a bare minimum, whereas throughout Greek and Roman Antiquity a five-element system would appear to have been the standard one, adding a 'fifth element' (literally: quintessence) to Empedocles' series of: earth, water, air and fire. As Table 1 indicates, a five-fold partition is found in

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<sup>15</sup> A cursory overview of the very extensive literature on the Pre-Socratics and on Empedocles specifically has been offered in van Binsbergen, in press [2010].



many parts of Eurasia, including in Hinduism and Buddhism, Japan, China, and in the Bön religion of Tibet.

*Table 1. Four or more elements in various Eurasian traditions*

No.	Tradition <sup>16</sup>	Earth	Water	Air	Fire	5th (Quintessence)	Other
1	Greek	Earth	Water	Air	Fire	Aether/Idea	N/A
2	Latin	Earth	Water	Air	Fire	Quintessence	N/A
3	Hindu and Buddhist <sup>17</sup>	Earth <i>khsiti</i> or <i>bhumi</i>	Water <i>ap</i> or <i>jala</i>	Air <i>marut</i> or <i>pavan</i> (air or wind);	Fire <i>agni</i> or <i>tejas</i>	Aether/Sound and <i>byom</i> or <i>akasha</i> (aether);	
4	Japanese: Godai 五大)	Earth 地 <i>chi</i>	Water 水 <i>sui</i> , <i>mizu</i>	Wind 風 <i>fu</i> , <i>kaze</i>	Fire 火 <i>ka</i> , <i>hi</i>	Void / Sky / Heaven (空) <i>Kū</i> , <i>sora</i>	Consciousness
5	Chinese Wu Xing 五行 'Five Phases' <sup>18</sup>	Earth 土 <i>tǔ</i>	Water 水 <i>shuǐ</i>	N/A	Fire 火 <i>huǒ</i>	Void	Metal 金 <i>jīn</i> , Wood 木 <i>mù</i> ,
6	Bön (Tibet)	Earth	Water	Air	Fire	Space	N/A
7	Ancient Egypt	Earth	Water	Air	Fire		Sky, Aether

In addition to these Eurasian data, and in considerable and surprising continuity with them, systems of a transformative cycle of elements may be identified in sub-Saharan Africa and North America (see van Binsbergen in press [2010]).

## 2.2. The transformative cycle of elements in East Asia: Two classical Chinese correlative systems

The literate wisdom systems we find in classic East Asian civilisation are known as 'correlative systems':<sup>19</sup> reality is subdivided into a limited number of named symbolic domains, and each of these domains systematically takes on a specific value on a number of cosmological and human-existential dimensions (the heavens, minerals,

<sup>16</sup> Given the severe limitations of my specialist knowledge my rendering of Eurasian traditions in Table 1 must inevitably remain based on secondary sources. For many details of this scheme I am indebted to Anonymous n.d. I have inserted my own view of the Ancient Egyptian system, cf. van Binsbergen in pres [2010]. I have suppressed, as a recent eclectic artefact, a line 'Neo-Paganism' (more or less coinciding with the New Age movement of the later 20<sup>th</sup> c. CE). For similar reasons I have omitted a line 'Seven Chakras philosophy (combining Hindu and Buddhist themes)', for which the following entries were specified in the original: Muladhara (Root): Earth; Svadhisthana (Sacral): Water; Vishuddha (Throat): Ether/Sound / Anabata (Heart): Air; Manipura (Navel): Fire ; Sabasrara (Crown): Thought/Space / Anja (Third Eye): Light/Time.

<sup>17</sup> The *pancha mahabhuta*, or 'five great elements' of Hinduism; the *mahabhuta* ('great elements') or *catudhatu* ('four elements') of Pali / Early Buddhist literature are earth, water, fire and air. Given the strong Hellenistic influence exerted on Central and South Asia from the late 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BCE onwards, also very conspicuous in the realm of wisdom systems, cosmologies and divination (cf. Pingree 1978), probably the Hindu and Buddhist listings in Table 1 are indebted to the Greek four-element system attributed to Empedocles, which had become the general Greek norm by Hellenistic times.

<sup>18</sup> Cf.: Fung Yu-lan 1952: II, 13; Needham with Ling, II, 260ff ; Maciocia 2005.

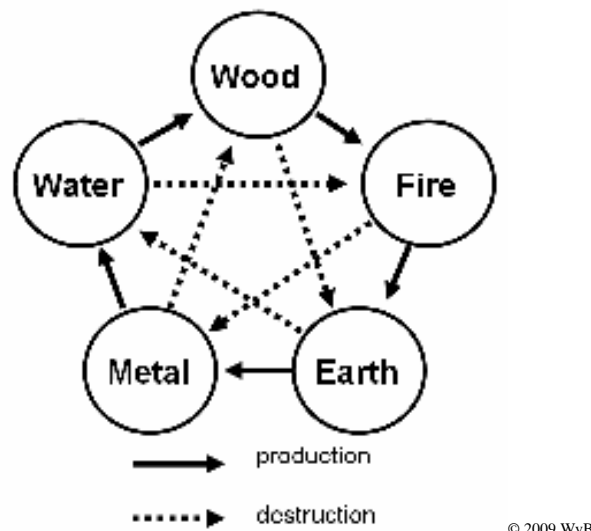
<sup>19</sup> Needham with Ling 1956; Fiskejo 2000; Carus 1898.

animal life, plant life, kinship, politics, colours, music, topography etc.– so that the entire cosmos can be subsumed in a matrix whose columns define symbolic domains and whose rows define cosmological / existential dimension. Correlative systems are, however, not specific to East Asia, as our Table 1 demonstrates. A familiar example of a correlative system is ancient Greek astrology, which developed (Bouché-Leclercq 1879, 1899; Tester 1989) in the middle of the first millennium BCE under the influence of Mesopotamian<sup>20</sup> and Egyptian astral divination, and which subsequently in its turn greatly influenced divination, arts and belles lettres in Europe, the Arabian world and South Asia. Correlative systems are powerful, comprehensive and tautological cosmological statements, conducive to argued meaning and connections in personal and societal affairs, and therefore an inexhaustible source of inspiration for divination.

At the heart of Taoism (道) as a wisdom philosophy of transformation with divinatory applications, is most clearly a transformation cycle. Earth, Water, Fire, Metal and Wood constantly produce each other and work upon each other in a complex cycle that shows how the specific position of each ‘element’ at each moment in each specific situation is ephemeral and incidental, giving way to another elemental phase under specific circumstances.

Fig. 1 renders, as a special case, the Taoist, classic Chinese transformation cycle in its simplest form (cf. Needham with Ling 1956; Fiskejo 2000; Carus 1898). Here, Destruction and Production are the two basic relations between elements in this proto-historic transformative cycle, secondary relations are Furtherance / Blessing and Hindrance / Insult.

*Fig. 1. Basic transformations in the classic Taoist cycle of elements*

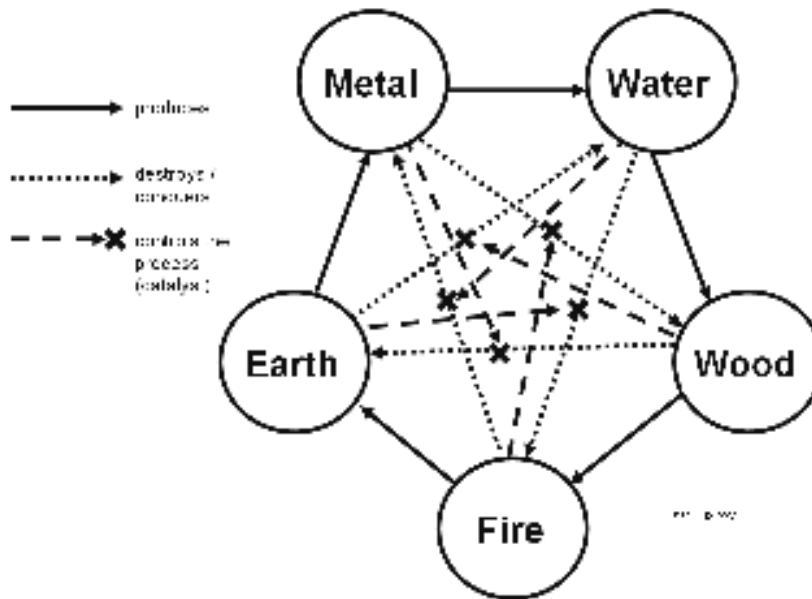


<sup>20</sup> Which was a correlative system in its own right: Gadd 1966. There is a considerable literature on Egyptian divination (e.g. Ray 1981; Borghouts 1995; Foucart 1912; Harris 1998) but the (probably considerable) extent to which it constitutes a correlative system cannot be unequivocally established on that basis.

In attenuated form, the relationships of production and destruction as indicated may also be conceived as furtherance, friendship and praise (for production), and hindrance, enmity and insult (for destruction), respectively

In fact, however, the model is much more complicated, because for each relation between two elements that produce or destroy each other, there is a third element that control the process – as some sort of catalyst.

Fig.2. The Taoist five-element transformative cycle according to Needham & Ling



This is essentially a rendering of the formula given by Needham with Ling (1956: II, 260f):

‘Wood destroys (conquers, red arrow) Earth, but Metal controls (x) the process  
 Metal destroys (conquers, red arrow ) Wood, but Fire controls (x) the process  
 Fire destroys (conquers, red arrow) Metal, but water controls (x) the process  
 Water destroys (conquers, red arrow ) Fire, but Earth controls (x) the process  
 Earth destroys (conquers, red arrow ) water, but Wood controls (x) the process’

with this proviso that in addition to the destruction relations, I have also shown the productive relations.

This cycle of transformation essentially defines three roles: the Destructor, the Destroyed, and the Catalyst. Even more elaborate versions have been published, in which the cycles shown here are complemented by other cycles:

The essence of the Chinese Taoist system is that the difference between each element is accidental and situational, and that each of them may turn into all others in one or two steps. Belonging to a particular element is an accidental and incidental condition, not an ontological given. Since the distinctions between the elements are ephemeral and non-essential, there is no fundamental difference between them – absolute, transcendental differences are absence from the Taoist system, which is geared to a constant flow of *immanentalism*, in other words, which is an expression of a worldview that at no point needs to take recourse to the idea of an order of Being that is radically

and absolutely different from the natural order of the here and now, in which the human experience evolves itself. Perhaps the transformation cycle is shamanic in origin, and, like shamanism as an institution, could be argued to go back to the Upper Palaeolithic of West to Central Asia (c. 20-15 ka BP).<sup>21</sup>

We can now turn to a discussion of the famous *yì jīng* 易經 system of changes, whose dynamic logic resides in the systematic ways in which pairs of trigrams (☰, ☷, ☱, ☴, ☲, ☵, ☳, ☶: all the three-item permutations that can be made of broken and unbroken lines) are combined into 64 named configurations; between these configurations systematic transformations exist, whose generation and interpretation is the basis of *yì jīng* as a cosmological, divinatory and psychological system.

Table 2. General overview of 易經 (*yì jīng*) as a correlative system

	Trigram Figure	Binary Value	Name	Translation: Wilhelm, others	Image in Nature	Direction	Family Relationship	Body Part [7]	Attribute	Stage/ State	Animal
1	☰ (☰)	111	乾 qián	the Creative, Force	heaven, <u>aether</u> (天)	northwest	father	head	strong	creative	horse
2	☱ (☱)	110	兌 duì	the Joyous, Open	swamp, marsh (澤)	west	third daughter	mouth	pleasure	tranquil (complete devotion)	sheep
3	☲ (☲)	101	離 lí	the Clinging, Radiance	fire (火)	south	second daughter	eye	light-giving, dependence	clinging, clarity, adaptable	pheasant
4	☳ (☳)	100	震 zhèn	the Arousing, Shake	Thunder (雷)	east	first son	foot	inciting movement	initiative	dragon
5	☴ (☴)	011	巽 xùn	the Gentle, Ground	wind (風), wood (木)	southeast	first daughter	thigh	penetrating	gentle entrance	fowl
6	☵ (☵)	010	坎 kǎn	the Abysmal, Gorge	water (水)	north	second son	ear	dangerous	in-motion	pig
7	☶ (☶)	001	艮 gèn	Keeping Still, Bound	mountain (山)	northeast	third son	hand	resting, stand-still	completion	wolf, dog
8	☷ (☷)	000	坤 kūn	the Receptive, Field	earth (地)	southwest	mother	belly	devoted, yielding	receptive	cow

<sup>21</sup> It is a widely-held view that shamanism already existed in Upper Palaeolithic Eurasia (e.g. Clottes & Lewis Williams 1996; Layton 2001). Elsewhere I present a provisional typological analysis of traits connected with shamanism, that appears to confirm the emergence of shamanism in the Upper Palaeolithic in West to Central Asia.

### **3. Return to Izanami's plight**

#### **3.1. Izanami hardly one particular element**

At this point we are properly equipped to return to our myth of Izanami giving Birth to Kagutsuchi / Fire.

Fire, of course, has been among the basic elements or positions in this cyclical transformative cosmology for many millennia, and so have water, earth, air (though not included in the Taoist scheme), probably also metal and wood, thunder and aether (the latter two again not included in the Taoist scheme). Being destroyed by Kagutsuchi / Fire, and (see my initial numbered series, Register 1) being situated in a cultural context where the peripheral influence of the Taoist scheme is *consciously* present among the contemporary actors, one would be tempted to equate Izanami with Metal. In this connection let us recall Fig. 1 for which however the details of the text provide hardly any basis.

#### **3.2. Kagutsuchi / Fire within a transformative cycle of elements**

A more abstract approach appears to be called for. Being involved in the total process of (re-)production of the world, Izanami cannot in herself be totally equated with any of the handful of constituent elements, but should rather be conceived as some underlying *prima materia*, or better still, as the overarching ontological framework within their transformations take place. Significantly, the gods that emerge in the process of Izanami's fatal confinement, her death, and the (almost alchemical) killing of Kagutsuchi / Fire, evoke a range of other elements – earth, wood, air/storm, thunder etc. (the latter two indicating that a more comprehensive, and older, locally Japanese, system is at work and not the imported Taoist one).

These clusters of elements are unmistakable. Already the first gods to be born after Izanagi and Izanami had produced the islands, were clusters of wind/'air', rock/'earth' and ocean/'water' gods, soon to be followed by vegetation/'wood' gods. When Izanami lies dying,

‘The names of the Deities born from her vomit were the Deity Metal-Mountain-Prince and next the Deity Metal-Mountain-Princess [‘metal’] The names of the Deities that were born from her faeces were the Deity Clay-Viscid-Prince and next the Deity Clay-Viscid-Princess. [‘earth’] The names of the Deities that were next born from her urine were the Deity Mitsuhanome [‘Water-snake-woman’] [‘water’] and next the Young-Wondrous-Producing-Deity. (Chamberlain 1919, my interpretation between brackets).

A crucial passage here is the lament Izanagi makes when his spouse/sister has died in childbirth, rendered in the Chamberlain translation as:

‘Oh! Thine Augustness my lovely younger sister! Oh that I should have exchanged thee for this single child!’

Single child?<sup>22</sup> Not in the sense of having no siblings – numerous were already the children of Izanagi and Izanami, and more will be born from her decaying body. Neither single in the sense of the only element to be explicitly mentioned as the child of this union, for we have already seen how the other clusters of gods can be interpreted as evocations of the other elements.

The un-integrated recourse to this 6<sup>th</sup> register on my above numbered series, within the evolving flow of the mythical narrative, and the fact that the contemporary authors themselves no longer had a grasp on the full dynamic logic of the transformative cycle as part of Japan's prehistoric heritage but only knew the imported Taoist and *yì jīng* versions, explains the one-sided drama of Izanami's *Giving Birth to Kagutsuchi / Fire* – a one-sidedness which has fortunately given us one of the finest narratives in world mythology. The one-sidedness exists in the fact that, with Izanami's death, the cycle is broken: although various elements are evoked, the thread of the personalised narrative is taken up again before the implication can be taken into account that, under the transformative cycle, whatever is destroyed also produces something new and lives on in that new form. However, Izanami is dead and remains dead – she even becomes 'death' *par excellence*, the Death Goddess. At this point Register 6 gives way to the other registers again, and cosmological and narrative reasons that are not in the least dictated by the notion of the transformative cycle, Izanami returns and remains in Yomi, Izanagi kills their last child Kagutsuchi / Fire and goes to purify himself, and although again a dazzling fireworks of element-related theogony is triggered by both acts, the thrust of the narrative is then dominated by Register 5, natural phenomena, notably the struggle between Rain-storm and Sun.

### 3.3. Cosmic order through firm and lasting boundaries

The struggle to establish firm and lasting boundaries is a central theme in our Japanese myth. The initial word is chaotic, fluid, dripping, cloudy, even the cosmic egg is said to have only blurred boundaries, and the order which the creative process of Izanagi and Izanami establishes, is one of firm boundaries – the outlines of the Japanese archipelago as bounded by the sea, the definition of the male and female body by its respective anatomical features, the demarcation of the land in the form of the Amaterasu's carefully tended, dyked rice-fields, which Susanowo (the impetuous attacker and destroyer of boundaries) does not succeed in permanently upsetting. And most of all the boundary between life and death. While Izanami is still in an intermediate, ambivalent state (eager to return to the land of the living, prepared to ask the Yomi authorities for permission, her condition still invisible in the darkness, yet

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<sup>22</sup> Chamberlain (1919) at length comments on the very unusual phrasing of the Chinese text (*Kojiki* was written in classical Chinese), which scarcely offers the standard way of expressing 'single child' and instead seems to make allusion to 'tree' (木, modern Beijing pronunciation *mù*) or 'hair' (毛, modern Beijing pronunciation *máo*). So Kagutsuchi / Fire himself is named by the element from which it is supposed to be produced, in reality, and also according to the Chinese version of the transformation cycle.

Incidentally, there are two \*Borean roots with the same consonantal structure \*PV<sub>n...n+1</sub>HV<sub>n...n+1</sub>, one of which means 'tree', the other 'fire' (Starostin & Starostin 1998-2008, section 'long-range etymologies'). Do we have here already an Upper Palaeolithic indication of the link (so obvious at the level of everyday reality) between 'tree' and 'fire', later to be enshrined in the correlative systems of the Bronze Age?

having to admit that – by an almost universal fairy-tale logic – she has already partaken of the food of the dead) Izanagi *virtually brings about her death* by casting light in the darkness attending Yomi. Finally and most dramatically, pursued by Izanami and the eight Thunder gods that have arisen from her putrid (boundary-effacing) dead body, Izanagi particularly effects the boundary between life and death, in fact *creates* death once for all as a permanent irreversible and non-negotiable state (in total departure from the range semantic of \*Borean thought), first by a number of partly ineffective measures (throwing peaches, his staff, urinating a boundary river, etc.), and finally by erecting an incredibly large boundary stone, at which point Izanami has no option but to give up, they separate.

That Izanagi, and not Kagutsuchi / Fire is, in the last analysis, responsible for Izanami's death appears to me a valid and highly significant point. In the narrative the polluting environment of Yomi is cited as the reason why Izanagi must purify himself after his return in the land of the living. Such post-funerary purification through washing has many comparative parallels, some of which are cited by the commentators.<sup>23</sup> However, the most common form of post-mortem purification concerns the person who has actually caused the death, the killer. With triangulation points in sub-Saharan Africa (Nilotic-speaking Nuer,<sup>24</sup> Bantu-speaking Nkoya and other inhabitants of South Central Africa,<sup>25</sup> where the custom also applies to hunters of big game after making their kill), and the Aegean (in whose mythology Heracles and Peleus, among others, must make great efforts to find purification after killing, and in the process – irate at the purification priests' reluctance – incur further pollution by further killings), and possibly early Japan. This makes me suspect that, in the underlying mythical logic of the Japanese narrative, Izanagi killed not only Kagutsuchi / Fire, but also Izanami.

Thus the absolute difference between life and death has become thinkable – a binary opposition that has always been a part of human life, but that funerary rites and representations of an afterlife, of reincarnation, etc. have managed to obscure from consciousness because firm, lasting and total binary oppositions could not yet be thought. The boundary stone that Izanagi erects is at the same time a milestone in human thought – and like a typical male thing, such achievement in thought could not care less for his wife's and sister's sensitivities and her love of life.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> I can add a few from personal fieldwork: North African Muslims returning from a funeral must first solemnly wash their hands and face in a collective wash basin before they can partake of the funerary meal (1968); and Southern African spirit mediums returning from the funeral of one of their midst must first wash their entire body near the river before returning to society (1989).

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Evans-Pritchard 1967 (1940).

<sup>25</sup> Marks 1976; author's field-notes 1972-1996.

<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile we must be careful lest we attribute too much of an advancement in thought to Izanagi's articulation of death. At a different level of analysis and comparison, Izanagi's actions at the boundary between life and death simply amount to a myth explaining the origin of death – and such myths, as has been argued convincingly by the comparative mythologist Yuri Berezkin, belong to the oldest mythical repertoire of humankind, almost certainly to be included in the original package before the Out of Africa exodus, and still one of Africa's most cherished and most widespread myths. On the basis of Berezkin's authority, I have now revised my earlier reconstruction of this package so as to include this type of myth. Oppenheimer's suggestion (1998) that the myth of the origin of death originate from South East Asia, is very implausible, for reasons I have set out elsewhere (van Binsbergen with Isaak 2008).

Table 3. Old-World mythological and religious development: Towards male celestial gods

Region and period	Mother goddess of early times	Subdued by male god of subsequent times	Reduced to a secondary role as
Ancient Mesopotamia	Spider goddess Uttu	Raped by Enki 'Lord Water' (has usurped the sea, as one of the domains of the Mother of the Primal Waters)	Uttu, goddess of weaving and clothing Ninhursaq, Earth and Underworld goddess
Ancient Iran	Anahita	?	Anahita largely reduced to domestic and subservient function, but still weaving virgin and control over waters
Ancient Egypt	Neith in the 1 <sup>st</sup> dynasty (3100 BCE), goddess of warfare and hunting	Horus, Rē <sup>c</sup>	Goddess of weaving and funerary goddess in the New Kingdom c. 1300 BCE (but continues to rule the waters and to have a final say in the assembly of gods)
Ancient Greece	Athena, Hera	Zeus, Poseidon, Hades	Demeter, Persephone, Athena as goddess of handicrafts and weaving,
Ancient Rome	Magna Mater	Jupiter	Juno
Ancient Judaism	El, Elohim, Yam	Jahweh	Names of Jahweh; Leviathan
Ancient Arabia	The pre-Islamic female goddesses at Mecca	Allah	Names of Allah
Early Japanese society	'X' / Izanami, giving birth to the entire world and to the elements is her epiphany	Izanagi, Susanowo	Izanami as death goddess; but the celestial realm remains under female rule, notably that of the Sun goddess Amaterasu, who is mainly a weaver

In a way, Izanami also represents a (woman-centred) cosmology which is painfully and nostalgically rendered obsolete by Izanagi's boundary erection (with all its phallic implications); whereas the creation of boundaries seems a male prerogative, at the final separation, at the boundary between life and death, it is the woman, Izanami, who (perhaps in shameful<sup>27</sup> recognition of the incestuous nature of their earlier intercourse) insists on the boundary, – in this insistence infringing on Izanagi's male prerogatives, and driving him furious. Perhaps it does not go to far to claim that, at one level of analysis, Izanagi and Izanami stand for successive and irreconcilable worldviews: the world view of the terrestrial mother goddess, and that of celestial male god.<sup>28</sup> If we may invoke here my hypothesis of the succession of dominant

<sup>27</sup> That shame may apply to this situation in the Japanese perspective, may be surmised from the following commentary by the translator Chamberlain (1919) on a slightly earlier point in the narrative, when Izanami and Izanagi go around the wedding column, and she speaks first:

<sup>22:3</sup> *Aha-ji* signifies "foam-way," i.e., "the way to Foam (Aha)-Island," on account, it is said, of its intermediate position between the mainland and the province of Aha in what is in modern parlance the Island of Shikoku. The author of the "Chronicles of Old Affairs" fancifully derives the name from a *hoji* "my shame."

But usually Izanami's reason for shame is attributed, by commentators, to the fact that, as a bride, *she spoke first* (in accordance perhaps with her name, which means 'female who invites' – but then why should her brother / husband be named 'male who invites'?), not that she committed brother-sister incest.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Ishida 1955 for a discussion of related themes from a Japanese perspective; and on China, Ye Shuxian 2003.



cosmogonies (first the Separation of Land and Water, then the Separation of Heaven and Earth) between the Upper Palaeolithic and the Early Bronze Ages, then what seems to be involved is the following: in the Upper Palaeolithic a putative ‘Mother of the Primal Waters’ held sway over the waters above (the sky, although the conceptual elaboration of heaven had not yet taken place), in the horizontal plane (the sea), and below (the underworld, chaos, Sumerian *apsu* etc.); essentially horizontalist, these three watery realms were supposed to be continuous, in line with the ‘range semantics’ which we have suggested to exist for \*Borean, spoken at that time. When (in a combined effort also leading to the emergence of shamanism and of naked-eye astronomy) this cosmogony was replaced by that of the Separation of Heaven and Earth, the three watery realms lost their earlier continuity, and heaven was conceptually and ritually detached from earth-underworld. A general tendency towards masculinisation, noticeable in several ancient civilisations, led to the installation of male celestial gods as rulers of the universe, and the degradation of formerly omnipotent creation goddesses (‘Mothers of the Primal Waters’) to become mere underworld goddesses, or worse still, mere domestic and subservient female goddesses in a pantheon otherwise dominated by male gods, cf. Table 3.

In this perspective, Izanami, whatever her other trappings as the female sibling in a pair of paradisiacal flood surviving twins, is also an epiphany of the Palaeolithic and Neolithic mother goddess, and her divorce from Izanagi and her subsequent fate as a death goddess brings out the triumph of male-dominated celestial relation.

In such a context, we can begin to understand why the references to, and the systematic implications of, the essential archaic and obsolete, recursion-based transformative cycle of elements, although surfacing many times in the narrative, yet could not be acknowledged and pursued by the early 8<sup>th</sup> century CE historical actors that were the authors of the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon Shoki*.

### **6.3. Flood myths as a possibly implied background of Izanami’s Giving Birth to Kagutsuchi / Fire**

The above does far from exhaust the possibility of casting light on the Izanami’s Giving Birth to Kagutsuchi / Fire myth from a perspective of recent developments in comparative mythology and its long-range auxiliary sciences such as molecular genetics and linguistics. The narrative has too many resonances with the global corpus of flood myths not to mention a few of the most striking parallels and implications, even though we cannot pursue this point any further. We have already touched on flood myths because their North American exponents (which make up nearly half the global corpus!) show evidence of the same transformative cycle of elements whose discussion has cast some additional light on our narrative. But the applicability of the flood myth model goes much further. Without wishing to reduce the enormous, creative variety of flood myths to a handful of fixed formulae, my painstaking statistical analysis of the global corpus brought up a number of frequently recurrent models:

1. the discovery of sexuality (often with connotations of incest) as the likely origin of the flood;

2. the tower, bridge, etc. rainbow that used to connect heaven and earth before the flood, that is destroyed in the flood, but replaced by analogous devices (god-made, natural, or man-made) after the flood
3. the complete extinction of fire as a result of the flood (in other words, Water taking over completely and destroying Fire), hence the difficulties, rites and taboos attending the lighting fire after the flood (the Prometheus myth is only one case in point)
4. similar difficulties attending sexuality (often cosmologically equivalent to fire), which had ceased during the flood and is only reluctantly (see point 1 of this series!) resumed after the flood – yet repopulation of the world through procreation is imperative, and often a compromise is reached where the first act of procreation is not of a genital but rather of a vegetal nature: a featureless, smooth gourd-like product is at first produced (sometimes by human intercourse, sometimes by human-plant or human-animal intercourse or through no physiological act at all), from which later true humans emerge; a fairly typical example from East Asia is the following, from the Yao people of Northern Vietnam:

Chang Lo Co built a house roofed with banana leaves. The thunder chief, wanting to destroy the house, transformed himself into a cock and landed on it, but he fell from the slippery roof and was caught and caged by Chang. Chang planned to slaughter the cock for a party and went to buy some wine. While he was away, his son Phuc Hy saw a man now in the cage and went to investigate. The thunder chief asked for a drink of water, which the boy fetched for him. The water gave the thunder chief his strength back, and he broke from his cage. Grateful to the boy, he gave Phuc Hy a tooth, telling him to sow it, and it would grow into a gourd in seven days. He warned the boy to take refuge inside the gourd then. Phuc Hy did as he was instructed. On the seventh day, the gourd was mature, a heavy rain had begun, and he and his sister entered the gourd and sealed the opening with beeswax. They also brought food and a pair of each species of domestic animal. Chang Lo Co was also aware of the thunder chief's vengeance. He built a raft and sailed on the flood to the gate of heaven to fight the thunder chief, but the flood withdrew too quickly. Chang's raft crashed on a mountain, killing him. The gourd carrying the siblings landed on Con Lon mountain. Each sought a spouse, but all other people had been killed. One day, Phuc Hy met a tortoise which told him to marry his sister. Angered by this, he threw a stone at the tortoise, breaking its shell. The tortoise regained its form immediately, but with marks where it had broken.<sup>29</sup> Later, a bamboo told Phuc Hy the same thing, and he cut the bamboo to pieces. The bamboo regenerated, albeit with marks where it had been cut. Seeing these omens, Phuc Hy told his sister that they should marry, but the sister refused. That night, they slept on opposite sides of a stream. Two trees grew from their bellies as they slept and entangled together. Three years, three months, and three days later, she gave birth to a gourd. Phuc Hy told her to cut it open and sow the seeds, which grew into people. She began sowing in the lowlands and had just a few seeds left when she reached the uplands, which is why the population is greater in the plains.<sup>30</sup>

In this connection it seems highly significant that much of the reproduction depicting in the beginning of our Japanese classics, is not of a sexual and genital nature either: individual gods or clusters of gods emerge from separate body parts, or from implements such as spears, from clothing, etc. Note that it

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<sup>29</sup> Probably an oblique reference to the *pa gua*, which Fu Xi is reputed to have discovered in various situations including on the back of a tortoise.

<sup>30</sup> Dang Nghiem Van 1993: 326-327.

is particularly the god Izanagi – whose male body lacks the anatomy and physiology to produce recognisable and viable life from his own body – who produces gods, not from his body but from his material attributes. Here there is a very striking parallel with the male sun god Marduk of Babylon, who prior to engaging in battle with the watery chaos goddess Tiāmat (cf. Table 15, Yam, Neith, etc.), has to prove his superior creative powers by creating a garment (a typical product of the *female labour* of spinning and weaving), not by any physical effort but with the sheer, disembodied power of his word.

5. the resuming of normal, genital sexuality between humans is not the only hurdle to be taken for post-flood repopulation, for very often the only flood survivors are siblings of complementary gender, and the incest taboo needs to be lifted or relaxed before the future of humankind will be assured again.

One cannot help to perceive the many parallels between these points, and our Japanese myth. No mention is made of a global or total flood, but many of the ingredients are there – enough to make us wonder how illuminating it would be to consider the narrative of Izanami and Izanagi as re-assembled from the detached elements of an earlier flood myth, from which however the very flood element had been taken away – as another obsolescent idiom, after all – at least, so is my claim – the Cosmogony of the Separation of Land and Water had been largely supplanted by the Cosmogony of the Separation of Heaven and Earth already thousands of years earlier. The rainbow only appears in the beginning, clearly reminiscent of the ubiquitous bridge or tower into heaven (Judaism and Christianity know it from the narrative of the Tower of Babel, immediately following the biblical flood story). Izanami and Izanagi are the typical sibling spouse destined to populate the world. The incestuous nature of their union apparently does not upset them – Izanami explicitly refers to their close consanguinity as a reason why her dead body cannot be seen by her brother, but sexuality is obviously a very different matter – and<sup>31</sup> the same term *imo* denotes ‘wife’ and ‘[younger] sister’ in the context of these ancient Japanese narratives. Sexuality is new to our two siblings, so much so that they question each other about the details of their respective bodies, and in one version need to learn about sexual practice from the wagtail, with its tell-tale rhythmic movements of the lower body. Although the various versions differ significantly as to the sequence of Izanami’s births, at one stage she produces Hiruko 蛭子, Leech, later known as a popular fisherman god Ebisu (恵比須, 恵比寿, 夷, 戎) – and the type of leech common in Japan has exactly the featureless, smooth appearance we know from the flood stories.<sup>32</sup> Like all leeches, it is hermaphroditic. Hiruko is the only character in our Japanese mythical complex to come close to a flood hero: after birth, he is put in a reed<sup>33</sup> or rock-camphor-tree boat (according to

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<sup>31</sup> Like in many African and West Asian societies including those of Ancient Egypt and (cf. the *Song of Songs*) Ancient Israel. This is another instance of a ‘cross-model’ trait.

<sup>32</sup> Also the ‘tree’ 木 connotations of Kagutsuchi / Fire, alluded to in Izanagi’s lament as discussed in a footnote above, carry the suggestion of an intermediate, vegetal birth product of the kind known from many flood stories world-wide when it comes to first attempts at repopulating the world after the flood.

<sup>33</sup> Also cf. the Egyptian royal titlature: *nswt-bḥ* 𓆎𓅓, ‘She of the Reed and the Bee’ – to be preferred over the usual ‘Him of...’ since the gender specified here would be feminine, as marked by the two *-t* suffixes. Is there a link between the Egyptian pair ‘reed’ and ‘bee’, and the Japanese first generation of gods, featuring heaven (with which the bee and other flying insets were associated in the Ancient Near East because of their flying, and especially because of the glittering effects of their wings evoking the

one version Izanami first had to give birth to that boat),<sup>34</sup> and put out to sea, later to be instated as a popular fisherman god – the parallels with the magical birth and early infancy attributed to Moses and Sargon II have not been lost on the commentators.

Less obvious is the other miscreant, which some authorities have identified as the placenta, although the Chinese character for ‘foam’ is often used in this connection, and connected with the name of the island of Aha. Foam or forth can be issued as a result of an early miscarriage. Placed at the beginning of the series of birth, as most versions do, hardly the placenta can be meant: apart from the nature of her children, Izanami’s confinements follow the usual obstetric pattern, and with usual pre-20<sup>th</sup> century CE medical technology except perhaps a very expertly executed and early caesarean operation, it would be virtually impossible to survive a confinement, and to continue to produce healthy children, after a *placenta praevia* condition, which neither mother (for haemorrhage) nor child would survive. What probably caused this particular obstetric problem is that in Japanese the homonyms *ye* (or is it one word

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rainbow – Draffkorn Kilmer 1987); with Izanami as an intermediate god (Egyptian Shu? cf. Sumerian Enki, ‘Lord Air’), while earth can be seen to be represented by Umashi-ashi-kabi-hiko-ji, or ‘Hikoji no Mikoto’ ‘sweet reed-shoot prince elder’? That would cast some light on the much debated but still mysterious Egyptian titlature. Incidentally, Japan is traditionally named, in what is reputed to be a sinising manner, ‘the Central Reed-Plain Land’.

Much to my surprise, the god Umashi-ashi-kabi-hiko-ji, or ‘Hikoji no Mikoto’ ‘sweet reed-shoot prince elder’, of the first generation of gods in *Nihongi*, has a literal counterpart in the primal Nkoya mythical character Katete ‘Reed Person’, one of a pair of siblings of complementary gender; cf. van Binsbergen 1992. Although I have no explanation for it except premature and rapidly mounting senility on my part, and admitted over-eagerness to perceive transcontinental connections, some of the passages of *Nihongi* read like an almost literal translation of the Nkoya traditional history *Likota lya Bankoya*, e.g.:

‘After this Ama-terasu no Oho-kami united Yorodzu-hata Toyo-aki-tsu-hime, the younger sister of Omohi-kane no Kami to Masa-ya-a-katsu-katsu-no-haya-hi no Ama no Oshi-ho-mimi no Mikoto, and making her his consort, caused them to descend to the Central Land of Reed-Plains.’ (*Nihongi*), cf.

‘Mwene Mutondo lived in her capital on the other side of the Lalafuta river, 3 in the valley of Kalimbata; between Kalimbata and Mulalila, that is where she had her capital. There she died and there her grave has been to this day. In the time of her kingship her sisters Nahonge and Kabandala were residing with her; the Ladies Myene shared with her in the kingship. 4 Mwene Nahonge gave birth to the following children...’ (Likota 26: 2f, van Binsbergen 1992)

‘Kabongo II took over the kingship from his mother. She<sup>33</sup> left with the Ladies Myene Lipepo and Nkulo. Mate Shinkisha belonged to the Nkomba clan, going back to the matrilineage of Mashiku. Their father however, Mukwetunga [= the Royal Escort ] Mulyata, was a member of the Shungu clan, and it was this man who begot all the children of Mwene Manenga.<sup>33</sup> When Mwene Manenga died, Kabongo II inherited the kingship.’ (Likota 18: 4, van Binsbergen 1992)

Probably these very sufficient, apparent parallels are mere red herrings. Impressed by the work of Oppenheimer and Dick-Reed, and struck by the Asian overtones in the court culture of the Nkoya dynasties in Zambia (of which I am an adopted member), I have for some years played with the idea of an Indonesian, South East Asian mainland, or South Asian origin for this complex. More recently I have explored the case, on the mainland of South Central Africa, of a Buddhist substratum in ritual, kingship and iconomography, apparently going back to South, South or East Asia (van Binsbergen 2010b). Meanwhile a painstaking analysis of Nkoya mythology (van Binsbergen 2010c) has revealed a number of Mongolian parallels – reminding us of the Altaic / Eurasian Steppe background of the Japanese culture and language.

<sup>34</sup> The Celestial Boat is a central theme both of Mesopotamian and of Egyptian cosmologies. Recent research draws a direct link between such boats, and flood heroes in their arks (e.g. McHugh 1999).

with an extended semantic field?) are used for both ‘placenta’ and ‘elder brother’,<sup>35</sup> i.e. the one born *before*, and not *after*, Ego.

In many versions of this episode, the miscreants are attributed to the defective execution of the marriage rite: Izanami is reproached for having spoken first, which is a male prerogative. In view of the comparative flood-story background of such miscreants, I am inclined to consider this ritual explanation a rationalisation imposed on archaic mythemes (notably, the non-human, asexual variants of post-flood procreation) that were no longer understood at the time these classic texts were compiled.

I believe I detect another such rationalisation when it comes to the complex dynamics of Izanagi’s and Izanami’s dealings in Yomi. The versions are quite divergent, to complicate matters. In some Izanami reproaches her brother/husband for being too late, she has already eaten from the food of the dead and there cannot be retrieved to the land of the living. The *Kojiki* version, at least in Chamberlain’s translation, can be read to suggest that Izanami is mortally disappointed by Izanagi and sets her thunder gods upon him, not because (the usual explanation) he lights the end tooth of his comb (another ‘male pillar, according to Aston 1896) and thus, against her injunction, is able to see the putrefying body of Izanami, but because he flees at the onset of the thunder demons. Apparently, Izanami appeals to a rule according to which it is not permitted for close relations to see each other in a dead or decaying state. In the light of comparative ethnography this rings a bell: many societies, e.g. in sub-Saharan Africa, have developed institutions of funerary obligations between more or less strangers, so as to prevent close kin to handle a dead body. If such a rule applies here, then the episode could be explained by reference to a breach of etiquette, just like the ritual blemish on the wedding rite. However, Izanami’s parting words suggest (at least, for the West European reader of the English translation, i.e. an admitted outsider to Japanese historical cultural codes) that it was not so much Izanagi’s seeing her, but his failure to bring his beloved sister-spouse back from the dead, which was the greatest source of the latter’s distress. Her eagerness to return to the land of the living is clear from how she devours (after Izanagi has tried to buy time by throwing three peaches – e.g. the apples of the Hesperids which were likewise at the boundary of the Western realm of the dead; and the golden apples by which Atalanta was lured in her running-match with her suitor Melanion, the grapes and the bamboo shoots that come into being as Izanagi runs for the way out of Yomi: food of the living, by consumption of which Izanami may hope to reverse the effect of the food of the dead of which she has already partaken. What is the rationalisation here, what the underlying cultural truth? The extensive flood-myth parallels that I draw suggest that already the contemporary editors may have concealed that cultural truth under so many layers of censorship, ‘sinising’ and otherwise, that we may be forever unable to retrieve it. Comparative mythology would be our best strategy to retrieve at least some of it. Above I suggested, on comparative grounds, that the real reason for Izanami’s reproach to Izanagi is that he, structurally and perhaps factually, kills her. One passage in *Nihongi* even may be read to suggest how he killed her:

‘My lord and husband, why is thy coming so late ? I have already eaten of the cooking-furnace of Yomi. Nevertheless, I am about to lie down to rest. I pray thee, do not thou look on me.’

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<sup>35</sup> Aston 1896: 17 n. 2: ‘The Japanese word for placenta is *ye* or *yena*. *Ye* is also Japanese for elder brother. The *Kojiki* has in the corresponding passage 兄 ‘[elder] brother’.’

At this point we may realise *that if Izanami, Kagutsuchi and Izanagi represent a transformation cycle of elements, it is not in the basic form of dyadic relationships, but in the advanced form of the triadic relationship involving a catalyst.* Further reflection is to decide whether, in Izanami's destruction, it is Fire which is the catalyst and Izanagi who is the destructor, or the other way around. If Fire is to be the catalyst, the destruction is to be of Wood by Metal, which refers to the clearing of forest for fields – which may well be taken to stand for the entire Earth in her maternal generosity and fertility – the Mother Goddess par excellence. This makes more sense than to have Fire as destructor, notably of Metal. Izanagi, with his Jeweled Spear and the sword with which he kills Fire, has all the connotations of Metal. Thus it is not Fire at all who kills Izanami! And we need not resort to the somewhat artificial construction where Izanami, although mentioned in a context reminiscent of the transformative cycle of elements, is not an element, but merely the overall matrix. She is both the overall matrix, and an element. And of course, by 'killing' her, Izanagi does nothing but to create order in the unbridled creative principle she represents. ) What did it mean in ancient Japan if a husband looked upon his wife lying down? Could it not be that Izanami succumbed under Izanagi's untimely sexual demands on her? In several societies belonging to the 'cross-model' (e.g. among the Zambian Nkoya), a husband's sexual overtures for which the wife has not explicitly given her permission, is a most serious offence, reason for divorce. Could this not be at the root of Izanami's disappointment and anger? Something to this effect is also suggested by the following variant:

'Izanagi no Mikoto followed after Izanami no Mikoto, and, arriving at the place where she was, spoke to her and said : ' I have come because I sorrowed for thee.' She answered and said, ' We are relations. 3 Do not thou look upon me.' Izanagi no Mikoto would not obey, but continued to look on her. Wherefore Izanami no Mikoto was ashamed and angry, and said, ' Thou hast seen my nakedness. Now I will in turn see thine.' Then Izanagi no Mikoto was ashamed, and prepared to depart. He did not, however, merely go away in silence, but said solemnly, ' Our relationship is severed.' 4 Again he said, ' I will not submit to be beaten.'

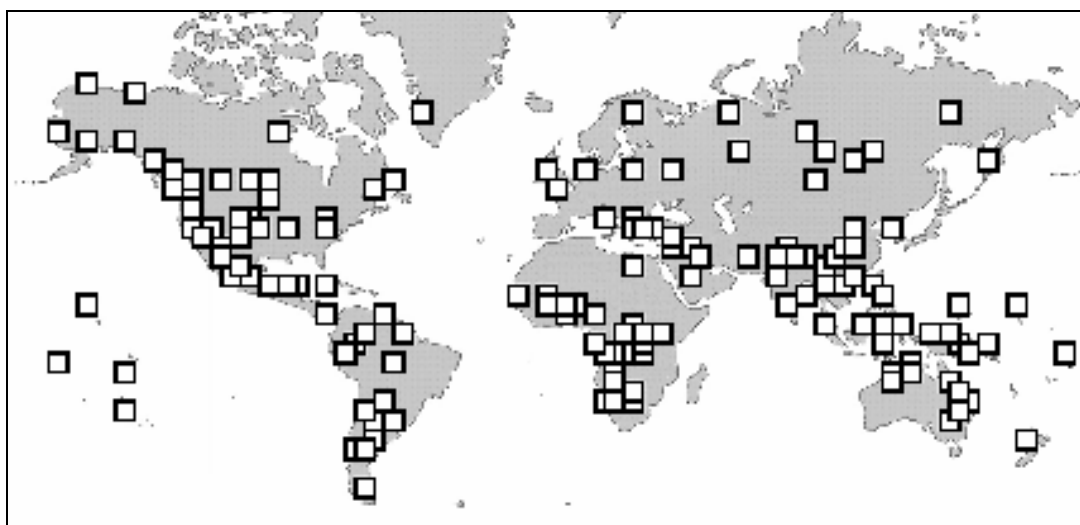
Which takes us back to the idea of the confrontation between Izanagi and Izanami as a power struggle between two rival cosmologies, one in which women are equal or superior to men, the other, later one, in which women are subordinate to men, and sexually submissive. Gimbutas nostalgically associates the latter situation with the Bronze Age, bringing male violence into the peaceful Neolithic society of gender equality).

So, considering the fact (for which I have Chamberlain's authority, 1919) that the 'Sinising' register is particularly dominant in the first pages of the two ancient Japanese histories, before we reach Izanami and Izanagi, makes it attractive to think that originally the stories of Izanami and Izanagi was a standard flood story, with them as the typical twins of complementary gender, sole flood survivors in a paradisiacal post-flood situation where the incest taboo is unknown, and that, before this post-flood situation was reached in the narrative the flood story itself had been deleted and replaced by a standard Chinese cosmogonic account inspired by the P'an-Ku myth, etc. There is no shortage of flood stories in China and Korea (cf. Isaak 2006; in Southern China and its ethnic minorities they are usually connected with the mythical figure of Nu Wa 女媧 'Lady Gourd' (although this may be a popular etymology), sometimes also with her spouse Fu Xi 伏羲), and in fact the taming of the waters is the central image of the creation of socio-political order in early China. In this re-

gional environment, the remarkable absence of flood stories in Japan might be explained as the result of deliberate censorship – perhaps in order to deny the Rainstorm-Ocean god Susanowo even a temporary victory over his rival and sister, the Sun goddess Amaterasu who in many ways is the emblem of Japan itself. Nonetheless, an oblique reference to Nu Wa may be detected in the *Nihongi*'s statement about the dying Izanami:

'She also brought forth the gourd of Heaven.'<sup>36</sup>

*Fig. 3. Flood myth attested in historical times (all types and sources aggregated; sources include Frazer 1918; Dundes 1988; Isaak 2006)*



These parallels offer more food for thought than I can begin to consume at the end of my present argument. They must be left for further research. *It looks as if, in the truncated and fragmented flood theme, we have discovered a seventh register to inform, in a selective and oscillating manner, the flow of narrative in the beginning of the two early Japanese histories.* However, considering the dominant place that the

<sup>36</sup> In what I would call a presentist, anti-humanities and scientific approach, Graham Hancock (2002) offers a very different explanation, which Young (2003) summarises as follows:

'Japan was not covered by an ice cap, had naturally precipitous coastlines and few low-lying plains, meaning that it largely escaped the ravages of the Ice Age cataclysms. If Japanese mythology is grounded in the myth-memories of the Jomon, it is not surprising that Japan has no indigenous flood myth. Underworld presents the idea that the Jomon lost their 'beachfront' properties only, including coastal temples and other sacred and functional sites that now lie 30 meters under water. The recurring Japanese myth of the Kingdom of the Sea King connects closely with Japan's undersea ruins in two ways: that of the kingdom remembered as an island, and as an underwater sanctuary of walls, palaces, and mansions. In Hancock's words,

'"could it be a memory that great structures with 'turrets and tall towers of exceeding beauty' once stood above water but are now beneath waves?"' (Hancock 2002: ] 594).'

This explanation is utterly unconvincing, because it is predicated on the obviously wrong assumption (not unlike Oppenheimer's, 1998) that flood myths occur there, and only there, where they reflect the local collective memory of a local flood that has actually occurred in the distant past. For the near-global distribution of flood myths, cf. Isaak 2006, and for a distribution map, cf. van Binsbergen with Isaak 2008, which I reproduce here as Fig. 3.

extinction and production of fire occupies in the flood context, it is quite conceivable that here lies an additional answer to the central question of our argument, as to why giving birth of Kagutsuchi / Fire should make so much of a difference to the seasoned mother that Izanami certainly was at that point of our story. Has the order of events been reversed, and was (like in some Graeco-Roman version of the Prometheus story) the unmentioned (unmentionable?) flood triggered by the human appropriation or misuse of fire?<sup>37</sup> Is Izanami's death then, at the moment of her giving birth to fire, at one level simply a celestial punishment for human *hubris* comparable to Prometheus' being chained onto the rocks of the Caucasus? What makes this a very interesting suggestion from a point of view of comparative mythology, is that the theme of the theft of fire has a distribution very well comparable with that of the transformative cycle of elements: West and South Asia, Graeco-Roman Antiquity, Oceania, and North America – which suggests it to be of such antiquity that it may well have left implicit traces in the oldest Japanese traditions.

## 4. Conclusion

Thus, applying the lessons of these parallels to Japanese cosmogonic and theogonic myths will make us look with new eyes at the Japanese material, realise its many-faceted transcontinental and temporally long-range connections, and also arrive at new interpretations informing the close-reading of its specific local details.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Other images come to mind, which may also have informed the productive relation between Earth and Fire in the East Asian transformational cycles: if Fire produces Land, this could be the volcanic fire that, after the eruption has cooled down, produces notoriously fertile land; or simply the logic of slash-and-burn (most probably in prehistoric use also in East Asia), where fire burns wood so as to produce fields.

<sup>38</sup> Fire occupies an ambivalent position in the context of Shinto religion. On the one hand fire is not worshipped; Shinto shrines, as focal points of what is primarily considered a nature religion, do not have open fires, and candles and incense is not being burned there. On the other hand there are a number of instances where respectful and pious reference is made to fire. Cf. Nobutaka & Havens 2002-2006. This paper was written in May 2009, half a year after I drafted a book-length manuscript with the working title (with a pun on Bernal's *Black Athena* concept; Bernal 1987-2006) '*Black Vulcan*'? A long-range comparative mythological and linguistic analysis of the complex relations between the Greek god Hephaistos and the Egyptian god Pth? - Exploring the Pelasgian realm and its African connections c. 3000 BCE - c. 400 CE. Unlike Pth (pace Blažek 2010), the Greek God Ἥφαιστος Hēphaistos is identified with Fire, and can be seen as a reflex (surprisingly, in the context of Berber < Afroasiatic), of a \*Borean root \*PVHV, 'fire', also with extensive reflexes in Eurasiatic > Altaic > Proto-Japanese: \**pi* 'sun, day', > modern Tokyo Japanese: *hi* (Martin 1987: 404; Starostin & Starostin 1998-2008, section 'Japanese etymology'). In view of the very extensive trans-Eurasian connections that exist, especially via the Scythian-Korean-Japanese branch of the 'cross-model', it is obvious that we also need to consider the Japanese myth of the origin of Kagutsuchi / Fire in the context of Western Eurasian mythical and ritual elaboration of the fire complex. Perhaps the dramatic birth of Kagutsuchi / Fire in the Japanese myth can be compared with the unusual birth of Hephaestus in Greek myth – although sometimes affirmed as the son of Zeus and Hera (e.g. Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* 3. 22 ), the more dominant story is that Hera produced Hephaestus parthenogenetically out of spite over her husband's producing Athena in similar manner (Hesiod, *Theogony* 924 ff, 929a ff; Pseudo-Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* 1. 19 ; Pseudo-Hyginus, *Preface*; an alternative father for Hephaestus is mentioned by Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 8. 53. 5: the Cretan sun god and guardian of the island, Talos). There is no suggestion in the Japanese story that Kagutsuchi / Fire was only, parthenogenously, the child of Izanami, although Izanagi hates him and kills him. However, that Kagutsuchi / Fire in that



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context is and outsider to the extent of being killed, may have a parallel in Hephaestus' being kicked out of heaven, by his mother (Homer, *Iliad* 18. 136 ff ; *Homeric Hymn 3 to Pythian Apollo* 310 ff ; Pseudo-Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* E2. 9; Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 8. 41. 5; Quintus Smyrnaeus, *Fall of Troy* 2. 549 ff) as well as by his father (Homer, *Iliad* 1. 568 ff Plato, *Republic* 378d; Pseudo-Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* 1. 19; Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 3. 17. 3) (I acknowledge Aaron J. Atsma splendid website [www.theoi.com](http://www.theoi.com) – Abma 2008 – which gives, for nearly all Graeco-Roman gods, the principal primal sources and iconography in a most useful way.) Incidentally, also in the Finnish epic Kalevala (which is clearly a modern literary product, yet equally clearly contains much that is old and authentic) the birth and subsequent actions of Fire are reminiscent of those of Hephaestus and Kagutsuchi (Lönnrot 1866); likewise, the story of a son of god thrown out of heaven because he had invented sorcery was narrated to me by the hunter / nature prophet / witchfinder Mr. Lubumba at Njonjolo, Kaoma district, Zambia, in September 1973 (cf. van Binsbergen 1981). Perhaps further connections may be pointed out, for instance: the exception and ominous birth of fire in our Japanese myth, has a close parallel in the Graeco-Roman account, not of the birth of Hephaestus / Fire, but of Dionysus: the young woman Semele has become the lover of the Supreme God Zeus, without knowing his true identity; then Zeus' lawful wife Hera incites Semele to ask her lover to appear to her in his true splendour – which he cannot refuse, only to burn Semele to death with his lightning force (cf. the thunders that emerge from Izanami's body), so Zeus has to take the unborn Dionysus from his mother's dead body and sew it into his thigh, from which it will later be born as one of the puzzling legchildren of comparative mythology; however, there are strange correspondences between Hephaestus and Dionysus in Greek mythology. However, the obvious task of systematically confronting the Japanese fire god with Hephaestus must be reserved for a later version of the present argument, or for a different argument.

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