

# A study of the characteristics of the Moon deity in Japanese mythology

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## Abstract

Although Tsukuyomi, the moon deity, is one of the most important deities in Japan, there are extremely few myths about him. Psychologists, as well as national scholars and historians, have focused on the lack of information about the moon deity, and some have linked this phenomenon to the sensibility of the Japanese people.

According to the “*Nihonshoki*,” the chronicles of Japan, Tsukuyomi contributed to the birth of grain by killing the grain deity. As the story of the haniwa horse in the same book shows, the moonlit night was a space where people could come into contact with the dead. Tsukuyomi’s domain is emphasized as a remote place, such as “Aounaharano-siono-yaoe,” the distant world of the sea, or a night away from the deity of the sun, which seems to be related to the fact that the moon seems to have the characteristics of connecting the otherworld with life.

## Introduction

In Japanese mythology, Tsukuyomi, the male deity of the moon, is one of the most important deities and one of the three noble children (三貴子), along with Amaterasu, the female deity of the sun, and Susanoo, the male deity of storms. Among them, Tsukuyomi is the least legendary. However, the moon is so beloved by the Japanese that it appears in many literary works. Thus, it is truly unnatural that the moon deity, one of the most important deities, is so rare in Japanese mythology. This research aims to uncover the characteristics of the enigmatic Japanese moon deity.

### 1. On the Inconspicuous Moon Deity

Some myths suggest that Tsukuyomi was born to his father, Izanagi, and his mother, Izanami, who are believed to have created Japan; others suggest that he was born from a mirror held in Izanami’s right hand or when Izanagi washed his right eye. His domain is similarly not fixed and has been described as either the heavens or the sea. In the myths of “*Kojiki (Records of*

*Ancient Matters)*”<sup>[1][2]</sup> and “*Nihonshoki (The Chronicles of Japan)*”<sup>[3][4]</sup>, the sun deity Amaterasu<sup>1</sup> has a rule that is almost universally described as “heavenly”, as in “Ten 天” or “Takamagahara 高天原”, while the rule of the moon deity is said to be that of “Yoruno-osukuni 夜食国 (the realm of the night)” or “Aounaharano-siono-yaoe 滄海原潮之八百重 (the distant world of the sea)” or even to encompass the heavens along with Amaterasu.

Previous studies have suggested that the myth of Susanoo was originally a myth about Tsukuyomi that was later converted, as there are traces of the integration of several other myths into Susanoo’s mythology<sup>[5][6]</sup> (Takagi, p. 250. Wakai, p. 299). One researcher who has considered why there is so little mythological information about Tsukuyomi is the psychologist Hayao Kawai. He noted that when groups of three deities appear in Japanese mythology, the second-born deity typically has a vanishing structure<sup>2</sup>. According to Kawai, Tsukuyomi is positioned in a “hollow structure 中空構造” that expresses the Japanese sense of balance; by being a quiet presence, the “hollow structure” functions

<sup>1</sup> In “*Nihonshoki*”, another name is Ohirumenomuchi.

<sup>2</sup> In the case of Hoderi 火照, Hosuseri 火須勢理, and Hoori 火遠理 in “*Kojiki*”, the conflict between Hoderi (or Umisachihiko 海幸彦) and Hoori (or Yamasachihiko 山幸彦) is described, but Hosuseri, in the middle, is mentioned only by name. In the case of the three deities in “*Kogoshui (Ise-bon) 古語拾遺(伊勢本)*”, Takamimusuhi, Tsuhayamusuhi, and Kamimusuhi, the second child, Tsuhayamusuhi, has almost no role<sup>[7]</sup>.

as a mediator, balancing the opposing ends <sup>[7]</sup> (pp. 47-50). In response to this theory, Michiyoshi Hayashi, an economist and psychologist, noted the paired nature of Amaterasu and Tsukuyomi. In other words, he suggested that the mythological structure of Amaterasu and Tsukuyomi is such that it is difficult to suggest that Tsukuyomi is in the middle; i.e., Hayashi claimed that Kawai's interpretation is forced by limiting Tsukuyomi to the second place. As described in the fifth section of "*Nihonshoki*" vol. 1, Kamiyo-jo 神代上, the sun and moon were born as twins from Izanagi's left and right eyes, while Susanoo was born when Izanagi washed his nose <sup>[8]</sup> (pp. 96-97). Although they are said to be siblings, in the 11th chapter of "*Nihonshoki*," Kamiyo-jo, it is suggested that Tsukuyomi would have had a different status from Amaterasu and Susanoo. The kanji, which means "rule," that was assigned to Tsukuyomi is different from those of the other two deities. When Izanagi ordered who would rule over each domain, Amaterasu and Susanoo were assigned the kanji character "御," while Tsukuyomi was assigned the character "知". In this chapter, Tsukuyomi receives orders from Amaterasu, which seems to be the reason for this distinction. The difference between "御" and "知" needs to be studied further; however, in this case, Tsukuyomi carries out the orders of Amaterasu, which seems to mean that the moon deity is the "connector" between the sun deity and something else.

## 2. On the Emphasis on Distant

Nakatsune Hattori, a late-Edo period scholar of Japanese classics, suggested that Tsukuyomi and Susanoo were the same deity because of the overlap of some of their areas of control and mythological content <sup>[9]</sup>. However, there are slight differences between the two; for example, Susanoo is ordered to rule over the ocean plain, 海原 [*Kojiki*] or 滄海之原 [*Nihonshoki*], whereas the sea, which is said to be Tsukuyomi's domain, is marked with "Yaoe 八百重", which means that it is extremely distant, as in 滄海原潮之八百重. The emphasis on remoteness and the consequent difference in rulers make it difficult to see the areas ruled by Susanoo and Tsukuyomi as "sea regions" in the same sense.

The myth of the origin of grain also overlaps with the

myths of Tsukuyomi and Susanoo; however, there are some differences. In the 5th section of the 11th chapter of "*Nihonshoki*", Tsukuyomi is mentioned as the origin of grain. Amaterasu and Tsukuyomi were ordered to rule the heavens together. However, Tsukuyomi was later ordered by Amaterasu to meet with Ukemochinokami, the female deity of grain, and he then went to her. There, the female deity served rice from her mouth as a feast, which angered Tsukuyomi, who stabbed her to death with a sword. The corpse of this female deity produced cattle, horses, silkworms, and rice and thus was the origin of grain. However, in the first volume of "*Kojiki*," Susanoo kills the female deity of food, Ogetsuhime, in the same way, but no "cattle and horses" are born from her corpse. The birth of cattle and horses, which are indispensable for agricultural work, seems to emphasize how the deeds of the moon led to the distribution of food to the people. In fact, "*Nihonshoki*" describes a scene in which Amaterasu rejoices that she will become food for the people living in this world. In this myth, Tsukuyomi is regarded by Amaterasu as an "evil deity" because he murdered the grain deity, and he was kept away from her. However, because the moon deity brought death to the grain deity, grain became something that people living in this world could eat. This myth seems to indicate that Tsukuyomi is the mediator between death and life. The description of the sun deity as having "kept away" the moon deity explains Tsukuyomi's presence in the distant realm.

## 3. The Moon and the Otherworld

The moon's connection to the otherworld in the distant sea is illustrated by a mural painting in the Mezurashizuka burial mound in Ukiha city, Fukuoka Prefecture, which was constructed in the late 6th century. The circle on one side of the mural is said to represent the sun, the small circle on the other side with a frog-like creature about to jump into it is said to represent the moon, and a person going to the moon in a small boat is depicted <sup>[10][11]</sup> (Otsuka, pp. 117-118. Tatsumi, pp. 91-92). Vol. 6 of the "*Nihonshoki*" describes the distant world beyond the sea as "Tokoyo 常世 (the eternal world)," where the deities live in hiding and where laymen cannot go, and states that it took ten years to go there and back. In the "*Manyoshu*," vol. 4, no. 650 <sup>[12]</sup>,

it seems that those in Tokoyo were believed to be rejuvenated, and Tsukuyomi, mentioned in vol. 13, no. 3245 [12], is said to be the owner of “Ochimizu,” a rejuvenating sacred water. The fact that there is a waka poem in which Tsukuyomi possesses the rejuvenating water suggests a relationship between the moon and Tokoyo. The orientalist Nikolai Aleksandrovich Nevskii, citing the legend of the moon and the “Shirimizu 変若水 (rejuvenating water)” in Okinawa, describes how the ancients believed in the moon as something related to death and immortality [13] (p. 15).

The 14th volume of the “*Nihonshoki*” tells the story of an incident on a moonlit night in which a man met a person riding a swift horse near a burial mound and asked the rider to exchange his horse for his own. The next morning, however, the horse was a haniwa (clay figurine). When he searched the area of the burial mound, his horse was found among the haniwa horses. This would lead one to believe that the person he met was the emperor who was buried in the mound. In these stories of contact with the dead, the moon is a key word that connects the worlds of life and death.

### Conclusion

The killing of the grain deity, the only myth associated with Tsukuyomi, is related to “death” and “life”. The deeds of the moon deity were indispensable for making grain available to the people of life. In mythology, the fact that a moon deity is entrusted with the rule of a “distant” sea realm or is kept away from the sun deity seems to be related to the idea that Tsukuyomi also seems to have the characteristics of connecting the “distant” world, or “death”, with “life”. Additionally, the tenuous presence of the Moon deity in Japanese mythology seems to be related to his characteristics as an intermediary.

One theory is that the characters of Tsukuyomi and Susanoo were confused because Susanoo was added to the deities of the sun and moon to make them the three noble children, and they became “evil deities” [14] (Owa, p. 28); however, the myth of Tsukuyomi differs from the case of Susanoo, as Tsukuyomi was only “kept away” from the sun deity, whereas Susanoo was “banished”. This difference, which includes the difference between “御” and “知”, as mentioned in Chapter 1 of this paper, is a subject for future research.

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### Abstract (Japanese)

日本における月神であるツクヨミは、最も重要な神の一つに数えられるにも関わらず、神話が非常に少ない。月神の活躍の乏しさについては、国学者や歴史学者のみならず心理学者も着目し、日本人の感性と結びつける説もあった。

『日本書紀』において、ツクヨミは穀物神に死を与えることで、穀物の誕生に貢献している。また、同書にある埴輪の馬の話にあるように、月夜は死者と接触できる空間であった。ツクヨミの領域が、滄海原潮之八百重、即ち遠い海、あるいは、日神から遠ざけられた夜といったように、離れた場所と強調されているのは、月が異界と現世を繋ぐと考えられていたであろうことと無関係ではないだろう。

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