

A SYMBOLIC USAGE OF THE BOAT IN JAPANESE MYTHOLOGY

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Abstract: *An instrument of discovery and initiation, the boat is a symbolic element in many important myths. In Egypt the boat was the “vehicle” that enabled the Sun’s journey across the sky, as well as the journey of the souls to the other world. Actually, in the esoteric traditions the boat is often a symbol of the knowledge beyond death. In Japanese myth we have the famous ama no iwabune, from the Jimmu story, as well as some interesting examples of symbolic uses of fune in Manyōshū poems. This paper compares these instances with many other mythological traditions and leaves a few open questions.*

The method and ideology that underlies my research comes from the work of René Guénon, as is best illustrated in his “Symboles fondamentaux de la Science Sacrée”, namely that myth is not a collective creation, but a really symbolic perpetuation of a much older esoteric knowledge that would have otherwise been lost, unless placed for safety in the oral, collective transmission.

Keywords: *Ama no ukihashi, Sora-mitsu-Yamato, goddess Hathor, the Seven Hathors, topological tunnels.*

The starting point of my research was the phrase from *Nihonshoki*, book III: “Now I have heard from the Ancient of the Sea that in the East there is a fair land encircled on all sides by blue mountains. Moreover, there is the one who flew down riding in a Heavenly Rock-boat. I think that this land will undoubtedly be suitable for the extension of the Heavenly task, so that its glory should fill the universe. It is doubtless, the centre of the world. The person who flew down was, I believe, Nigihaya-hi. Why should we not proceed thither and make it our capital?”¹

And:

“Finally, when Nigi-haya-hi no Mikoto soared across the Great Void in a Heaven-rock-boat, he espied this region and descended upon it. Therefore he gave it a name and called it Sora-mitsu-Yamato.”²

Sora-mitsu-Yamato is explained by the translator in the footnote as: “Sky-saw-Yamato. But *sora-mitsu* really means “that fills the sky”, i.e. that reaches to the farthest horizon. These names are merely poetical invention. They were never

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¹ The Ancient of the Sea was Shiho tsutsu no oji; Nigihaya-hi means “soft swift sun”. The fragment is cited from *Nihongi – Chronicles of Japan from the earliest Times to A.D. 697*, trans. from the original Chinese and Japanese by W.G. Aston, Tokyo, Charles E. Tuttle, 1998, pp. 110-111.

² Ibidem, p. 135.

in actual use.” W. G. Aston obviously had a big conceptual difficulty with “Yamato seen from the sky” which is, obviously, the best rendering for *Sora-mitsu-Yamato* in this context. Motoori Norinaga accepted the rendering of *Sora-mitsu-Yamato* as “Yamato seen from the sky”³, and Ian Hideo Levy beautifully translated *Sora mitsu/ Yamato no kuni wa* as “This land of Yamato/ seen by the gods on high”⁴.

Nigihayahi no mikoto, 饒速日命, is enshrined in several shrines near Kyoto, like Hikō Jinja, Iwafune Jinja or Ishikiri Tsurugi Jinja. In Iwafune Jinja (situated at 9-19-1, Kisaichi Katano, Osaka) Nigihayahi no mikoto is symbolized by a big rock (12 meters high and 12 meters wide), that looks like a ship. Legend has it that Nigihayahi no mikoto flew to the place of this shrine from Takamagahara, by this rock ship.

I had written a paper on some poems from *Manyōshū* and *Kokinshū* where the image of the boat has symbolic meanings that appear in European literature as well, that support so well Bachelard’s theories of the *Imaginaire*, or Creative Imagination of mankind, when I discovered the flying rock boat of *Nihonshoki*. I confess this shocked me, not only for realizing how careless was my prior reading of the *Nihonshoki*. The idea of Jimmu Tennō’s ancestor (Nigi-haya-hi no Mikoto) flying in a boat like an Egyptian solar deity across the land of Yamato was interesting, but I found no comments on it in the Western scholarship. Searching further, I discovered that Hirata Atsutane was *the* Japanese scholar that addressed the question. Great anthropologist *avant la lettre*, Atsutane was deeply interested in the supernatural and the bizarre, sensing that there are deeper meanings to be found therein, than just the surface value. On the *Ama no iwabune*, or the Heavenly Rock Boat, he seems to have had the following opinion: “*Ama no ukihashi* was used when gods deigned to come down from Heaven. They let it float in the big empty sky [when they] used it, and therefore it is called floating bridge. ... Moreover, it seems that this thing to go back and forth with, because it was like a boat riding on water, was also called Heavenly Rock Boat [*Ama no iwabune*].”⁵

So Hirata Atsutane equates the Heavenly Rock Boat with *Ama no ukihashi*, the Floating Bridge of Heaven.

I have taken the texts of Atsutane and Iida Takesato from *Historical Reality or Metaphorical Expression?* by Michael Wachutka. In a note of Wachutka’s book, Atsutane is further cited to have said in *Tamadasuki*: “*Fune* really means a utensil of any kind”. A utensil – it seemed so prosaic and discouraging at first. But it turned out to be very interesting, after all.

In his book Michael Wachutka discusses the two approaches to Japanese mythology: the emic one, or the inner view of Iida Takesato (1828-1900) and the etic or outside view of Karl Florentz. As far as our subject matter is concerned, Iida Takesato’s interpretations of the *Ama no ukihashi* are very interesting.

³ Marra, Michael F., *The Poetics of Motoori Norinaga*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 2007, pp.147-151.

⁴ In his translation *Ten Thousand Leaves: A Translation of the Manyōshū*, Japan’s Premier Anthology of Classical Poetry, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1981, vol. 1.

⁵ The quotation is from Michael Wachutka, *Historical Reality or Metaphorical Expression?*, London, Literatur Verlag Munster, Hamburg, 2001, pp. 139-140.

Iida cites many comments on this matter, from *Shaku Nihongi*, a compilation from late Kamakura period, where the author, Urabe Kanekata, collected all the research on *Nihongi*, of which the peak until then had been in the Heian period. I will quote again Iida.

“*Ama no ukihashi*. In the *Sha*[ku Nihon]gi it says: “Kanekata has the opinion that Ama no Ukihashi is Ama no Hashidate.”In the *Tango Kuni Fudoki* it is said: “In the N-E corner of the district of Yosa no Kōri there is Haya ishi no sato. In the sea of this village there stretches a long, big promontory. The length is 2,229 jō. The width, at some points, is less than 9 jō.....In former times it was called Ama no Hashidate.It is said, the land creating god, Izanagi no Mikoto, in order to go back and forth to heaven, erected a ladder. Therefore it is called Ama no hashidate [Heavenly standing ladder]. While the god was sleeping, it fell over.”

And a last quote: “Furthermore, in the *Harima Kuni Fudoki* it is said:”In the village Mashike in the Kako district there is a stone bridge. One legend goes that in the ancient times this bridge reached up to heaven. Eighty companions were coming and going down the bridge, therefore it is called Yaso Bridge.” And Iida commented on these fragments from *Fudoki* like this:”We see that this also is a bridge for traffic with heaven. ***In the Age of Gods, bridges leading up and down from heaven must have existed here and there.***” (my underline)

All these passages have in common an essential feature: they point to a direct communication with the world of the gods, via a very material channel. They also show the belief that there are certain geographical places in Japan where communication with the world of Heaven is possible, by this very concrete channel of communication, the bridge or ladder. Karl Florentz interpreted, in the Tylorian animist manner normal for his age, that Ame no ukihashi is the Rainbow⁶, personified by the ancient Japanese. But can we still subscribe to such interpretations in the 21-st century, after Jung, Eliade’s theories, or if we consider the large amount of data that we have now on hand in archaeology on ancient technology? I think not. In my opinion Iida’s view is a more modern and reasonable interpretation

The belief in sacred places that have the power to energize the pilgrim and help him connect to the core, source of his being, places so extraordinary that they could not have been made by just human effort, is widespread, in time and space. The Inca and Mayan Pyramids, or Egyptian Pyramids, have benefitted from explanations by way of extraterrestrial help, transfer of advanced technologies from other worldly beings, and so on. Actually, there is a whole bulk of very uncomfortable archaeology that the current academic view of our history cannot explain. I will not touch upon it here, although my paper is nothing but a plea for accepting even such disturbing views for serious consideration.

So what is the point of my research? First, I subscribe completely to Hirata Atsutane’s interpretation that *Ama no iwabune*, a Rock Boat flying in the sky, is more of a bridge, actually, than a boat, and that it is the same thing as *Ama no*

⁶ Michael Wachutka, *Historical Reality or Metaphorical Expression?*, Hamburg, London, Literatur Verlag Munster, 2001, p. 142.

ukihashi, the bridge that gods used to go back and forth to earth. Furthermore, strange as it may seem, I consider that Egyptian myth supports this interpretation.

I would like to compare this idea of concrete channel of communication between our world and that of the gods, that we see in Japanese mythology, with some data from Egyptian mythology, namely, the descent of the Goddess Hathor, with, guess... a Heavenly Boat, to the land of Egypt, to bring civilization.

Hathor was an important goddess in Egypt, with many attributes, “the same name [of Hathor] covering actually, the initially multiple personality of several gods”⁷. Hathor was the goddess of the sky, in an early age considered to be the beloved daughter of Re (the Sun) and Nut (the Sky) and mother of the solar god Horus. She had countless attributes, like being considered “the living soul of trees”, for example, especially the sycamore, or the living embodiment of gold. She was also the patron of far off lands, like Punt or Byblos, and of the Mountain of the Dead, on the West of the Nile. At Thebes, where she was the protector of the dead, she acquired a plural personality, becoming the Seven Hathors, seven fairies who ruled the human destiny, like the Greek Moiras.

In the Ptolemaic period, these Seven Hathors, were associated with the group of the brightest 7 stars from the Constellation of Pleiades, the Greek nymphs, daughters of Apollo, that turned into stars⁸.

So, a group of divine beings, called Hathors, who had come with a divine boat from the sky (maybe the constellation of the Pleiades), went across Egypt, unfolding a civilizing mission⁹. It might seem a little fanciful, but it might be not quite so, altogether. Anyway, it makes a good parallel to the image of the god Izanagi, coming down and up between Heaven and Earth, on *Ama no hashidate/ukihashi*, creating what was to become the Japanese land.

The images of Hathor riding in a boat with other gods, and a helmsman, are on the walls of tombs in the Valley of Deir el Bahari or at her temple at Dendera. Her origin as a being of the Sky, is clearly proven by her representation as a cow, for the body of a cow with stars on it was the oldest Egyptian representation of the sky.

Then, as evidence of her being loved by the people, as well as of her coming and going out of Egypt several times, there are fragments of ancient Egyptian poems that show the joy of the people when the goddess comes back from a voyage to Nubia (*On the Return of the Goddess Hathor –Tefnut from Nubia*, “Hathor has gone, at dawn, toward her house. How good it is, how good it is, when she comes back to us”)¹⁰.

⁷ *The Encyclopedia of Egyptian Civilization and Art*, ed. Georges Posener, Bucharest, Meridiane Publishing, 1974, p. 134.

⁸ Victor Kernbach, *Dictionary of General Mythology*, Bucharest, Albatros Publishing, 1983, pp. 253-254.

⁹ I quote Florin Gheorghită: “This strange mythical tradition leads us to the presupposition that cultivated persons in Egypt knew that across their country went a “group of divine Hathors” of celestial origin, and knew even where these Hathors came from: the group of stars known astronomically as the Pleiades”, in *The Galactic Brilliant Ones*, Bucharest, Coresi Publishing, 2009, p. 133.

¹⁰ Florin Gheorghită, *The Galactic Brilliant Ones*, Bucharest, Coresi Publishing, 2009, pp. 133-134.

The region of Karnak, Luxor, and the Valley of Hathor (Deir el Bahari), with the Dendera temple of Hathor, is one of the oldest places where the ancient civilization of Egypt developed. The Temple of Dendera poses indeed many mysteries, as it contains the famous stone Zodiacal Calendar, which shows positions of the constellations some 50,000 years ago. In the basement of the old temple were discovered bas-reliefs that show “people holding in their hands big electric bulbs (!!), with a filament (fig. 83), powered by cables from an electric battery”¹¹. Romanian researcher Florin Gheorghiu has an interesting hypothesis concerning these facts. As he puts it, these enigmatic artifacts as well as mythological traditions widespread in the ancient world suggest “the descent from heaven, in the respective places, of some highly evolved, unknown beings, who demonstrated miraculous powers in a way beneficial to humans. such troubling remains speak of themselves: they demonstrate a fact that archaeologists – as the whole contemporary scientific community, actually – avoid and push back repeatedly, namely that highly evolved beings were present there for a long period of time.”¹²

This archaeological evidence of a contact with other civilizations, which was gathered from around the world in a thick file with the label of paleoastronautics, is not the object of my paper. There is yet another interesting aspect in the hypotheses of Florin Gheorghiu which connects well to our *Ama no ukihashi*, or Floating Bridge to Heaven, from *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki*: namely the idea of topological tunnels in which the space-time continuum is canceled, and which appear to exist in those energetic places on Earth, where the exchange of energy with the Cosmos is intense, which were considered Sacred places (and where civilization first appeared). It is through such a topological tunnel, or Portal, on the Gizeh plateau near the Sphinx, and on the Nile Valley near Dendera, that highly evolved beings, perceived as gods, descended to Earth.

If we approach the notion of tunnels where space and time are abolished, (otherwise called Portals to another world), they too are mentioned in myth. The Egyptian Book of the Dead mentions “gates with locks” in the sky, Romanian folk tradition has “the barrier checkpoints of the sky” (vămile văzduhului), and Biblical or Muslim traditions that speak of prophets Enoch or Mahomet being taken to the sky for initiation have them pass through such Portals.

Modern physics speaks about properties of elementary particles to preserve and transmit information, by making a quantic void, a surplus of negative energy somewhat like a black hole, which could act like a tunnel through space and time. P-branes and wormholes, are terms of modern physics, but they could translate in terms of myth as heavenly floating boats and bridges.

The story of Urashima Taro has been cited¹³, together with Irish Saga *Imram Brain maic Febail* or the Romanian folk story *Everlasting Youth (Tinerețe fără bătrânețe)* to support the possible extension of the theory of the relativity of time and space. What physicists call the “dilatation” of time, which can only be demonstrated in a small proportion by our technology, happens amply to

¹¹ Idem, p. 130, and illustration on p. 315 with photograph from Dendera by R. Habeck.

¹² Ibidem, pp. 129-130.

¹³ Victor Kernbach, *The Essential Myths*, Bucharest, ESE Publishing, 1978.

Urashima Taro, for whom time flies much faster in the Underwater Palace of Otohime.

In one of his books the Romanian researcher discusses the problem of archaeological and mythological “proofs” to contact with extra-terrestrial beings, giving many opinions of German, Chinese or Russian historians. I particularly liked what a Russian historian, dr. Igor S. Lisievici, says: “We all know it is no longer ridiculous to study meticulously these old documents ... even if what we find does not seem to be in agreement with traditional notions. An attentive analytical study offers a very interesting image of the capacities manifested by the alien humanoid sages called ... Sons of Heaven and who, according to these texts would have visited South East Asia in the third millennium B.C. E.”¹⁴ So, as we see, not only the ancestors of the Japanese Emperors, but also of the Chinese ones seem to be descended like this, as we see in the stories about Huang di.¹⁵

The point that I want to make in this paper is whether myth can be used as evidence to support theories and hypotheses in physics. My answer to such a question is yes, and Iida Takesato says it candidly but convincingly: for him, **“bridges for traffic with heaven must have existed here and there in the Age of Gods”**. If we are living in the 21st century and we no longer share Tylor’s reductionist view on myth, we certainly will not want to say that the ancient Japanese saw the rainbow in the sky and called it *Ama no ukihashi*. We might prefer a more modern interpretation as that some reminiscences of a contact with more advanced beings coming from the stars, in the dawn of mankind, were preserved in some myths.

So the issue here is: can we combine mythology with modern science into a new worldview? Many contemporary authors do it, calling in mythology to help unite the two conflicting views that we have of ourselves: the traditional view of Newtonian physics that tells us we are solid and move through time unidirectionally, and the quantum physics view, which tells us that we are 99% empty space, that the particles we are made of can bilocate, or, actually, seem to take particle form only when they are observed ... and many other strange behaviors that we observe mostly in myth. We no longer can believe myth to be true, but maybe it is time to look at it again as being true. Literally true, but instead of a stone staircase to heaven we could think of a spatial wormhole where the information that makes up you and me could be preserved indefinitely and recomposed, perhaps, in another universe...

Illustrations for boat symbolism in myth and prehistoric artifact

The Megalithic civilization that flourished before the arrival of the Indo-Europeans, left stone funeral buildings, dolmens, menhirs and stone circles all around Europe (Ireland, Scandinavia, from Gibraltar and the Spanish coast even to the Northern coast of Africa, Arabia, India and Japan. A symbol that can be found on these stones, for example at the burial site of Newgrange, Ireland, or on buildings in Bretagne and Sweden, is “the boat with the sun”. Very similar to

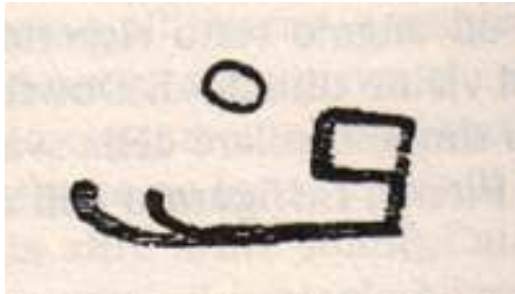
¹⁴ Florin Gheorghită, *op.cit.*, p. 49.

¹⁵ Florin Gheorghită, *op.cit.*, p. 69.

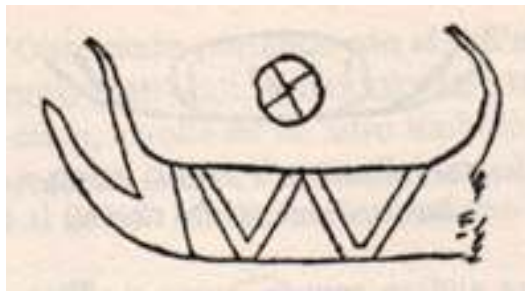
these images is the Egyptian boat that ships the souls of the dead to the other world, or the one which carries the sun god, Re, in his daily journey across the sky.



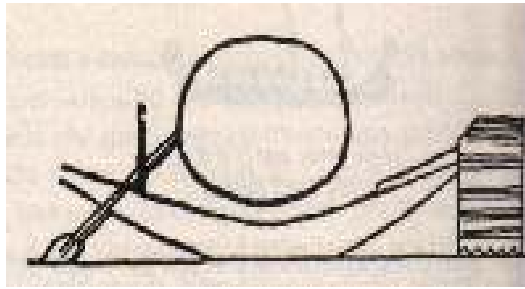
“The boat with the sun” drawing of the symbol engraved at Newgrange site.



Drawing of a boat found on megalithic buildings in Bretagne



Drawing of a boat as found on megalithic Buildings in Sweden



*Egyptian boat*¹⁶

The association of the boat with flying is present, from the very beginning in many mythologies. In the Sumerian and Chinese one we have the “boat”- “moon” equivalence, where the souls of the dead go, with the boat of the waning moon, to a place – an island, the “Black Moon Island” – from where rebirth is possible, just like in the cycle of the moon¹⁷. Hence, a lot of interesting iconographic material (including certain Chinese characters like the one for new moon), where the boat appears.

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¹⁶ All illustrations are taken from the article *Celts, Myths, Druids* from the website: http://webospace.webring.com/people/bu/um_2941/miti_eng.htm

¹⁷ Klaus Antoni, *Death and Transformation: the Presentation of Death in East and South East Asia*. In Asian Folklore Studies, 1982, vol. 41/2, pp.148-149.