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Deposited in *Repositório ISCTE-IUL*:

2024-05-13

Deposited version:

Publisher Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Vaz da Silva, F. (2023). The cave episode from Japan's mythical history. In Ulrich Marzolph (Ed.), *Reading matters: An Unfestschrift for Regina Bendix*. (pp. 399-404). Göttingen: Göttingen University Press.

Further information on publisher's website:

[10.17875/gup2023-2303](https://doi.org/10.17875/gup2023-2303)

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## The Cave Episode from Japan's Mythical History

*Francisco Vaz da Silva*

First, cocks crowed; then there was singing and rhythmic thumping. Riotous laughter exploded in the night. It sounded like a predawn party, but how could that be? No dawn was expected, nor was there cause for mirth. Since the sun had gone into hiding, constant night reigned; the distressed cries of the myriad deities were abundant like summer flies, and calamities were rife. Yet, despite all the doom and gloom, something cheerful was at hand. She opened a chink in the rock, peeped out, and asked why there was cheering. The deities rejoice, she was told, because a deity greater than the sun goddess was among them. Frankly puzzled now, she pushed aside the bolder that blocked the entry to the cave, came out cautiously, and watched. There was, indeed, this brilliant lady standing before her—a dazzling person very much like herself, really. She also saw the cause of all the mirth: a spirited deity, who *had bared her breasts and exposed her genitals, danced quite entranced—and stomped her feet rhythmically*—on an upturned tub. Amaterasu, ever more puzzled, came forth to get a better view. Quickly, someone blocked the entry to the cave; there was no retreat now. Sunlight was restored to the world, days and nights resumed their rounds. There was cause for joy and laughter.

A folklorist hypothetically recording the proceedings outside the heavenly cave where Amaterasu, the Japanese Sun goddess, once retreated might have come up with some background notes. She would have certainly mentioned that the 800 myriad *kami*, alarmed at Amaterasu's eclipse, plotted a plan to bring the sunlight back into the world. First they caused cocks to crow, then they hung long strings of beads, a mirror, and offering strips from the branches of a flourishing *sakaki* tree, uprooted from a heavenly mountain, which they placed in front of the cave as an

offering. (The ancestor folklorist would probably go ahead and note that the sakaki tree, *Cleyera japonica*, is an evergreen, and its name is written with ideographs meaning “wisdom tree,” “hill tree,” and “kami tree.”) And then, most spectacularly, Uzume kindled fires, overturned a bucket and started dancing on it, and “she became divinely possessed, exposed her breasts, and pushed her skirt-band down to her genitals” (Philippi 1992: 84). This performance elicited hearty laughter from the assembled kami. As Amaterasu peeked out, the deity she saw, supposedly superior to herself, was in fact her own image (enhanced by the sparkling of myriad beads) in the mirror.

Assiduously paying attention to fairy tales made me realize that mirrors in folklore are often linked to spirits and tend to show hidden essences rather than appearances. That is why, for instance, a beautiful princess sought by a prince—who distressingly finds her in a hideous guise—encourages him to look at her true form in a mirror (Grimm 197, “The Chrystal Ball”). But two and a half decades ago, for better or worse, I hadn’t been to fairy-tale school yet. I then felt like a brother-in-arms to Roland Barthes as he looked to Japan for “the possibility of a difference, of a mutation, of a revolution in the propriety of symbolic systems” (Barthes 1989: 3–4). Fired up by the stark otherness of Japanese traditional representations, I spent feverish months trying to get a hold on the inner logic of many stories preserved in two eighth-century collections of traditions about the origin of Japan and its mythical history, the *Kojiki* (Records of Ancient Matters) and the *Nihongi* (*Chronicles of Japan*). The cave episode didn’t particularly strike me at the time. It took a recent look at how the scene appears in *ukiyo-e* woodblock print art, the jolt of it, to prompt this discussion. The following thoughts are poised between very old texts and more recent images; I probe the common ground between heterogeneous depictions of the cave scene to understand its linchpin: Uzume and the laughter she rouses.

That Amaterasu was shown to herself in the beads-adorned mirror is interesting. The same word, *tama*, designates beads and “spirit.” And Amaterasu herself explains, as she bestows the beads and the mirror to her descendant who will institute worship and government on earth, that the mirror is “my spirit” (Philippi 1992: 140). Indeed, these beads and this mirror (along with a sword wrought from the tail of an eight-forked serpent at a later time by Amaterasu’s brother Susanō-o), are among the three sacred regalia of the Emperor invested with the Sun deity’s spirit. The point is that the “kami tree,” decked with the mirror and the beads, contained the essence of Amaterasu—and it was offered to Amaterasu. Amaterasu was drawn out by her ritual double; symbolically speaking, Amaterasu was lured out by herself.

What about Uzume? Was she, like the mirror (and the) tree, Amaterasu’s ritual double in this scene? Certainly she provoked the laughter, the cause of which, she reported, is a kami superior to Amaterasu. Was Uzume, then, the superior kami she talked about?



Fig. 1: "Origin of Music and Dance at the Rock Door." Woodblock print, signed Shunsai Toshimasa. 19th century. From Wikipedia Commons, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Amaterasu\\_cave.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Amaterasu_cave.JPG) (accessed May 25, 2021).

Consider a nineteenth-century woodblock print that conveys the uproar of the laughing kami (Fig. 1). Uzume's dance takes center stage, and the entranced dancer is flanked by the cock and the sakaki tree bearing the mirror, as expected. However, Uzume wears the string of beads that the old texts hang on the tree. What is more, the flowers in her right hand look like sakaki flowers. The overall suggestion is that Uzume and the tree share one role. The association between Uzume and the tree is not without precedent in the ancient texts. One tradition in *Nihongi* states that Uzume made herself a headdress with sakaki greenery (Aston 1972: 44). More significant perhaps, the link between the tree and the dancer is intelligible once you recall that the tree is a kami tree, and the dancer is kami possessed (*kamigakari*). Which kami, then? The answer is self-evident. That Uzume wears the beads whereas the sakaki holds the mirror recalls that their shared function is to lure Amaterasu out of the cave. That is, indeed, the crux of the story. Another textual variant boils down the deities' plan to the decision of making an image of Amaterasu and praying to it (46–47). In this instance, both Uzume and the tree get subsumed in the Amaterasu image. Yet another variant (Chamberlain 1981: 64) states that Uzume's headdress is made of spindle-tree leaves, *Euonymus planipes*. These leaves turn to crimson-to-ruby red in autumn and glow brightly in the dark season—as though Uzume shone with a solar halo in the dark. Add to this that Uzume "kindled fires" before she started dancing (Aston 1972: 44), a detail usually emphasized in *ukiyo-e* images. Having laid out these convergences, I dare state the obvious: in the woodblock print image, Uzume is dressed like Amaterasu—she looks like the active version of the collected deity.

Acknowledging that Uzume is indeed Amaterasu's ritual double makes it possible to explain a couple other details not in the texts. Uzume in the image holds a sword in her right hand. Although one textual variant claims that she "took in her hand a spear wreathed with Eulalia grass" (Aston 1972, 44), none that I know mentions a sword. Also, the circular plate at the center of Uzume's necklace of beads is unexpected in light of the texts. But consider that the circular plate is a passable allusion to the circular mirror, and that the sword matches the third article in the sacred imperial regalia. Allow that Uzume wears allusions to the sacred regalia, and all the chips fall into place. This makes sense because Amaterasu herself can be seen holding the sacred regalia, as befits the ancestress of the imperial lineage. Consider another woodblock print signed Toyokuni III (Fig. 2). In this scene Amaterasu wears the regalia at the cave's door, and she stares at her own semblance in both the mirror and Uzume.



Fig. 2: *Amaterasu Leaving the Cave (left half)*, signed Toyokuni III. Edo period (1603 to 1868).  
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Fig. 2 was, incidentally, the trigger for the present query. It prompted this question: why does Uzume (portrayed here in a courtly and composed mode) appear so eerily similar to the sun deity? Answering the question entails first understanding what the sun eclipse is about, and then asking what the connection may be between eroticism and laughter (associated with Uzume) and the sun (impersonated by Amaterasu).

A modicum of background context is required here. At the beginning of the world, Izanagi and his sister Izanami united sexually to create the islands and the kami of Japan. Unfortunately, the birth of the fire kami burned Izanami's genitals and she passed away to *Yōmi*, the realm of the dead. Izanagi tried to rescue her, but he broke a taboo and saw her putrid body. Therefore, he had to flee *Yōmi* and blocked the exit with a boulder. The couple split—Izanami, henceforth the great kami of *Yōmi*, sends people to their graves whereas Izanagi propitiates new births. Izanagi then proceeded to divest himself from the impurities contracted in *Yōmi*. From washing his left eye Amaterasu came into being; from the right eye, the lunar Tsukuyomi; and washing a lower, murkier place—the nose mucus—created Susanō-o, a willful troublemaker associated with storms. Izanagi bestowed celestial ruling on Amaterasu and passed to her his own tama necklace; then he destined Tsukuyomi to rule the night; and he assigned to Susanō-o the realm of the oceans. But from the start Susanō-o wept and howled relentlessly. His weeping “caused the verdant mountains to wither and all the rivers and seas to dry up. At this, the cries of malevolent deities were everywhere abundant like summer flies; and all sorts of calamities arose in all things” (Philippi 1992: 72). The weeper raged because he longed to join his mother Izanami in *Yōmi*; therefore, Izanagi ordered him to settle in the netherworld. But first Susanō-o visited his sister in heaven. There he destroyed the rice fields, voided his excrement in the hall of first fruits, and even managed to soil his sister. To cap it all, Susanō-o hurled a backward-flayed colt into the sacred weaving hall. As a consequence, the heavenly weaver stroke her genitals against the shuttle and died (80). Other variants state that Amaterasu herself is the weaver who wounded herself with the shuttle (Aston 1972: 41), or else her junior version, Young-Sun-Maiden, wounded herself and passed away (45). Anyway, Amaterasu hid in the cave, and the alternation of days and nights came to an end. Now “the cries of the myriad deities were everywhere abundant, like summer flies; and all manner of calamities arose” (Philippi 1992: 81). In this dire situation, the deities devised a plan to get Amaterasu back into the world.

Amaterasu emerges overall as a successor to Izanagi, whose tama she received, whereas Susanō-o aligns with Izanami the ruler of *Yōmi*. He unleashed in heaven the impurity characteristic of the underworld, and he led Amaterasu (or a transparent surrogate) to pass away, after which everlasting night prevailed along with calamities otherwise associated with Susanō-o's wailing. Important to note, Amaterasu's retreat into the cave after wounding her genitals recalls Izanami's previous passing into *Yōmi* after burning her genitals. In this regard Amaterasu is in continuity with her mother. The full import of Amaterasu's eclipse is that it repeats Izanami's original death, with a twist. In the first round Izanami became the ruler of *Yōmi*, but Izanagi exited the underworld and carried on with creation. In the second round Amaterasu died like Izanami, yet she must exit the cave like Izanagi in order to protect the living. The point is that Amaterasu must be brought from the clutches of death, yet the sun is required to elicit life from death (which is why Amaterasu must be brought back in the first place). In slightly different terms:



only the power of Amaterasu could bring Amaterasu back from death. Some moderns would call this a catch-22 situation. The ancient Japanese came up with Uzume's ritual act instead.

Step back and look at the cosmic drama. Susanō-o's weeping and howling correlate with eclipse and death, whereas laughter and erotism correlate with sunlight and life. This is a recurring symbolic code. Vladimir Propp, taking a welcome stride to overcome "formalist comparativism" (Propp 1984: 128), noted that in folklore worldwide the "laughing threshold" sets apart the realms of death and life. For this reason, coming into life—and bringing life forth—often happens to the sound of laughter (133). Because the sun promotes vegetable life, it is "connected with laughter" (137). And because generating life is at stake, laughing and "the singing of obscene songs, the ritual use of obscenities (aeschrology), and gestures of exposing oneself" while sowing, plowing, and planting are equivalent acts (138–9). When Demeter laughs spring returns to the earth, Propp remarked, and he cited the Japanese parallel: Amaterasu "reappeared and the earth became light again after Uzume, the goddess of joy, danced obscene dances in front of her" (139).

Strip away the literary niceties—the psychodrama of Amaterasu's sulking, curiosity, and final persuasion to come out—and the raw ritual efficacy of the cosmic drama stands out. Given the sun's demise, it takes solar allomotifs—as Alan Dundes might say—to bring the sun back. Uzume is Amaterasu's mirror image insofar as she enacts solar allomotifs. She is (temporarily) a greater kami in that she rescues the sun deity. In the ancient drama there is no catch-22—there is confidence in the life-bringing power of Eros, in the unshackling charm of laughter.

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