

# Melusine and Toyotamahime: Dissemination of a Culture by Sea

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Japan's founding myth tells the story of a crocodile princess called Toyotamahime,<sup>1</sup> wife of Prince Hoori. She asks her husband not to look at her as she gives birth, but he disobeys her and so sees that his wife is a crocodile. Finding out that she has been seen, the princess goes back to her country, that is, the bottom of the sea.

This tale can be compared to the one about Melusine (Half-Lancner, 1990, among others). In both stories there are common motifs such as the command not to look, and disobeying the command, as well as the transformation into a reptile. Both stories are also tales about the founding of a royal house.<sup>2</sup>

## **Myths from neighbouring countries**

In Korea the wife of King Chakutegon (Ancient Korea or Korai) was accustomed to returning to her country now and again by going down a well in the palace after turning into a dragon. One day the king noticed, and from that day his wife never came back again.

In China, on the edge of Dongting Hu lake, a man met a woman who invited him to her palace at the bottom of the lake. She was a female dragon.<sup>3</sup>

In Cambodia, a flute-playing shepherd enchanted the dragon princess with his music, and she invited him to her palace; but one day he saw the street was crowded with dragons and he took to his heels. However, the dragon woman laid an egg on the lake shore and her child became the country's first king.<sup>4</sup>

## **Melusine-type myths the world over**

The founding myth of the Nartes tells of the union between a frog princess and a prince. The frog turns into a beautiful princess, but during the day she hides in her

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animal shape and asks her husband not to let her be insulted. But one day, while carrying her in his pocket to a village meeting, he allows himself to be insulted by a member of the tribe and the frog goes back home, leaving their child on her husband's shoulder (Dumézil, 1965).

An Indian myth recounts the story of the union between the goddess of the river Ganges and King Shantanu. He was meant to utter no criticism whatsoever of his wife, but having seen her throw her child into the water he reproached her for it and she returned home. The river goddess has to have a serpentine form. That is how we trace the route by which the same myth was disseminated: a serpentine goddess is united with a human being, but after the husband breaks a taboo she goes away leaving behind children who become the ancestors of a dynasty. It is possible to trace the route followed by the myth from the Ossetias as far as Japan, through Vedic India, China and Korea; some people even see in it the traces of the movement of an equestrian population.<sup>5</sup>

### Motifs related to the Toyotamahime story

The Toyotamahime myth contains not merely a Melusine-type story; the meeting between Prince Hoori and Toyotamahime is brought about by the loss of a fish-hook. While searching for it the prince comes upon the dragon palace. This motif is found throughout the world but it is in Indonesian mythology particularly that Nobuhiro Matsumoto claims to discover the source of the Toyotamahime myth. In one of these myths the hero loses his lance while hunting a wild boar and when he searches for it he comes to the underworld, where he meets the princess, who has been wounded by a lance, and he cures her.<sup>6</sup>

Most texts of the Toyotamahime myth say she is a crocodile.<sup>7</sup> But it is in Indonesia especially that we find several crocodile stories, among them 'The crocodile and the hare'. This is also to be found in the *Kojiki*. Ohonamuchi meets a hare who tells him that a crocodile skinned him because he tricked it. The hare, wanting to cross the sea, had called up the crocodiles and, saying that he was counting them, he used their backs to walk across. This Indonesian tale is identical to the myth in the *Kojiki* that comes a little before the Toyotamahime story: the tale of crocodiles tricked by a hare.<sup>8</sup>

### Other tales of the serpentine woman in Japan

Some say the word 'crocodile' does not signify that animal because it has never lived in the Japanese archipelago. Those who try to deny the existence of the tropical beast think they see the myth of the snake woman in the Toyotamahime story. It is true that in the *Kojiki* we find a parallel tale to that of Toyotamahime: the story of the snake goddess Hinagahime and Prince Homuchiwake. According to the psychologist Hayao Kawai, it is a negative version of the heroic story of Susanoo. The hero resembles Susanoo, but all his actions end in failure. If Susanoo encounters an eight-headed python in the river Hi, Homuchiwake meets a python too, and if Susanoo vanquishes the python Homuchiwake runs away from the monster, whom he had

previously loved in the human form of Hinagahime. However, this story is not just the negative of the heroic tale of Susano, it is also the negative of the Toyotamahime narrative. While Toyotamahime flees from her husband, it is Homuchiwake who flees from the dragon princess. Where Toyotamahime is a goddess of abundance, Hinagahime must be the goddess of destruction, or she is a bad fairy like Lamia.

In *Tales that now belong to the past*<sup>9</sup> can be found the story of a snake woman who pursues her ungrateful lover. This is one of the variants of the Hinagahime narrative and that same tale was retold by an Edo period writer, Akinari Ueda, in a short story entitled *The love of a snake woman*, which is also one of the sources for the film adaptation of the *Tales of the pale and silvery moon after the rain* by Mizoguchi.

### Snake story or crocodile tale?

In most cases the Melusine story contains a snake figure, but in Japan, as in Indonesia, the tale uses the figure of a crocodile. Is this a regional adaptation? In the myth of the supernatural woman, she may take any shape: goose-footed fairy, heavenly fairy, mermaid, water nymph, swan virgin, etc. But the author of the *Kojiki* wanted to make a distinction between the swan virgin and the crocodile goddess: the crocodile goddess is not the softened figure of a swan; she is above all a dangerous wild animal. The tale of the swan virgin also resembles the story of Melusine and we might say the snake and the swan fulfil the same mythological function, whereas the snake and the crocodile are different. Toyotamahime is a crocodile who rules the sea.<sup>10</sup>

Mythological texts around the *Kojiki* present other stories about crocodiles. One of the children of Ohonamuchi, the founder of Japan,<sup>11</sup> occasionally assumes the shape of a crocodile. The *Nihonshoki* in particular says he courted a certain girl in that form, and the child of that union became the wife of the first emperor.<sup>12</sup>

In one version this fertile god is presented as the god of thunder, and in Chinese civilization the thunder god is a dragon. So there is some contamination between the dragon or snake traditions and those of the crocodile.

In subsequent traditions the figure of the snake becomes that of a devilish seductress, as in Europe, while the crocodile figure stays the same: crocodile, sea monster, but always beneficent rather than demonic.

We should also note that in ancient Japan less of a distinction was made between the word crocodile and the word shark, and that 'crocodile' can mean any sea monster who devours humans, as opposed to the seductive snake. The *Fudoki*, geographical writings from each region,<sup>13</sup> tell tales of homicidal crocodiles (or sharks). They are terrifying but not in the least demonic creatures.

### Other tales from the coastal region

Japanese folktales tell stories of 'the crocodile and the cheating monkey'. In some tales the monster may be a turtle, and especially when the story tells of the monkey's voyage to a palace under the sea it is very often a turtle who carries him on his back.<sup>14</sup>

In other regions, in Asia or Africa, this tale often features a crocodile but never a snake. It is the story of the crocodile who is tricked. The devouring monster is presented as a large animal who easily lets himself be tricked by a wicked cheat. In other stories the crocodile appears as the incarnation of our ancestors. The voracious beast turns into an animal ancestor. In Oceania the shark replaces it in the role of man-eater and of ancestor incarnate.

The tale of the crocodile tricked by the monkey is one variant of the story entitled *The crocodiles and the hare*. In the folktales of India the crocodile often appears as the good ferryman for a Buddhist monk. Similarly in Egypt, the crocodile's primary function in stories is either as ferryman or, on the contrary, as the one who stops people crossing the Nile.

Lévi-Strauss thinks Japan's myth of the white hare might be one of the variants of the Isis myth, if we ignore the difference in period. Indeed the time difference is not important. First, no one knows at what period the story was introduced into Japan, since the date 712 merely refers to the writing of the *Kojiki*, which could contain older myths. Then, even if the date of the myth's arrival in Japan is relatively late, it could be thought that at that time the crocodile myth was alive in Egypt or other countries where the myth might have spread. We can find crocodile myths or tales in Egypt, southern India, Indonesia and Japan. The Toyotamahime myth is one of them, along with the tales of 'the hare and the crocodile' or those of 'the monkey and the crocodile'. So it is possible to identify a cultural area of the crocodile that extends from Egypt to Japan.

The myth of the snake woman of the Lamia type might come from China by the northern route. Indeed we cannot deny the existence of a cultural transmission between China and Japan, but if there has been a spread of Indo-European myths that even included Japan, there might have been others. The crocodile story could therefore indicate to us another route for dissemination of myths by sea.

Haruo Suwa (2006) thinks the Toyotamahime myth may have come from the south of China, where there are similar traditions, but that does not preclude the possibility of extending the area of spread of the story and, though there are crocodiles in the region of the long river in China, the crocodile tale may be restricted to the coastal areas.<sup>15</sup>

### The monkey and the crocodile and other tales

The existence of tales about 'the monkey and the crocodile' and 'the crocodile and the hare' leads us to think that folk traditions in ancient Japan were linked to south Asian traditions by the sea route. An episode in the story of the monkey god Sarutahiko also supports this theory. Sarutahiko lets himself be caught by a giant shell that drags him into the sea, and in an Indonesian tale the same plot can be found in a story about the monkey and the turtle.<sup>16</sup>

Toyotamahime is a crocodile. Prince Hoori meets her when he loses his fish-hook. Another fisherman catches a turtle, which carries him to the dragon's palace.<sup>17</sup> (The turtle and the crocodile are identical in these stories.) A monkey lets himself be dragged by a turtle to a palace under the sea to be killed (Japan). He gets away by

tricking the turtle. A monkey tricks a crocodile to cross a river (Indonesia). A hare tricks some crocodiles to cross the sea (Japan). Isis tricks the ferryman of the Nile, which is full of crocodiles. A monkey tricks a turtle, who takes his revenge by letting him be caught by a shell (Indonesia). The monkey god Sarutahiko lets himself be dragged to the bottom of the sea by a shell. In all these tales the monkey or hare<sup>18</sup> tricks a crocodile or turtle after living with them. And the Toyotamahime tale follows the myth of the hare and the crocodile in the *Kojiki*. The stories of 'the crocodile and the monkey' are found in the maritime regions of the south Asian countries, and a similar crocodile tale is also found in Egypt. Furthermore, most of the tales have a seaside setting, the actors are fishermen, the drama unfolds beside the sea, and so on.

The fact that they have these elements in common shows how likely it is that all Japanese myths have a close connection with maritime traditions that circulated myths and tales to Indonesia, India and even Egypt. The chief actors in these stories are monkeys, hares, crocodiles or turtles.

The other routes of cultural dispersion are indisputable, such as the one that came from China via Korea or, most notably, the interior route along which tales were transmitted with the caravans that travelled through the deserts. In addition there were books that recorded those myths and carried them, but the existence of parallel stories between Indonesia and Japan makes us think that there was also a sea route for the diffusion of Indian culture, which might extend as far as Arabia and Egypt. It is said that the crocodile can swim in the sea and though it may be only a legend at least its story may make the sea voyage. The sailors of the Indian Ocean would thus have spread the crocodile tale, or perhaps it was Indian merchants who recounted stories collected all round the world.<sup>19</sup> It is very hard to say what the precise mechanisms were, but it is clear that from ancient times there was a sea route for dissemination of a culture between India and Japan via Indonesia, and if some of these stories are found in Egypt and Japan we should not be particularly surprised.<sup>20</sup> The existence of the Silk Road on the mainland notwithstanding, the Toyotamahime myth may be proof that there really were other routes – a sea route, a route for cultural diffusion through books and a route for oral transmission – that could link Japan with the Mediterranean world.

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Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

## Notes

1. When he goes to the dragon palace Prince Hoori finds Princess Toyotamahime, the dragon king's daughter, there and marries her; he leaves her in the dragon palace when he returns to his country, but she follows him there and gives birth to a child.
2. We need to take into account the literary inventions of Jean d'Arras. He is supposed to have collected many popular tales and added literary imaginings to them.
3. Hisako Kimishima tells this story.
4. Akihide Mishina was the first to recount this myth.
5. A theory articulated by Namio Egami in 1948.
6. In other tales of the same type we find instead a marvellous bird wounded by an arrow. But the fish-

- hook motif is found of course in maritime regions.
7. The *Nihonshoki* gives four variants of the main text for this same myth.
  8. In other stories the hare is replaced by a monkey or another animal.
  9. A collection of 12<sup>th</sup>-century tales.
  10. Some people think the word crocodile indicated the shark in old Japanese. But whether shark or crocodile, it is still a carnivorous monster that threatens South Asian or Oceanic peoples.
  11. Kotoshironushi.
  12. It was the first retelling of the Toyotamahime myth that gave rise to the father of the first emperor. The latter's wife was supposed to have been born of the union between a crocodile and a human girl.
  13. On the emperor's orders each region produced geographical descriptions mixed with myths and legends (8th century).
  14. There is another well-known Japanese tale: the fisherman Urashima comes to the palace under the sea by letting himself be pulled by a turtle he catches.
  15. Koji Inada also thinks the story of the hare and the crocodile may have come from Siberian peoples. We might say that this is the furthest limit of the crocodile story's northerly spread.
  16. The turtle, tricked by the monkey, wants to take his revenge on him and attracts him to the sea's edge; there he invites him to play with a giant shell which drags him to the bottom of the sea by grabbing him (a tale collected by de Vries, 1925).
  17. The story of the fisherman Urashima.
  18. Prince Hoori is nicknamed the 'fruits of the mountain', and in Japan the abundance of the mountain is represented by the shape of a monkey.
  19. Though it was Buddhist monks in particular who brought books from China, it was illiterate merchants who are said to have come by the southern sea route.
  20. Some aspects of Sarutahiko, the Japanese monkey god, appear in the Egyptian god Thot. The character of Susano, who rules over the underworld, the kingdom of roots, makes us think of Osiris as well.

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