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## **Can Japanese Mythology contribute to the Comparative Eurasian Mythology?**

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### **Introduction**

Classical Japanese mythology was recorded mainly in the *Kojiki* (712) and *Nihonshoki* (720). The production of these books were inspired by the introduction of writing and advanced ideas of technology, agriculture, philosophy, religions (Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism), and politics from China. Episodes in these mythological texts show motifs common not only to classical Chinese myths but also to various mythologies of other Euro-Asian countries. One reason is that Japan, being situated at the eastern coast of Eurasian continent, had received many cultural influences from neighboring regions. Bordered on the north by Siberia, on the west by the Korean peninsula, and on the southwest by southern China and Taiwan, overseas influences could penetrate in Japan from various directions (Map1). Another reason is that Japanese archipelago has been inhabited from ca. 10,000 B.C. to the present in relative isolation and safety from the more powerful foreign invaders. Thus the archaeological remains from the oldest pre-agricultural Stone Age to the Bronze Age, Iron Age, down to the historical periods are well attested. That means that cultural strata discerned in the classical Japanese mythology could be compared with actual archaeological discoveries enabling to examine the validity of mythological traditions.

The comparison of classical Japanese mythology and mythologies of various other Eurasian countries has been conducted by many eminent scholars: In Japan, by late Taryo Obayashi (n.1), Atsuhiko Yoshida (n.2), and Hitoshi Yamada (n.3); in Europe, by late Nelly Naumann (n.4); and in the United States by Michael Witzel (n.5), for example.

As I mentioned, parallel examples of these motifs could be found not only in China, but in Taiwan, Siberia, Mongolia, Oceania, Southeast Asia, and even in North America. Tracing the origin of motifs is brilliantly conducted by scholars mentioned above. What I am intending here is slightly different. I am more interested in transformation (n.6): how various motifs coming from abroad were organized as classical Japanese mythology and what was the core of the idea. Among contributors mentioned above, the most ambitious and audacious is doubtlessly Witzel. His approach is both philological and

ethological (Kulturregeschichtlich). Mine is more of a structural interpretation. I wish to touch upon two topics. One is the myth of the sun and fire. The other is about the presumed common structure in classical Japanese mythology and culture.

### **I. Myth of the Sun and Fire**

Witzel's paper is presenting brilliant cases of parallelism in mythological theme about the sun and fire, all through Europe, India, Southeast Asia, East Asia, Siberia, North America, Meso-America, and South America. His argument is further supported by his methodology. Traditionally, in comparative mythology, not enough attention was paid to rituals. Witzel first compares the Indian pair of myth and ritual about the emergence of light with Japanese pair of myth (about the rebirth of sun goddess Amaterasu) and ritual (coronation ritual of new emperor, *Daijo-sai*) about the same genre.

There is no denying that Witzel is on the right track. The myth of the (re)emergence of light and related ritual must have been part of the large mythological structure shared by the common Laurasian heritage. Starting from this Indian-Japan comparison, Witzel expands his scope of inquiry not only among the Indo-Europeans, but East Asians, Siberians, North American Natives, Meso-Americans, and South American Natives. What Witzel suggests about the future directions of research about mythology is absolutely right: "(Re)creation of sunlight, descent from solar ancestors, emergence of death, and the great flood, all brought together in one single, long myth" (n.7). Among these people, the basic frame is identical, difference being superficial.

Here I pay more attention to that superficial difference and try to avoid the central issue. The reason is twofold. One, I am not capable of discussing the Indian material. I am much more comfortable in Japanese mythology proper. Thus my comparison is between the Japanese myth of the Hidden Sun and the similar myths about the sun or fire in Circum-pacific area, the Indic and Indo-European materials excluded. Apparently the scale is much smaller than the cases discussed by Witzel. It is natural that my comparison must stay on a superficial level. Still I believe there is something interesting even on that level.

Let me first summarize the main plot of Japanese version of the Hidden Sun myth. For convenience, the summary is divided into five sections (A~E).

**A.** First important gods are the couple of Izanagi and Izanami. They are World Parents. The couple was ordered by elder gods to consolidate and fertilize the land from the chaotic primordial ocean. By sexually uniting on the newly created island, they produce other islands and younger generation of gods of various functions. When

Izanami gave birth to the fire god Kagutuchi, she was burnt to death. Izanagi followed his sister/wife to the land of the dead. His plan however failed. When returned from the land of the dead, Izanagi purified himself in a stream. From his eyes were born the solar goddess, Amaterasu and the lunar god, Tsukuyomi; from his nose was born the violent god Susanowo.

**B.** The heavenly world was entrusted to Amaterasu, the night to Tsukuyomi, and the ocean to Susanowo by their father Izanagi. Since Susanowo was unruly, Izanagi ordered his son to be expelled to the underworld. Susanowo visited his sister Amaterasu under the pretext of saying farewell. Amaterasu however suspected her brother's hidden intention and confronted Susanowo in full armor. Susanowo proposed to make an oath and bear children. In his opinion that act proves his innocence. The two then exchanged personal items (Amaterasu, jewels and Susanowo, sword). Then each chewed the item and spat the pieces into air. Then from Amaterasu's jewels, three goddesses appeared, and from Susanowo's sword, five gods.

**C.** Thus Susanowo declared his innocence and stayed at his sister's Heavenly domain. He however made numerous misbehaviors and with anger Amaterasu hid herself in the Rock Cave of Heaven. This produced universal darkness. Gods and goddesses gathered and discussed how to restore the world. The solution was to have Ame-no-Uzume, Dancing Goddess of Heaven, perform erotic dance in front of the cave. This caused great laughter among the deities, and Amaterasu, being curious, opened the door little and peered out. Then Tajikarao, the God of Might, took her by hand and pulled her out of the cave.

**D.** Susanowo was expelled from the Heaven and descended to the earthly land. On the way he murdered the Food Goddess Ukemochi. From her corpse grew rice, wheat, beans etc and these crops were eventually given to Amaterasu.

**E.** One of Amaterasu's grandchild was elected as a ruler of earthly world and with accompaniment of five powerful gods and royal regalia given by Amaterasu, this divine child, Hono-ninigi, descended and became the ancestor of the imperial line.

Here, such elements as 1. hiding of the sun; 2. erotic dance; 3. laughter; 4. trick are discerned. I shall list the myth of the hidden sun or the myth of fire-theft among the people of the circum-Pacific regions. The examples of myth from Northeastern Asia are of Ainu, Koryak, and Chukchee. The examples of myth from Northwestern America are of Tlingit, Thimshian, Kwakwaka'wakw, Sinkiyone, and Pomo. Numbers one to four in square bracket indicate the four elements above. Numbers with parenthesis are ones somewhat unclear or doubtful.

**Ainu:** The Sun Goddess was abducted by the Demon. The earth became entirely dark, and many gods and people died. Aynu-rak-kur, the Hero, was asked by gods to rescue the Sun Goddess. He together with the Mountain God of Kemushiri went down into the Underworld, conquering the Demon and saved the Sun Goddess (n.8) [1]

**Koryak:** Raven-man swallowed the sun and kept it in his mouth. Big-Raven's daughter tickled him until he laughed, opened his mouth, and let the sun fly out. Then daylight appeared again (n.9) [1, 3, 4]

**Chukchee 1:** The Raven wanted to obtain the sun, which was in possession of the Demon. The Raven went to a distant country and found the house of the chief. In that house, sun, moon, and stars were kept sewed up in black walrus-hide, like large balls. The Raven seduced the daughter of the Demon and successfully obtained the ball of the stars, the ball of the moon, and finally the ball of the sun. (n.10) [4]

**Chukchee 2:** In another version, the Creator made the Raven, and bit him obtain the light. The Raven gathered various birds. They flew off toward the dawn and tried to pierce the stone wall of the day with their beaks. At last one bird succeeded in making a small hole, and the dawn passed through. (n.11)

**Tlingit:** There was no light. A chief kept in three boxes. The chief had a daughter. El, the Hero, could assume any form. He became a tiny piece of grass, and let the chief's daughter swallow it when she drank water. Being conceived in this way, she gave birth to a baby which was in fact El. He kept crying demanding the three boxes that contained the heavenly lights. When he had the first box, he opened it, and instantly stars appeared in the sky. Then from the second box, the moon appeared. When El obtained the last box, he changed himself into a crow, flew away with the box. Then he gave the sun to people. After this, El went out to an island in the middle of the sea. It was in this island that fire was kept. At that time, people did not have fire. El being dressed in magpie skin snatched a burning brand. Since the island was so far away, he had to drop the brand, and the sparks were blown on to the rocks and trees. This is why fire is found in rocks and trees. (n.12)[4]

**Tsimshian:** Finding the world always in darkness, the Raven (Giant) went up to heaven. There he found the daughter of the chief of heaven. When she came close to a spring, he changed himself into the leaf of a cedar tree and floated on the water. When the chief's daughter drank water, the Raven in the form of a leaf was swallowed together, thus succeeded to be born as her child. The child kept crying. He wanted a box that hung in the chief's house. Inside the box, the daylight was kept. The Raven got hold of the box and then ran away with it. That is how the sun was obtained. (n.13)[4]

**Kwakitul:** Counsellor of the World wanted to steal the box containing the sun from Day Receptacle Woman. He transformed himself into a baby and entered the womb of the woman. After four days, he was born. The baby cried for the box. As soon as he was given the box, Concellor of the World ran away. He then opened the box, took out the sun and the double-headed serpent mask of the sun. This is how the world obtained the sun. The mask is the daybreak mask used in the winter dance. (n.14)[4]

**Sinkyone:** There was no fire. A child kept crying. People did not know why. When he grew up, he said he was fearing the fire although people could not see it. People searched for it and discovered that the Spider was hiding the fire inside his body. Coyote gathered many animals. He ordered the animal to do ridiculous things. All tried hard, but the Spider did not laugh. Finally the Skunk came dancing in with his tail stuck up. All laughed and the Spider laughed, too. Then fire shot out of his mouth. Thus the fire was obtained. (n. 15) [1, 2, 3, 4]

**Pomo:** In olden days, the sun did not move across the heaven. It only rose above the eastern horizon and sank again. Coyote, wishing to find out the reason, set out to the east with singers and dancers. They arrived at the home of the Sun people. The sun was hung to one of the rafters of the dance-house. The party of the Coyote entered that house singing and dancing. The Coyote party and the Sun people danced together. While dancing, the Coyote liberated four mice, and they gnawed the sun from the rafter. The Coyote and his party brought back the sun to their village. People discussed where to situate it and decided to hang it up in the middle of the sky. Various birds try the task, but none succeeded. When finally the Crows volunteered, everyone laughed as they thought the Crows were too slow and too weak for the task. But after much effort, they accomplished the task and received lots of presents from people. (n. 16) [1, (2), (3), 4]

Most of these examples belong to cosmogony. They explain how in the primordial condition the sun was brought in this world through the working of a cunning Trickster. In these cases, the sun is not deified. It is simply an object. So we may conclude that even though the motif of acquisition of the sun is identical, the religious significance of Japanese Sun Goddess Amaterasu has no parallels in examples above. Still the emphasis on dancing and laughing in the myths suggests that some kind of ritual for the appearance of light and the sun was important all across the circum-Pacific area. We must turn our attention to another meaning of this identical motif.

In case of Indian myth of the emergence of light, it was the Dawn goddess who hid in the cave, and what was released from the cave was the herd of cow. The solar and fiery aspect of the original myth seems to be weakened. On the contrary, those of Japan and

circum-Pacific region are all about the sun and/or fire. There is no mention of the dawn nor cow. Is this just a coincidence or is there a reason?

I think the persistence of the sun/fire element with accompanying ritualistic elements of dancing and laughing is due to a common environmental factor: Frequent volcanic eruptions and earthquakes.

The Pacific Ring of Fire (or sometimes called circum-Pacific belt or circum-Pacific seismic belt) is an area of frequent earthquake and volcanic eruptions encircling the basin of the Pacific Ocean. In a 40.000 km horseshoe shape, it is associated with a nearly continuous series of volcanic belts. The Ring of Fire has 452 volcanoes and is home to over 75% of the world's active and dormant volcanoes. In the northern section, the Aleutian Islands, the Kamchatka Peninsula, Japan are included; in the southern portion, the Mariana Islands, the Philippines, Bougainville, Tonga, and New Zealand; New Guinea and Indonesian islands of Sumatra, Java, Bali, Flores and Timor lie between the Ring of Fire and the next most active seismic region, the Alpide belt. Crossing the Berling Sea, the Ring covers all the western coasts of the North and South Americas (n.17).

Due to the dark sky and subsequent famine caused by the huge volcanic eruption, the people must have kept that horrible memory in the form of the myth, especially myth of the Hidden Sun (n.18). The sun, volcano, light, and fire are often interchangeable in myth. It is not coincidence that the Pacific Ring of Fire where the volcanic activity is most prominent (Map 2) and the dense distribution of the myth of the Hidden Sun (Map 3) are overlapping.

## II. Common Structure in Classical Mythology and Culture

The second topic is about a thread that connects the following various topics of classical mythology and history of Japan which are usually discussed separately:

**1. Jomon clay figurines:** the Jomon period was basically hunting and gathering society. It began around twelve thousand years ago and lasted until fifth century B.C. when the new agricultural age, called Yayoi period, began. The Jomon period is characterized by many female figurines. Some vases also have female faces and are shaped like pregnant women. In Japanese myth, Izanami gave birth to the fire god Kagutuchi. The myth says that fire comes from the body of a goddess. This type of myth may have appeared already in the Jomon period. Along with this female symbol, there are examples of stone pillars shaped like penises. These seems to be two symbols visualizing the principle of harmony and cooperation between men and women.

**2. World Parents Izanagi and Izanami:** The couple of Izanagi and Izanami created the

world and gods. They are the World Parents of Japanese mythology. When the couple had been ordered to create the land, there was only the chaotic primordial ocean. This couple was brother and sister. They united and created other gods, but their first child was deformed leech-child and they let it float. The story pattern certainly reminds us of the Flood Myth found in the minority groups of southern China, the Miao, the Yao etc. (n.19).

**3. Amaterasu and Susanowo:** Just like Izanagi and Izanami, Susanowo and Amaterasu are brother and sister. As the ritual of oath-taking, they exchanged belongings and through chewing spitting the pieces, gave birth to children. The process does not involve actual sexual intercourse, but this is certainly a symbolic incest. On the other hand, in the Hidden Sun motif, their antagonism is clear.

**4. Amaterasu as a Virgin Mother Goddess:** As the summary above shows, Amaterasu never has sexual relationship. She is a virgin goddess. Still, as the result of Susanowo's oath, she became mother of five gods among whom Oshihomimi, father of the ruler of the terrestrial land, Hono-ninigi. Consequently, Amaterasu is a Virgin Mother Goddess, like Athena and Virgin Mary, an ideal type of goddess men dreamed of. Amaterasu is still worshipped as a titular goddess of the imperial line as she is claimed the ancestor of the imperial family.

**5. Amaterasu as Mirror:** Amaterasu is symbolized as mirror. The largest bronze mirror discovered in Japan is 46.5 cm in diameter and weighs 7.95 kg. It is certainly not for cosmetics. The purpose was to reflect the sun beams. The bronze mirror was first imported from China and was believed to expel the evil power. That is why people of the Yayoi culture put mirrors in their graves. So far five hundred bronze mirrors are discovered from graves.

**6. Himiko, the Queen of Yamatai Kingdom:** The name of Queen Himiko, the ruler of Yamatai kingdom, appears in the Wei dynasty history *Wei Zhi*, which is part of the history of the Three Kingdom Period (220- 280 CE) in China. The text says: "The country formerly had a man as ruler. For some seventy or eighty years after that there were disturbances and warfare. Thereupon the people agreed upon a woman for their ruler. Her name was Himiko. She occupied herself with magic and sorcery, bewitching the people. Though mature in age, she remained unmarried. She had a younger brother who assisted her in ruling the country. After she became ruler, there were only a few who saw her. She had a thousand women as attendants, but only one man. He served her food and drink and acted as a medium of communication". She seems to be a shamaness. Many examples of Japanese shamanism are of the female-possession type. Amaterasu who hid in the cave, Ameno-uzume who became intoxicated through dance

may be included in this category.

**7. Hime-hiko ruling system:** The text says that Himiko did not appear in public and the important role of delivering her messages was done by a single man, no other than her brother “who assisted her in ruling the country”. The division of female/male is clear: Himiko, female, inner, sacred, spiritual, religious vs. Her brother, male, outer, secular, physical, political. This kind of division of authority is well attested in the *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki*. Examples of brother and sister pair whose names are produced by adding male indicator -biko (hiko) or female indicator -bime (hime) to the place names they jointly ruled abound: Saho-biko and Saho-bime; Nuka-biko and Nuka-bime; Kitsu-biko and Kitsu-bime, Usatsu-biko and Usatsu-bime etc. (n.20)

**8. Wonari-gami in Okinawa:** Okinawa, the southern Ryukyu islands, still preserves a strong tradition of female shamans. Besides, there is a belief in the protective power of sisters. On the state level, the king was spiritually protected by the highest priestess, Kikoe-no-Okimi, who was no other than king’s sister. All sisters were regarded by brothers as a protective deity, *wonari-gami*.

**9. Male-female division of rulership in Japanese new religions:** In Japan’s new religions, often the founder is female. Tenrikyo was founded by Miki Nakayama (1798-1887); Omotokyo by Nao Deguchi (1836-1918); Reiyukai expanded its size due to Kimi Kotani (1901-1971); Rissho-Koseikai’s expansion due to Myoko Naganuma (1889-1957); Tensho-Kota-Jingukyo was founded by Sayo Kitamura (1900-1967).

What is interesting is that in almost all these religions there were male organizers along with the female spiritual leaders: For Miki Nakayama, Shuji Nakayama, her elder son (1821-1881) or carpenter Izo Iburi (1833-1907); for Nao Deguchi, Onisaburo Deguchi, her son-in-law (1871-1948); for Kimi Kotani, Kakutaro Kubo (1892-1944); for Myoko Naganuma, Nikkei Niwano (1906-1999).

In my opinion, these topics could be classified into following categories:

**I. Brother-Sister marriage:** 2. World Parents Izanagi and Izanami; 3. Amaterasu and Susanowo.

**II. Brother-Sister antagonism:** 3. Amaterasu and Susanowo.

**III. Brother-Sister rulership:** 6. Himiko; 7. Hime-hiko system; 8. Wonari-gami in Okianawa; 9. Male-female divisions of new religions.

**IV. Virgin Mother Goddess or Mother-Son Deities:** 4. Amaterasu and (Oshiho-mimi) and Hono-ninigi; Athena and Erichthonios; Mary and Jesus. (n.21)

**V. Corn Mother and Corn-Spirit:** 4. Amaterasu and Hono-ninigi

What is most notable here is the Brother-Sister combination. This combination means both integration and separation of two spheres. This is naturally one variant of the basic dichotomy model of human brain: male and female; sister and brother; mother and child; *ying* and *yang*; the sun and moon; secular and profane (or secular) etc. Along with the Brother-Sister combination, Mother-Son combination is also prominent and shows the similar combination of both integration and separation. These two combinations/divisions may indicate strong tendency of female principle active in Japanese history throughout the ages. Whether it stems from the geographical or ecological or historical or social reason is not clear. As the cases of Athena and Mary show, however, such tendency is not limited to Japan; it could occur in other areas under certain circumstances.

### Notes

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2. "Japanese Mythology and the Indo-European Trifunctional System", *Diogenes* 98 (1977) 93-116.
3. Hitoshi Yamada, "Mythology of the Taiwan Aborigines: State of the Art", presented at Harvard and Peking University International Conference on Comparative Mythology, May, 2006.
4. *Japanese Prehistory: The Material and Spiritual Culture of the Jomon Period*, 2000, Otto Harrassowitz. On Naumann's achievement, see my review article, "Nelly Naumann's Contribution to the Study of Japanese Religion and Mythology", *Religious Studies Review* 32 (2006) 163-168.
5. "Vala and Iwato: The Myth of the Hidden Sun in India, Japan, and Beyond", *Electric Journal of Vedic Studies* 12 (2005) 1-69.
6. My previous papers touching upon this issue are: "Birds as Symbols of the Realm of the Sacred in Japanese Myth", *Tenri Journal of Religion* 24 (1996) 97-134; "Alone among Women: A Comparative Mythic Analysis of the Development of Amaterasu Theology", Inoue Junko ed., *Kami*, Kokugakuin University, 1998, 42-71; "The *Koki* Story and the Femininity of the Foundress of Tenrikyo", *Women and Religion*, Tenri Yamato Culture Congress, 2003, 359-397; "Ancient Japan and Religion", Paul Swanson and Clark Chilson ed., *Nanzan Guide to Japanese Religions*, University of Hawai'i Press, 2006, 131-143.
7. Witzel 50.
8. Kindaichi Kyosuke ed. *Yukar*, Iwanami, 1936, 130-144.

9. Jochelson, Waldemar, "The Mythology of the Koryak", *American Anthropologist*, N. S. 6 (1904), 423.
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12. Golder, F. A. "Tlingit Myths", *Journal of American Folklore* 20 (1907), 292-293.
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16. Barret, S. A., "A Composite Myth of the Pomo Indians", *Journal of American Folklore* 19 (1906), 44-46.
17. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pacific\\_Ring\\_of\\_Fire](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pacific_Ring_of_Fire)
18. Barber, Elizabeth Wayland and Paul T. Barber, *When they Severed Earth from Sky: How the Human Mind shapes Myth*, Princeton University Press, 2004, especially chapters 2, 8, 17.
19. Dundes, Alan ed. *The Flood Myth*, University of California Press, 1988.
20. Matsumura Kazuo, *Megami no Shinwagaku (Mythology of Goddess)*, Heibonsha, 1999.
21. Ei'ichiro Ishida, "Mother-Son Deities", *History of Religion* 4 (1964) 30-52.



**Fig1. East Asia**

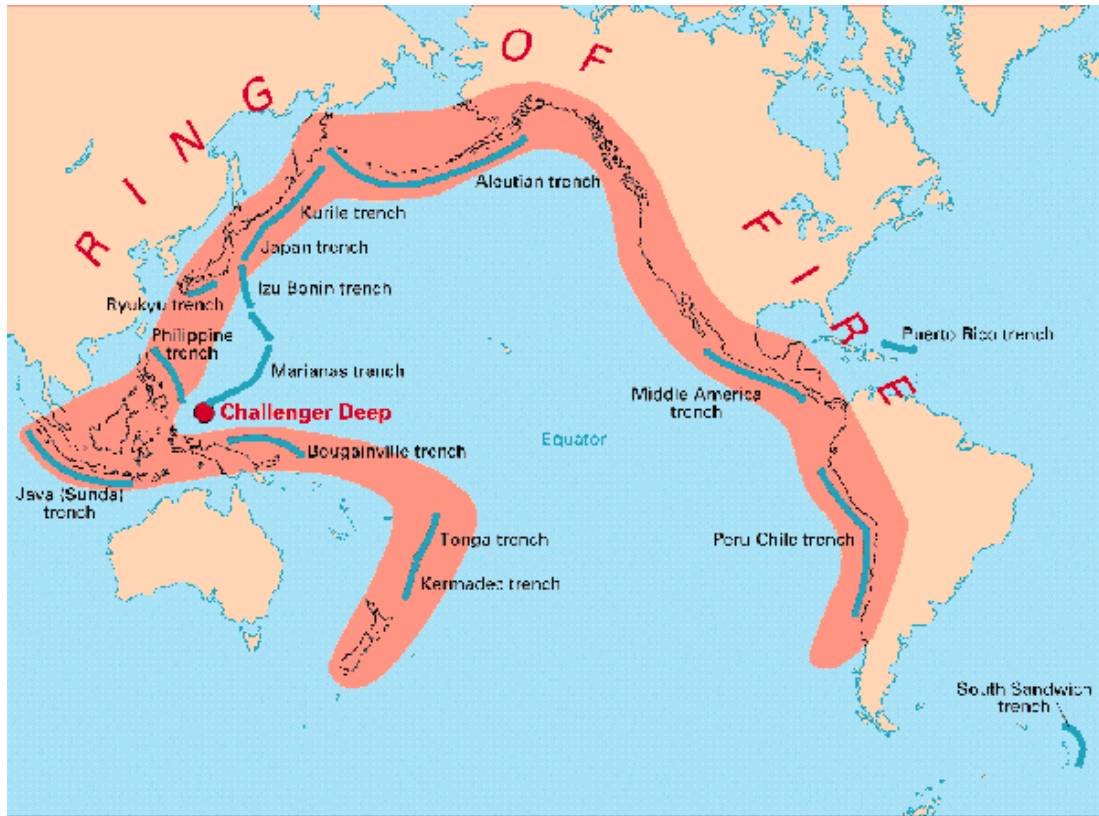


Fig2.The Pacific Ring Of Fire

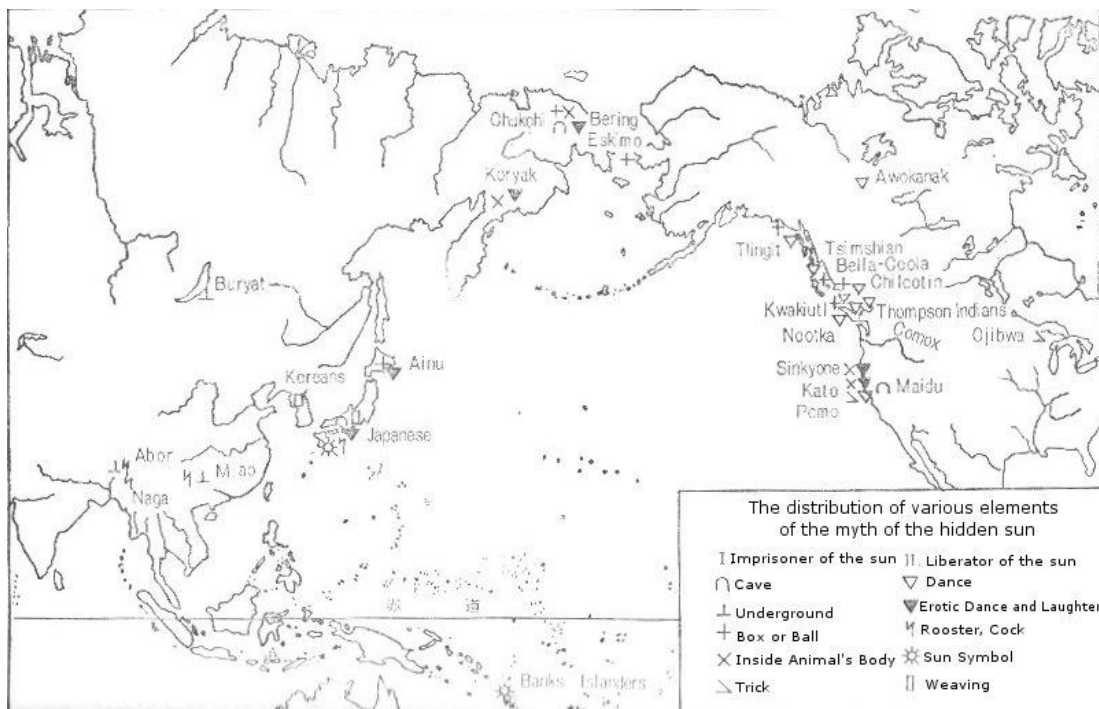


Fig3. The (geographical) distribution of various elements of the myth of the hidden sun