

日本の神話 武神の伝承

Japanese Mythology

Budô: A tradition handed down from the deities of war

The spirit of Bushidô can be traced back to ancient times. Its origin derives from the Japanese myths, which were at first passed down by word of mouth, since it was before the time of writing systems. But even today, in the 20th century [this text was written in 1981], these spiritual fundamentals of Bushidô linger on.

The oldest narration of the Japanese Mythology concerning the martial spirit, is the lore of the sacred sword, which is still preserved today in the main sanctuary of the Atsuta Jingû in Nagoya. This sword has been kept in the imperial family over many thousands of years, up to the present day, and has been passed on over generations in the unbroken line of the Chrysanthemum throne of the Tennô (Emperor of Japan). The tale of this sword is as follows.

In Takamagahara, where most of the deities lived, the most sublime and luminous deity, Amaterasu ômikami¹, reigned above them all. She had a younger brother, Susanowo no mikoto, who was wild and free by nature, but at the same time sensitive and soulful. Driven by his wildness, he committed a sin that violated the regime of the deities, and was therefore banished from Takamagahara. Feeling lonely, he went on a long and aimless journey through faraway countries. As he arrived on a riverbank at a land called Izumo, he met an elderly couple, residents of the neighbouring village, weeping and wailing there. Replying to the deity's question as to the cause of their wailing, the old folks told him:

There is a bloodthirsty and evil deity hereabouts called Yamata no orochi. His giant figure resembles a dragon with eight heads and eight tails, though he is so huge from head to tail that he stretches out from this mountain, over the vale, to those mountains there.

The anger of this evil deity could only be allayed by continued sacrificial offering of a fair virgin every year for seven years. Within the next few days, this evil deity would

¹ Female deity, worshipped in the Ise Jingû

return and claim the beloved eighth daughter of the two elderly people. That is why they were weeping and wailing.

The soulful and brave Susanowo no mikoto decided at once to defeat this monstrous and evil deity, even though the deity was unknown to him, and thus could not be assessed. So he made his arrangements and waited. It did not take long until the giant Yamata no orochi appeared. Cunning and daring, Susanowo no mikoto succeeded with his sword in cutting down the deity, who was shaped like a tremendous snake, and slaying him. Thereby he discovered that a magnificent sword was hidden inside the tail of the beast. Susanowo no mikoto took the sword. Shortly after that he returned to Takamagahara and gave this sword as a gift to Amaterasu ômikami. Amaterasu ômikami was highly pleased about the bravery and kindness of Susanowo no mikoto. Therefore Susanowo no mikoto was readmitted and rewarded with a higher position amongst the ranks of the deities.

The holy sword, which was presented to Amaterasu ômikami by Susanowo no mikoto, was later passed down to her descendant, the first Tennô, as a symbol of one of the three virtues that are essential for reigning over a nation. It is passed on ever since to each new keeper of the Chrysanthemum throne. There are several different opinions about the symbolism of this sword among Shinto theologians. However, a notable theologian of the middle ages advanced the view that it represents strong determination and the ultimate source of wisdom.

Numerous heroic narrations can be found in the Japanese mythology that still exists to this day. A war deity called Takemikazuchi no kami went as a messenger for Amaterasu ômikami of Takamagahara to the land of Izumo, to negotiate there with the deity Ōkuninushi no kami. Ōkuninushi no kami was a descendant of that Susanowo no mikoto and belonged originally to a vassal of Amaterasu ômikami, though he reigned for a long time over this region. The messenger called on Ōkuninushi no kami to cede sovereignty over his territory to Amaterasu ômikami. Ōkuninushi no kami said that he would give in to the demand if his two divine sons approved. The eldest son, Kotoshironushi no kami, accepted immediately, without any objection. However the younger one, Takeminakata no kami, wanted to compete in a martial contest with the messenger Takemikazuchi no kami.

Loyal to the mission entrusted to him by the sublime deity Amaterasu ômikami, Takemikazuchi no kami had his sword positioned upside down at the shore and calmly sat there atop the blade. Takeminakata no kami arrived with a massive boulder at hand, which required a thousand men to move, and challenged Takemikazuchi no kami to a duel. As he

reached for Takemikazuchi no kami's hand to pit his strength against his own, the deity's hand was transformed into an icicle and became hard to grasp. While he tried to squeeze it nonetheless, drawing on all of his power, the hand, that was previously an icicle, turned into a blade. Takeminakata no kami, who could not win this uneven battle, fled. Takemikazuchi no kami tracked him and finally caught up with him at Suwa. Therefore Takeminakata no kami swore to worship Amaterasu ōmikami, and to loyally obey her divine commands.

Because both of his sons had finally accepted, Ōkuninushi no kami as well agreed to Takamagahara's request. Then a great shrine was built in Izumo to honour Ōkuninushi no kami, reaching right up to the sky.² This is the origin of today's Izumo Taisha, which is known above all the other shrines in Japan as the greatest and most glorious.

Yet another magnificent shrine was built in Suwa to Takeminakata no kami, who had once challenged Takemikazuchi no kami to a duel. Moreover this deity enshrined in Suwa was elevated to the status of a Japanese war deity, to whom several hundred shrines were erected all over the country. It is a remarkable fact, that among all the shrines that are dedicated to deities of war and are still maintained to this day, the number of Suwa-shrines devoted to Takeminakata no kami considerably exceeds the number of shrines devoted to Takemikazuchi no kami.

This much can be said according to Japanese Mythology. Japanese people have meditated a great deal on these myths – down to the present day. Below I will put down some of my thoughts about this.

Sometimes it just happens that the deities of Takamagahara, in which the Japanese believe, quarrel among each other. However, if their opponent yields to them, and agrees with their will, any dispute is immediately forgotten and they face him with the same, or even greater, esteem as they face their own, old, familiar deities, and they pay their respect to him in a most reverent manner. The existence of Izumo Taisha and the Suwa Taisha exemplify that thought, which should be considered as an origin of the spirit of Japanese warriors in historic times.

How was Takeminakata no kami inferior to Takemikazuchi no kami? Both were deities, not men. Therefore Takeminakata no kami could throw a rock, which could only be moved by a thousand men. This was no more than extreme physical strength. On the contrary, Takemikazuchi's strength lay in the ability to be invulnerable to a sharp sword. It was the true power of a deity, which is not affected by any physical force, no matter what; it was

² Literally: a palace for the deities

qualitatively of a very different kind. He was blessed with such a power only because he acted loyally according to the will of the truly sublime deity Amaterasu ômikami. For what reason do the Japanese worship Takeminakata no kami, as a deity of martial arts, in an equal, or even greater manner, with which they understandably worship Takemikazuchi no kami, who actually accomplished this divine act?

On this it can be said that, as mentioned above, Takeminakata no kami had complied and pledged his loyalty towards Amaterasu ômikami when he was caught in Suwa. As soon as Takeminakata no kami pledged his loyalty towards Amaterasu ômikami and became one of the deities of war for Amaterasu ômikami, the divine power of Takeminakata no kami became equal in quality and strength to that of Takemikazuchi no kami. The outcome of the past fights was completely extinguished. Within this lies the mentality of the Japanese, which is deeply rooted in Shinto. I believe that this is one of the distinctive features which needs to be recognised by those who want to understand Japanese thinking regarding the spirit of Bu.

The Japanese perceived military prowess as not merely physical strength. They believed that the more one acts loyally and draws nearer to the will of the sublime deities, the more one's true military power and spiritual strength increase. Also one's martial skills improve to a subtler level, which almost becomes an act of the deities.

This has been the faith of the orthodox Japanese warrior since ancient times, throughout the middle ages, and on into the present age. Martial arts' training implies not just exercising physical strength. From ancient times, in order to train themselves in martial arts, the Japanese always carried out religious exercises like Misogi, and have been keen to keep their minds pure and clean. They believed that only by doing so could they take the right decision and right actions immediately without any fear or hesitation against any physical force whatsoever, no matter how enormous or superior it seemed to be. They believed they could get closer to divine greatness both in military power and martial skills.

Even today, in the 20th century, a Kamidana is certain to be found in every authentic budôjô that practices Budô. A Budôjo without a Kamidana is nothing but a hall for training acts of violence, and thus distances itself in an essential way from Budô.

The martial spirit in the realm of antiquity

Until now we have referred to deities, not to men. In Japan, the beginning of the history of human society is dated from the time of the first Tennô, Jimmu Tennô, more than 2,600 years ago. Before that was the age of the deities. It is said that Jimmu Tennô was a direct

descendant of Amaterasu ômikami, and he was the legitimate and supreme priest who carried out the rites for the deities of Takamagahara. At first he reigned over the outlying district of Japan, in Kyûshû. He had heard that the inhabitants of the eastern area of that island chain – the majority of whom were peasants – had been suppressed by cruel, despotic chiefs. He consulted with his generals and came to a bold decision: to crusade against the east, and therefore create a way for all of the people of this island chain to build a safe and peaceful community life, exempt from suppression.

Jimmu Tennô defeated the wild and tyrannical chiefs one by one, and, after grave and long lasting battles, founded the capital at the centre of the Japanese archipelago, and thereby provided the basis for the foundation of the nation. The written records of this time are brimming with reports about the worship of the deities of Takamagahara, and about heroic battles, that altogether correspond to the myths which had been passed down about the divine achievements of the deities of war.

The succeeding Tennô and their princes continued Jimmu Tennô's grand accomplishment which founded the Japanese nation. During Jimmu Tennô's crusade to the east, the supreme leader of the most powerful opposing party was Nigihayahi no mikoto. He finally submitted to the authority of Jimmu Tennô, because he accepted that Jimmu Tennô was the legitimate and supreme priest for the sublime deities of Takamagahara, of whom he was a direct descendant. Nigihayahi no mikoto was a descendant of the deities of Takamagahara (but outside the main line of descent) and was entitled to worship them. As Jimmu Tennô recognised that Nigihayahi no mikoto had agreed to worship the deities of Takamagahara, truly and without any ulterior motives, he immediately gave him the position of a first-rate official, kept him close by, and had full confidence in him. The previous supreme general of the enemy was regarded with respect and deep trust, and appointed to an honourable office. There were many historical occurrences such as that, which could have been borrowed directly from Mythology.

Among past Tennô and princes of antiquity have been many who excelled in sacred heroism. The despotic chiefs vanished from the Japanese islands thanks to their efforts. Tennô and princes of ancient times personally lead the armies, took care of internal security, prevented the rising of rebel leaders, and simultaneously guarded against the attack of external enemies. It was mainly peasants who were enlisted to serve in the army. The loyalty and bravery of this peasants' army, that had secured peace and safety among the villages of the service men, was

of a high degree. Among the ancient war songs, that couched this pure feeling of loyalty, are many moving, heroic pieces that are still inspiring to men of military spirit in Japan today.

“If I go away to sea,
I shall return as a washed-up corpse;
If duty calls me to the mountain,
A verdant meadow shall be my pall,
Thus for the sake of the Tennô,
I will not die peacefully at home.”³

“From this day on I will keep nothing on my mind,
for I will serve as the unworthy shield of the great ruler.”⁴

“Being in the military camp of Asakura

Whose sons could those possibly be, that are marching into battle one after another?”⁵

Japan is well known to be an island nation. Once peace and order were established, rebels found it difficult to revolt against the legitimate authority and powerful internal enemies no longer posed a threat. Also the geographical conditions were favourable guarding the realm against external enemies. Peace was secured, the sovereign and the populace both worshipped the same deities, the people lived together in harmony, the cooperation in agriculture came along well, major progress took place in the field of arable farming, the economy prospered in general, and the realm grew wealthy.

Along with the development of these circumstances, the introduction of advanced civilisation from the continent increased remarkably. Because of the social development within the nation due to a high degree of security and the substantial economic prosperity, the adaption of the

³ Ōtomo no Yakamochi, c. 718 – 785

⁴ Squad Leader Imamatsuribe no Yosofu, peasant

⁵ Tenchi Tennô, 626 – 672

foreign culture took place rapidly. Great cities were built and the age of a glorious civilisation dawned.

It was a natural course of events that a flowering of civilisation would bloom magnificently in the capital, and more notably than in other parts of the nation. The more time elapsed, and the longer the peaceful civilisation lasted, the more likely court members and high-ranking officers were to fall for the fascination exuding from those adopted foreign cultures. There was a rapid change going on in every field of culture and life, within art, music and literature, and including everyday matters. The first-rate officials studied all of this new way of life, and lived a comfortable and civilised life. Thus, they lost the mind-set of respecting the martial spirit which had been kept by the ancient court people; they even avoided military matters and eventually looked down on them in contempt.

One of the prominent features of this time can be seen in the field of literature, which produced many remarkable female poets and writers. Various works of female literature of that period are preserved, which still possess a fragile beauty, even after a thousand years, such as is rarely seen in world literature. It was certainly a distinctive period in the history of the civilization of Japan. The spirit of the urban civilisation performed great feats in the shape of feminine elegance. However, it is evident that a sense of purity-with-directness, and the strong mental tendency to respect bravery and fortitude in former days had disappeared.

The duties which required strong power of Bu had been indispensable for the nation to sustain peace and order. However, those duties were ignored by members of the imperial family and high-ranking officials. In turn, they were considered to be the duty of the military officers, who had been assigned to a second-rate position at best. The high-ranking officials enjoyed the refined life of urban civilisation altogether, and for quite a while the administration of the villages within the lesser-developed provinces was ignored. For a period everything went well, but as governance over the provinces continued to be disregarded, order was violated and riots occasionally occurred that compromised public safety.

High-ranking officials still did not deign to engage themselves with such troubles, even though these events were accurately reported by the provinces. Nobody wanted to be sent down from the elegant central city to the rural provinces. Merely second-, or third-rank military officers were dispatched to the provinces. The administration of the provinces was considered the duty of a military officer. The high-ranking officials had the taxes collected and hauled to the city by the military officers, incorporating those taxes into their own elegant, civilised lifestyle.

These ways of behaving were maintained for a long time. The result was that the military officers settled down in their respective area of the provinces for long periods of time. Close ties were established for generations between the military officers and the local people of these provinces. Each district formed its own semi-autonomous political community. Hence conflicting interests arose among those communities, which caused commotion. However, the high-ranking officials in the central government did not move to solve the conflicts in the provinces. Furthermore they did nothing but send more second- or third-rank military officers to the rural provinces, as previously.

But that is not all. The high-ranking officials had also lost their ability to solve factional conflicts in the central government. When conflicts occurred, they became dependent on the second- or third-ranking military officers who were attached to them. Under these circumstances the military officers of each clan began to form their own factions both in the centre and the provinces regardless of their lower position. Securing a solid position, they moved up to become the main figures in the political tussles in both the central and local governments. The two most significant factions of warrior were the clans of the Minamoto and the Taira.

Bushidô since medieval times

With the emergence of the Minamoto and Taira, the political responsibility of the realm was virtually passed over to the warriors. From this time, while these warriors fought their repeated battles, the spiritual concept about the way of warriors was gradually shaped among Japanese warriors, which was later developed into Bushidô. Although it was a continuation of the warrior's spirit handed down from times of the ancient Japanese dynasty, as outlined above, yet it included significant differences in some respects.

According to ancient warriors, fighting occurred mainly between the descendants of the sublime and righteous deity, and the rebels who derived from the line of evil deities. Since the mystic age, the Japanese warriors had a spirit of tolerance towards their enemies. However, as long as their enemies offered resistance, they took it for granted that they should fight without mercy and without offering any quarter. The warriors were obliged to strive after faithfulness towards the righteous deity (in other words, towards their liege-lords who act upon the will of the deity), and their honour was founded on loyalty, definitive and dauntless courage to defeat rebels and enemies, and wisdom to achieve victory. They believed that wisdom and the

strategy to defeat the enemy were inspired by the righteous deity. The sacred sword symbolised wisdom and strong will.

However, with the emergence of the Minamoto and the Taira clans, the conditions between opposing warriors changed substantially. Both the Minamoto and Taira, who were at war with each other, had originally been military officers of the Tennô. For both parties the opponent was neither an evil deity, nor could he be called a rebel. It was simply their fate in this profane world to oppose each other, though they had a strong intuition that their opponent was in the same situation as they were. As one took his sword, out of loyalty to one's liege-lord, should not the enemy be moved by the same mind, to take his own sword out of loyalty to his liege-lord?

It was a duty of a warrior to fight, on his honour as a warrior, bravely and with all his might; but the feeling was hard to repress, that the enemy too, was subject to the same fate. It is hard to deny that this view was affected in many respects by the Confucian philosophy of heaven and the Buddhist philosophy, which were widely disseminated amongst the common folk at that time.

Since the middle ages, the warriors that felt this way fought undaunted by death indeed, but still sympathized and respected their enemy for his loyalty and courage. They grew a strong sense of decency, that they must not stain the honour of the enemy as a warrior, if he fought loyally and bravely. They developed a spirit that the principle of fairness must be respected even in the use of tactics where manoeuvring is actually required. They also established the spirit that a violation of the principle of fairness is disdainful even in the attempt of securing victory.⁶

The spirit of the Japanese warrior had evolved independently on this island, since the days where myths were passed down by word of mouth. For a long time Japan was isolated from abroad, well into the modern age, encounters with European civilization rarely happened. But as the Japanese became acquainted with the chivalry that originated from Europe, and with the war conventions according to the international law etc., they were deeply impressed, since a great deal of that would match, or seem similar to their own ideas.

⁶ This became kind of a tacit agreement among warriors.

In conclusion

However, not everything was the same, or similar. Some of warlike operations that were considered by the Japanese to be honourable, or to be an expression of commiseration, occasionally seemed cruel or inhuman to Europeans. On the other hand, there were warlike operations by Europeans that seemed absolutely inhumane and unacceptable from the Japanese point of view. The reason seems to lie in the significantly different origins of the spiritual foundation of Bu in Japan and Europe, and that its intellectual history took a different course of development. I am not very familiar with European history, but I suppose the way of life and religion of the ancient Greeks, the Romans, or the Germanic tribes were completely different from the ensuing Christian civilisation, where a substantial change took place due to conversions. I suppose a remarkably profound transformation of thoughts must have happened within the mind-set and moral conception of the warriors that converted to Christianity.

In Japan no complex changes have happened whatsoever: the spiritual foundation of the Japanese was, and still is, Shintoism, which persists since the mystic age. Above I mentioned that there were Confucian and Buddhist influences, but these influences only reached as far as they were accepted by the shintoist Japanese, under the continued practice of their shintoist attitude to life. The modern Japanese still believe the sacred sword enshrined at Atsuta Jingû as a supreme symbol of Bu. Those deities of war worshipped by the ancient Japanese still remain as the deities of war for the modern Japanese.

Martial practise by a warrior is by no means limited to the strengthening of physical power and the training of the body. As one progresses in his spiritual practice to get closer to the will of the deities, he can increase his courage and martial spirit to the same degree. One will no longer struggle with life and death decisions, and the practical techniques will get nearer to the level of divine skills. The deities mentioned here, are the unchanged deities of antiquity, from several thousand years ago. This is the reason why a Kamidana is certain to be found in every budôjô where authentic Japanese warriors practice Budô in modern society.

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