

The Land of the Dead – International Motifs in the Oldest Work of Japanese Literature

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The *Kojiki* (*Records of Ancient Matters*) is the oldest extant work of Japanese literature. It was written in 712 AD with an aim to show the Imperial family's legitimacy to the people and prove the Emperor's divine origin. Court scientist Oo no Yasumaro edited the *Kojiki* on the basis of a rich oral tradition, ancient myths, tales, legends and songs, in addition to the Japanese Emperors' genealogies. The *Kojiki* consists of three volumes. The first volume describes the creation of the world and Japan's origins; the second volume includes the period from the legendary Emperor Jimmu to the Emperor Ojin (according to tradition, from 600 BC to AD 310); whereas the third presents the time from the Emperor Nintoku to the Empress Suiko (from 313 to 628). Apart from treating the Japanese people's original cultural heritage, this rich work is also of vital interest to many students thanks to its numerous international motifs. Such universal themes and motifs prove interesting for comparative and typological study, and are found in the cultures of people worldwide, which certainly had no contact with ancient Japan, in particular Serbian folk tradition.

The worldview represented in the *Kojiki* is founded on the ancient polytheistic religion, *Shinto*,¹ which is integrated into Japanese culture. This autochthonous animist religion primarily rests on the belief that every segment of nature contains a *kami*, i.e. a god, that is, a spirit. That also means that the gods of the Japanese pantheon (the *Kojiki* presents them as genealogically related anthropomorphic characters) in fact personify the concrete natural elements, various human activities and imaginary concepts. The phenomenon personified by a *kami* is visible in its own name. We can find progenitors among the gods in question – the demiurges, cultural heroes, and tricksters, who have an inherent capacity of alternatively creating and disorganizing.

The *kami* live in heaven, on earth and also inhabit the underworld. That implies that ancient Japanese thought is characterized by the trichotomic structural scheme of the universe,² with the celestial, earthly and underworldly spheres. The celestial sphere is represented by the Plain of High Heaven. It generates the celestial gods who number eight million in total.³ They are presided by the supreme deity of the Japanese pantheon, the Great Sun Goddess Amaterasu. The central sphere is imagined as Middle Earth overgrown with reeds.⁴ It is inhabited by earthly gods, mostly arrogant and disobedient rulers, who later vest their authority in celestial gods, more precisely, to the descendant of the sun goddess, from whom all later

¹ Chinese reading of the Japanese word *kami no michi*, meaning “the way of the gods.”

² Cf. Meletinski, E.M., *Poetika mita* (Мелетинский, Е. М., *Поэтика мифа*, 1976), Belgrade, 1986, p. 210.

³ In Japan eight is a holy number denoting multitude, prosperity and fortune, and is constantly present throughout the work. Eight million in fact means a numberless host.

⁴ It is common in mythological systems to refer to “earth, the abode of men, placed between the ‘upper’ and the ‘lower’ worlds, as the middle world, middle earth.” Cf. *Poetika mita*, p. 218.

Japanese emperors derive. The third cosmic level – the netherworld, is embodied as the Land of Night, for which some of the celestial gods leave.

The first *kami* are single, i.e. they have no match for themselves, and they symbolize every step in the process of cosmic evolution. After them, divine couples originate, including the primeval couple of gods – demiurges, Izanaki and Izanami, and the process of insular and divine creation continues through their sexual congress. Having given birth to the last in the series of gods – the god of fire, Izanami falls gravely ill and dies. The *Kojiki* presents that as her departure for the Land of Night (Yomi no Kuni), i.e. the underworld of the dead. Before the goddess Izanami, single demiurgical gods would disappear after fulfilling their cosmogonical role, but they subsequently remained in heaven. Izanami is the first said to have died and gone to the world of the dead.

The god Izanaki cannot reconcile himself to the death of his beloved and departs after her. On reaching the gates of her palace, he calls to her to come back to complete the earth they were creating, but the goddess reprimands him for not coming earlier, for she has already tasted the food of the dead. However, she does promise him to talk to the god of night and asks him not to watch her. When he becomes bored waiting, Izanaki chips off a tooth from the end of the sacred comb, tucked at the queue on the left side of his head and lights a flame. Then he enters the palace and sees a dismal sight: maggots creeping over her corpse and eight gods of thunder on her body. Disgusted by the sight, he runs away. Izanami first sends hags to pursue him. Izanaki stalls them by throwing a vine wreath from his hair, which immediately grows into wild grapes which they eat. Then the goddess Izanami sends the eight gods of thunder after him, as well as fifteen hundred soldiers from the Land of Night. Brandishing his divine sword behind him, Izanaki arrives at Hira hill on the very border of the Land of Night. There he finds a peach tree, picks three fruits and throws them at his pursuers, thus stopping them. After that, the goddess Izanami herself takes up the pursuit. Izanaki blocks her way up Hira hill with a huge rock, they confront each other, and pronounce the formula of divorce. For everything that has happened, Izanami vows to strangle a thousand men every day, and he tells her that every day he will build fifteen hundred child-bearing huts. That is the very reason for a thousand deaths and fifteen hundred births a day. In that way the goddess Izanami becomes the Great Goddess of the Land of Night.⁵

This brief survey of the narrative line offers us an insight according to which the *Kojiki* has an abundance of similarities to the familiar myths of neighboring cultures of Southeast Asian countries, but also to the traditions of the peoples living in distant regions without any contact with ancient Japan. They primarily include the developed ideas and motifs of the underworld of the dead.

However, the myth of the gods Izanaki and Izanami is not the only one that mentions the world of the dead. The son of the goddess Izanami – the god of storm and natural forces, Take Haya Susanoo, later becomes the principal chthonic deity. The god Ookuninushi⁶ arrives in his realm, one of the cultural heroes – tricksters in the *Kojiki*.

Ookuninushi is a servant to his eighty wanton brothers who humiliate him all the time and even kill on two occasions, but his mother succeeds in reviving him. In order to preserve him, she

⁵ *Kojiki, Jodai kayo, The Collected Works of Classic Japanese Literature*, Vol. I, ed. Asao Hagivara et al., Tokyo, 1992 (hereafter: *Kojiki* 92), pp. 64-68.

⁶ The god Ookuninushi (the god-creator of Earth) is the supreme god in one of the three complex mythological systems on the territory of today's Japan, in the one based in Izumo. Later on, the god Ookuninushi becomes the main obstacle to the goddess Amaterasu's successors in their taking over the power over the earthly sphere.

sends him to the Underworld of Hard Sand (Ne no Katasu), to the god Susanoo. There Ookuninushi falls in love with Susanoo's daughter Suseribime, and accordingly Susanoo puts him to a test with various labors. The first night he sends him to sleep in a cave with snakes, and the next night to the cave with wasps and centipedes. The hero manages to survive with the help of magic scarves that he received from Suseribime. Subsequently Susanoo releases a swishing arrow into the field, and Ookuninushi saves himself from the fire by solving the magic riddle asked by a mouse, and brings back Susanoo's arrow. Finally Ookuninushi steals Susanoo's symbols of sacral power (the sword of life, bow and arrow of life and a jewel-studded heavenly lyre) and runs away with the goddess Suseribime. Susanoo chases them all the way to Hira hill on the border of the Land of the Dead, then stops, shouting out instructions of how to defeat his brothers and begin creating the earth.⁷ In that way, Ookuninushi, the celestial god who was initially a victim of his wanton brothers, becomes the first celestial god who also passed through the nether-worldly sphere, to rule the earthly afterwards.

The plot of both myths is set in the land of the dead, a place with miraculous flora and fauna. The first myth makes mention of the bamboo into which Izanaki's comb turns in the blink of an eye. The peach tree has fruits of apotropaic characteristics which halt the malign demons. In the other myth Susanoo sets fire to the field and sends Ookuninushi there, where he is assisted by mice in solving the required tasks and thus saves himself. The inhabitants of the Land of the Dead are anthropomorphic characters who live in palaces, move around, feed, clash mutually and obey the commands of their supreme deity. In other words, they continue doing what they did in the "upper" world.

Despite these similarities, the image of the land of the dead in the mythological story of the gods Izanaki and Izanami differs considerably from the image of the land of the dead in which Ookuninushi arrives. In the story of the god Ookuninushi, the idea of the land of the dead parallels the idea of the Plain of High Heaven, but also the idea of the Middle Earth grown in reed, from which a conclusion may be drawn that in ancient Japanese consciousness all three spheres (celestial, earthly and underworldly) resemble one another. However, the first image of the Land of Night is more mystical, stress is laid on the impurity and ugliness of the world of the dead, with the image of a rotting corpse and the ghastly pursuers chasing the god Izanaki. Although the characters of underworldly deities are not developed, we can assume by the aspect of Izanami's body and by the pursuers she sends to chase her husband that those inhabitants are the horrible demons of chthonic character. Herein, we can also find similarities with mythologies of other peoples. The Land of the Dead is an embodiment of the impure and sinful, and the hags – ugly women from the Land of Night resemble, for example, Greek goddesses of revenge – the Erinyes, or the Roman Furies.

The idea of the underground world of the dead is also the most widespread in cultures worldwide. The first Serbian historian of religion, Veselin Čajkanović,⁸ writes that the belief that the deceased live underground is quite logical from the viewpoint of primitive man because it is most natural to seek the dead where they were buried.⁹ However, unlike some other traditions, the *Kojiki* does not contain the idea of judgment day, nor does it contain the

⁷ *Kojiki* 92, pp. 92-113.

⁸ Veselin Čajkanović (1881–1946) – Serbian classical scholar, religious history scholar, Greek and Latin translator, and professor of comparative history of religion. He wrote several books, while numerous studies and articles remained scattered in various publications. His texts were published mainly in Serbian, Latin and German.

⁹ Cf. Čajkanović, Veselin, *Stara srpska religija i mitologija (Ancient Serbian Religion and Mythology)*, Belgrade, SKZ, BIGZ, Prosveta, Partenon, 1994, p. 85.

eschatological myths of punishment or reward after death. According to Čajkanović, the older phase of religion did not offer an idea of retribution and punishment in the other world, and it came on much later.¹⁰

Čajkanović also talks about the descent into the netherworld, i.e. departure for the other world (katavasis), as being a motif undoubtedly belonging to the epic inventory of many peoples.¹¹ Unlike other mythologies, Sumerian for example, which extensively treat the descent of the goddess Inanna to the netherworld, the *Kojiki* neither offers a longer description of the goddess Izanami's departure, nor does it describe the land of the dead. Serbian tradition gives a simple answer to the question of how individuals descended to the netherworld. Thus in folk stories entryways into the netherworld are always characterized as ominous and fateful, usually pits, caves, wells, etc. We can name the pit (chasm) as an example, including the one which Cinderella's spindle fell into,¹² or the one through which the hero enters into the netherworld in the tales "Marko the Cowherder"¹³ and "Pearl-boy": or even a door that the hero discovers after rolling off a stone, such is found in the story "The Golden Horse", etc.

The descent into the netherworld symbolically marks an individual's death. Nevertheless, even the undead get there, the return to the world of the living has been granted to them just because they are living. In Japanese myth, this is the case with the gods Izanaki and Ookuninushi. In Serbian folk stories and legends, one of Serbian culture heroes – Saint Sava¹⁴ – also ends up in the world of the dead. He travels to "the dark land", and to corroborate the statement that we are dealing with, the "lower world". We read about a large number of mice, which Čajkanović refers to as 'shadowy' animals (from the word "sen", shadow, – soul, implying that the souls of the dead dwell in the animals).¹⁵

Contrary to Izanaki, there is no return for the goddess Izanami. After tasting the food of the land of the dead, she has irrecoverably condemned herself to the everlasting dwelling of the netherworld. The idea that one cannot return home because one has tasted the other world's food is very widespread in the cultures of diverse peoples, because, according to primitive thought, people eating or drinking together stand in a mutual magic relation. Perhaps the most famous example of this international motif is seen in the Greek myth of Kore, abducted by the god of the netherworld Hades. In spite of Zeus' demands, he could not bring her back, for Kore had already tasted seven pomegranate seeds from his orchard.

This is not the only similarity between Japanese and Greek myths. Namely, Kore's mother Demeter, the goddess of corn fields, was so irate after her daughter's abduction that she forbade trees to yield fruit and the grass to grow. She even vowed to remain sterile until her daughter was returned to her. Therefore, a compromise was made according to which Kore would spend three months each year as the chthonic deity Persephone. Kore, Persephone and

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

¹¹ Cf. Čajkanović, Veselin, *Studije iz srpske religije i folkloru 1925-1942 (Studies in Serbian Religion and Folklore 1925-1942)*, Belgrade, 1994 (hereafter: Čajkanović, *SSRF*), pp. 515-518.

¹² Stefanović-Karadžić, Vuk, *Srpske narodne pripovjetke (Serbian Folk Stories)*, Belgrade, 1985 (hereafter: Vuk, *SNP 85*), p. 167.

¹³ This and the following two stories in: Čajkanović, Veselin, *Srpske narodne pripovetke (Serbian Folk Stories)*, Belgrade, 1999 (hereafter: Čajkanović, *SNP*), pp. 26, 37 and 56.

¹⁴ I.e. Sveti Sava (cca 1175–1235) – the first archbishop of Serbian Orthodox Church, diplomat, writer, law giver and founder of several important medieval monasteries. He is considered to be one of the most important figures of Serbian history and he is canonized and venerated by Serbian Orthodox Church. Serbian people celebrates him as the patron saint of education and medicine.

¹⁵ E.g. "Saint Sava, the Cat and the River Sava" in: Ćorović, Vladimir, *Sveti Sava u narodnom predanju (Saint Sava in Folk Tradition)*, Belgrade, 1927, II-4, p. 47.

Hecate make up the Triple Goddess (Kore personifying green corn, Persephone mature spikes, and Hecate mown corn), whose general name was Demeter, and the cult itself rests on a maximum intersection of the fertility cult and the cult of the dead. In a similar way, Izanami (like Greek Gaea, the Babylonian Astarte and Egyptian Isis) incorporates the functions of fertility goddess and the chthonic mistress of the realm of the dead in her person. Izanaki and Izanami also establish harmony between life and death. She will subsequently make sure that the living should not overpopulate, since she will sweep away a thousand people a day. On the other hand, Izanaki is responsible for natality by building fifteen hundred child-bearing huts.¹⁶ This affirms the power of life over death, which leads to optimism, Shintoism's main characteristic.

The relationship between the dead and the well-being of the living can be found in traditions worldwide. Thus the ancient Greeks, Romans and Hindus pleaded for offspring and good harvests from their ancestors' souls. Interpreting Serbian beliefs, Čajkanović also discusses the ancestor cult. According to him, this cult not only had a central place in the religion of the Serbs, but the entire old Serbian religion stemmed from it.¹⁷ The bond between the dead and the living is never severed, and the ancestors' souls rule over the fertility of the land, humans, and livestock and therefore they demand sacrifices.¹⁸

Another widespread international motif, often present in the *Kojiki*, is the breach of established taboos. In the analyzed Japanese myth Izanaki broke two taboos. Firstly by lighting one flame, which was considered an ill omen. Secondly, when he disobeyed the goddess Izanaki's request by entering her palace and gazing upon her. In doing so, he disgraced her, thus making her his arch-enemy. That act is another from a series of reasons why this divine couple will remain forever separated. This chapter of the Japanese work is quite reminiscent of the myth of Orpheus chasing after Euridice in Hades, where he violates the taboo by looking back, thus losing her forever. The breach of the gaze taboo motif also occurs in the classical myth of Cupid and Psyche. It is also present in the Old Testament, when, despite God's prohibition, Lot's wife looks back in order to see how the Lord punishes Sodom and Gomorrah, thereby earning herself a transformation into a pillar of salt. Similar myths exist in Polynesia and North America as well. According to Campbell, both the Greek myth of Orpheus and Euridice and hundreds of similar stories around the world speak of a possibility of the beloved's return from the world beyond the dreadful boundary, something that never materializes due to error or human weakness.¹⁹

Both mentioned Japanese myths feature the famous international motif of magical escape. Whereas in the Izanaki myth the escape takes place because the hero has violated certain rules, more precisely, the established taboo, Ookuninushi's escape is caused by theft and abduction. Many scholars in the world have discussed this motif, concluding that its integral part is most frequently a metamorphosis motif. Thus Veselovsky analyses the type of folktale of pursuits and transformations,²⁰ and Meletinsky concludes that "the victims of

¹⁶ Child-bearing huts, *ubuya*, were built so that childbirth, in view of its impure nature, might be performed in isolation, which is a widespread custom with the Siberian Tungus as well as the remote parts of the Japanese archipelago.

¹⁷ Cf. Čajkanović, *SSRF*, p. 106.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Cf. Kembel, Džozef, *Heroj sa hiljadu lica* (Campbell, J., *The Hero With the Thousand Faces*, 1949), Novi Sad, 2004, pp. 183-185.

²⁰ Veselovski, Aleksandar N., *Istorijska poetika* (Веселовский, А. Н., *Историческая поэтика*, 1940), Belgrade, 2005, p. 605.

persecution, sometimes even the persecutors in various mythologies transform into hills, brooklets, they run away to heaven, where they turn into celestial lights. Some metamorphoses are related to outward similarity, for example, the origin of coconuts from human heads, or vice versa, humans deriving from coconut trees; the origin of the Sun from fire or fire from the Sun and the like.²¹ Character' transformation on the occasion of magical escape were classified by Aarne and Thompson of the Finnish school of folklore studies as a sort of dynamic motif.²² Among the functions of characters in a folktale, Propp lists the hero's persecution and his rescue from persecution. The pursuer dashes after the hero or gets in his way, quickly morphing into various animals and alluring objects. On the other hand, the pursued hero transforms into objects making him unidentifiable, but along the same lines: "The hero is running away, sowing obstacles in the pursuer's path as he is running. He throws a hairbrush, a comb, a scarf. These become mountains, forests, lakes."²³ Campbell lists as "a famous variety of magic escape" the one "in which the hero on the desperate run throws away various objects behind him."²⁴ In further analysis this scholar thoroughly discusses the myth of the god Izanaki's escape from the land of the dead, as one of the most impressive examples to serve his purpose of illustrating this motif. He concludes that "after stepping out from the creative sphere of the supreme father Izanaki into the field of decay, Izanami attempted to protect her brother-husband. But when he saw more than he could bear, he lost his innocence regarding death and coupled with his tremendous will to live, he set up, like a huge rock, a protective veil that has always stood between our eyes and the grave."²⁵ Eliade concludes that Izanaki's magical escape from the chthonic deities is "a common topic in folktales across the world as well."²⁶

It is interesting to compare the god Izanaki's magical escape with similar motifs occurring in Serbian folk stories, especially folktales. As such, on this occasion, we will consider two collections of folk stories: Vuk Stefanović Karadžić's²⁷ *The Serbian Folk Stories* and Veselin Čajkanović's *The Serbian Folk Stories*.²⁸ We will not be treating other prose genres of Serbian literature here, such as legends or traditions, since the magical escape motif has different functions in them.²⁹

²¹ *Poetika mita*, p. 197.

²² Filipović-Radulaški, Tatjana, *Formalističko i strukturalističko tumačenje bajke (Formalist and Structuralist Interpretation of the Folktale)*, Belgrade, 1997, p. 37.

²³ Prop, Vladimir J., *Morfologija bajke* (Пропп, В. J., *Морфология (волишебной) сказки*, 1928), Belgrade, 1982, str. 62–65.

²⁴ *Heroj sa hiljadu lica*, pp. 177–185.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Elijade, Mirča and Kuliano, Joan, *Vodič kroz svetske religije (A Guide to World Religions)*, Belgrade, 1996, p. 260.

²⁷ Vuk Stefanović Karadžić (1787–1864) – Serbian linguist and major reformer of the Serbian language. As one of the leading European philologists of his time, Karadžić reformed the Serbian literary language and standardized the Serbian Cyrillic alphabet by following strict phonemic principles using the German model. In addition to his linguistic reforms, Karadžić also made great contributions to folk literature, with peasant culture as the foundation. He collected several volumes of folk prose and poetry and he published the first dictionary of vernacular Serbian. Karadžić also translated the New Testament into Serbian.

²⁸ *Vuk, SNP 85* and *Čajkanović, SNP*.

²⁹ Under the influence of Christianity, the traditional Serbian stylisation of the magic escape sometimes does not attribute magic powers and objects to the hero. Thus in legendary stories and traditions, instead of the hero, metamorphoses are performed through supernatural agency, i.e. God. For example, lightning from the sky burns the pursuing sorceress (*Vuk, SNP 85*: "The Devil's Fantasy and God's Power", p. 138); the dewberry and the large body of water hinder pursuit (Sveti Sava u narodnom predanju: "Sveti Savo i Sveti Pavo" ["Saint Savo and Saint

If we are talking about magical escape motif in folktales, we can, following Čajkanović's thoughts, ascertain that there are several types of this motif. They differ mutually by what represents the object of the transformation: the pursued, the pursuers, or the objects that the pursued throws away, thus creating obstacles to hinder the pursuit.

Čajkanović named one type of magical escape the magical escape with metamorphoses.³⁰ Such a model is made up of transformations of the hero himself so as to make him unidentifiable. The character transforms either with the help of others, or alone, using his own powers. A capacity to transform oneself is characteristic of the scope of the magic assistant, and sometimes these functions relate to the pursuer's daughter who eventually becomes the wife of the pursued. Čajkanović's collection contains two folktales with this type of magical escape: "The Prince and the Giant's Daughter"³¹ and "The Way to Golden Rasudenac"³².

If the hero is trying to save himself by transforming on his own, we are dealing with a character that possesses magic powers. In the tales that use the motif of two contending wizards, both the pursuer and the pursued resort to successive metamorphoses in order to outwit each other.³³ This type of story finds its parallel in the biblical story of the contest between Moses and the Pharaoh's wizards, which Propp also makes mention of.³⁴ Their common characteristic is the transformation of both hero and antagonist, as well as the potential to quickly transform. Those characters are most often the teacher (the devil) and the apprentice, waging a battle to the death, in which the one who takes initiative and assumes a better form stands more of a chance of success.³⁵ Campbell says that "this kind of god is the favorite theme of folk tales, where it is developed into many other interesting forms."³⁶

Perhaps the most frequent type of magical escape motif is the escape where the hero hinders his pursuers by means of various mechanical and magic obstacles. The mechanical obstacles originate when the hero is running away, throwing the magic objects behind him, these in turn transform into certain elements that slow down the pursuit. These objects of transformation are primarily chosen because of their similarity to the transformed, or their natural relationship to the emerging obstacle. The speed at which it happens is miraculous, because each metamorphosis occurs momentarily. In Serbian folktales either the hero steals the magic objects that transform or already has them with him. The hero can also gain the objects if he does somebody a favor, or proves himself better at a certain skill. By the same token, the objects are brought into the field of the magic helper or donor.³⁷ Most frequently a comb, hairbrush, mirror or something similar turn into forests, mountains and large bodies of water,

Pavo"], pp. 44 and 45; "Saint Sava, the Cat and the River Sava", p. 48; "Saint Savo and Saint Pavo", p. 45). Besides, metamorphosis is occasionally the pivotal segment in traditions. There we most often deal with the one-way metamorphosis, without a possibility of assuming the original form. Such a metamorphosis usually has an etiological or cosmological function. For example, Saint Elias flees from his godchild, and when he smacks him with his rod, he turns into a lion. The saint then ties the lion to the earth's pivot so that he might stand there until Judgement Day. – Čajkanović, *SNP*: "Saint Elias' Godchild", p. 363.

³⁰ Cf. Čajkanović, *SNP*, notes, p. 595 ff.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 21, pp. 77–79.

³² *Ibid.*, 40, p. 149.

³³ Čajkanović, *SNP*, "The Son and the Devil's Trade", p. 94, *Vuk*, *SNP* 85: "The Devil and His Apprentice", p. 88.

³⁴ Cf. Prop, Vladimir J., *Historijski korijeni bajke* (Пропп, В. J., *Исторические корни волшебной сказки*, 1946), Sarajevo, 1990, p. 524.

³⁵ Cf. Čajkanović, Veselin, *Studije iz srpske religije i folklor (1910–1924)*, Belgrade, 1994.

³⁶ *Heroj sa hiljadu lica*, p. 179.

³⁷ Cf. *Morfologija bajke*, p. 86 ff.

something we can also conclude on the basis of Serbian material. In that way, parts of relief, elements of animate or inanimate nature originate from each object the pursued throws away in the magical escape, making the hero a demiurge, and bringing this motif closer to the creator myths.³⁸

Čajkanović singled out the following folktales wherein this type of magical escape occurs, detailing the obstacles which spring from the process: “The Golden Horse” (broomstick – thicket and hill; whetstone – beams and hills; gourd of water – lake); “Ninety-Nine Sons” (hairbrush – forest; curry-comb – pits, ravines, hills, chasms; mirror – sea); “Baldhead the Emperor’s Son-in-Law” (three bottles – wooden nails, fire, sea); “The Shepherd and the Fairies” (shovel – mountain; comb – forest; mirror – sea) and “The Poor Girl Becomes Empress” (comb – forest). Two folktales from Vuk’s collection can also be added to the list: “The Devil’s Fantasy and God’s Power” (hazelnut – rivers; walnut – fire) and “The Girl Faster Than a Horse” (hair strand – mountain; tear – rivers).³⁹

We can say that the last-mentioned type of magical escape motif occurs in the Japanese work as well. The pursued hero is the god Izanaki, and the pursuers are horrible chthonic demons. The hags personify the impurity of death, whereas the multitude of evil spirits is embodied in the gods of thunder and soldiers of the Land of Night. Since none of them accomplished the task, the goddess Izanami herself starts out in pursuit.

Izanaki hinders his pursuers first by means of mechanical obstacles including wild grapes and bamboo shoots. Those obstacles originate in the following metamorphoses: mediator – the god Izanaki first throws his ornamental vine wreath that transforms into wild grapes, and then a tooth from the holy comb that transforms into bamboo shoots. Both of them, the vine wreath and the comb, are taken off the deity’s head, which immediately indicates the numinous character of those objects. Both the vine wreath and the bamboo are plants with miraculous characteristics. Among all peoples of the world there are a great many beliefs, according to which numerous magic properties are attributed to diverse plants. The vine is equally present in Serbian popular beliefs as a netherworldly growth, but simultaneously as a holy plant from which demons flee. According to etiological tradition, the vine originated from the blood that dropped from God’s small finger to the ground, and therefore its fruit is taken for communion.⁴⁰ It also appears in incantations and popular medicine.⁴¹ St Sava’s relics would not burn on wood, but on vine.⁴² Popular songs and tales mention the vine that springs from the graves of innocent victims and children. On the other hand, since time immemorial the bamboo has been considered a miraculous plant in Japan, primarily for its rapid growth.

The comb itself is a polysemic symbol and stands as one of the most important objects with magic properties in Japanese myths, mentioned throughout the *Kojiki*. By analyzing the magical escape motif in Serbian folktales we find that among the objects representing the object of transformation the comb figures most prominently. It usually transforms into a forest (thicket). It is not by chance that in *The Historical Roots of the Wonder Tale* Propp gives the subheading to the magical escape chapter “Escape by Comb-Throwing and Similar”.⁴³ Propp

³⁸ Cf. *Historijski korijeni bajke*, p. 518.

³⁹ Čajkanović, *SNP*, notes, p. 595. All stories cited are from this collection.

⁴⁰ Čajkanović, *SSRF*, p. 461.

⁴¹ Čajkanović, Veselin, *Rečnik srpskih narodnih verovanja o biljkama (A Dictionary of Serbian Popular Plant-Related Beliefs)*, Belgrade, 1994, p. 56.

⁴² Sveti Sava u narodnom predanju: “Savina mala” (Sava’s Quarter”), p. 187.

⁴³ *Historijski korijeni bajke*, p. 519.

concludes that the hero usually saves himself by throwing a comb behind him, giving rise to a forest or a stone that engenders a mountain and a towel from which a river is created.

While considering the situation of Izanaki's escape from the land of the dead, we can conclude that the vine transformed into wild grapes and bamboo stemming from the comb represent the mechanical obstacles that only thwart the pursuers. It is necessary to resort to certain magic actions in order to put a final stop to the chase. A swing of the sword repels the magic of the other side, and three⁴⁴ peaches hinder the demons. This *Kojiki* myth is not the only one featuring the sword, not merely as a weapon, but as a symbol of sacral power and an object of miraculous, apotropaic and even life-giving properties. Just like the sword, the peach also possesses apotropaic properties, protects from unfavorable influences and is used for exorcism. However, all this magic is not sufficient to completely thwart the pursuit. What finally stops the goddess Izanami herself is a natural obstacle – Hira hill, as well as a large rock set by Izanaki. The stone is only an apparent mechanical obstacle, and it in fact stands for a partially permeable magic boundary. Namely, the living hero that has briefly found him or herself in the realm of the dead has been allowed to return, whereas the pursuers cannot cross that boundary because their dwelling there is permanent, and they do not hold sway over the realm of the living.

From the above, we can conclude that the *Kojiki* developed ideas of the land of the dead, presented in two mythological tales of the first volume. Those two ideas have certain things in common. Thus for example, in both, the world of the dead corresponds to the netherworldly part of the triadic cosmic structure, divided from the world of the living by the same magic boundary. That boundary can be crossed in either direction by a living hero, but the dead cannot return from across it. However, we can also see the differences between one and the other land of the dead. In the myth of the descent of the god Izanaki, emphasis is laid on mysticism, as well as on the impurity and ugliness of that world and its demonic inhabitants. In such a way the netherworldly realm is decisively differentiated from the sublime realm of celestial gods that create the world. Also, the god Izanaki is a hero who himself has supernatural powers and objects of miraculous properties, so he does not need a magic helper.

On the other side, in the story about the god Ookuninushi the image of the mysterious underworld fades away. As we progress from “the age of gods” to “the age of men”, there are fewer and fewer miracles and magic. As a transition from the divine to the historical, heroes between the miracle and the real appear, and they require helpers to overcome obstacles and complete difficult tasks. One of them is Ookuninushi. He is first helped by Suseribime, who offers him magic scarves, and then a magic helper – the mouse, thanks to whom the hero is saved from an apparently helpless situation. This rather reminds us of an idea of a faraway land where the main character of the folktale arrives in his miraculous adventures. He falls in love with a princess from that distant kingdom, and in order to win her hand, he must solve the difficult tasks set upon him by the girl's father. He succeeds in doing that with the assistance of miraculous objects and magic helpers, thus gaining the possibility to rule the realm himself. This kind of plot structure is quite frequent in folktales, including Serbian ones.

Moreover, it is possible to find many similar plots in folktales and in myths of culture heroes, and this problem was discussed by many scholars, disagreeing in relation to the historical precedence of myth, i.e. folktale. Thus folktales of visiting “other worlds” with an aim of freeing captives remind one of myths of descent into the netherworld in order to save the deceased. On the other hand, differences that exist between myth and folktales are founded

⁴⁴ A vestige of Chinese belief, according to which three is a holy number.

on genre discrepancies. The myth's main character is a god or culture hero, whereas in folktales it is most frequently a common man, very often a socially underprivileged, pursued representative of his people. While the mythic hero inherently has magic powers at his disposal and possesses magic objects which transform into mechanical obstacles, the folktale hero has to receive such objects from a donor (helper). The aims achieved in folktales relate to the hero's personal fate, and they are not elements of nature and culture, whereas in myth they almost always have a cosmic importance. In the aforementioned Japanese myth the hero sets a boundary leading to the definite dissolution of cosmic elements – the celestial and earthly spheres.

Despite the differences between myth and folktale, the oldest work of Japanese literature also offers us a glimpse into their approach, since the differentiation of primary functions is attenuated here: of the “secular” folktale and of myth as a sacral artifact. The focus is on desacralized myths, whose specific restrictions of rights to retelling and listening have been abolished. Not only were the uninitiated allowed to learn about them, but those myths were also written down with a purpose of being spread among the people so as to prove the emperor's celestial origin through them.

We also notice that the *Kojiki* contains a large number of international motifs present in cultures worldwide, some of which are frequent in Serbian tradition. That is the reason there are a multitude of similarities and common features between the oldest Japanese work and Serbian folk prose despite numerous differences caused by religious and social-historical circumstances. It is possible to reach them by means of comparative analysis. This kind of research provides a new perspective on the study of mythology, tradition and literature, and it is especially interesting to compare two national literatures deriving from different cultural settings.

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Abstract

In the *Kojiki* (712), the oldest literary work of Japan, there is a plethora of motifs which could be found in the cultures of many peoples all over the world. This paper treats with the international motifs interwoven in two myths from the first volume, forming a poetic picture of the Land of the Dead, the underworld part of the trichotomic cosmic structure. Among other things, there is the widely known Persephone motif, the Orphic motif or the motif of the successful escape from the Land of the Dead.