Symbolism of Fire in Greek and Japanese Creation Myths

by Steve McCarty


We may ask what fire is, what role it has played in human evolution, and what it symbolizes. Like the Roman god Janus with two faces facing in opposite directions, fire both saves and destroys. Tamed, it purifies and preserves. It transforms the raw into the cooked. Untamed, it burns out of control. Whether it is good or bad for humans in a given situation depends on how it is handled. The power of fire to improve or harm life has given it a prominent role in the moral of the story of many myths around the world.

As introduced by Athina Meli, control of the element of fire was foundational to civilization. Indeed, recent research confirms widespread diffusion of the use of fire and stone tools among hominids by at least 400,000 years ago, which means that there was culture even before homo sapiens. Fire was a key to the integration of disparate pre-humans, cooperative social organization, and human evolution (Eindhoven University of Technology, 2021).

Fire provided humanity with warmth from the harsh cold, light in the darkness, and protection from dangerous animals. Ancient humans carried torches at night, and gathered around campfires, which facilitated communication, story-telling, and the transmission of culture. Yet like a double-edged sword, the destructive power of fire could be overwhelming, in forest fires, accidents, or burning down human dwellings, even today.

Fire has taken on religious significance in various rituals across cultures worldwide. The Olympic flame, lit and extinguished to mark the beginning and end of ceremonies, harks back to the sacred flame of Delphi. As Athina Meli noted, ritually extinguishing and lighting a fire symbolically enacted the fulfilment of a need felt for purification or regeneration.

In Japanese mythology, Masashi Nakamura reports that the fire god represented calamity, then protection. Besides reflecting the dual nature of fire discussed above, the order from danger to protection from danger could well reflect the evolution toward mastering the use of fire. All the while, ancient Japanese shamans were negotiating religiously with the divinity of fire to propitiate and coax its superhuman power to the side of serving human needs.
Fire could take or give life, and Masashi Nakamura interprets cooking as linked to regeneration, also found in Greek mythology. Fire was a key to producing the pottery that preserved food and characterized the prehistoric New Stone Age culture of the Jōmon Period. The Neolithic Yayoi Period that came next, ca. 300 BC to ca. 250 AD, with wet rice cultivation and metalworking brought from mainland Asia, was also named after the design of its pottery.

Furthermore, fire and its power figures in the origin myths of Japan. There has never been a clear line between kami deities and ancestors, so to an extent the myths reflect human daily life at the time, at least for the elite regional leaders. The birth of fire as a deity was connected to female death, but then to the birth of further deities, including that of the cooking kiln. Although the fire deity was slain by one of the founding gods of Japan, his blood spawned further deities, still worshipped today.

The terrain of Japan was formed by volcanoes, which Masashi Nakamura finds significant. Eruptions represent the ultimate display of fire and its power. When settlers first arrived in Japan from around 30,000 years ago, the rumbling of volcanoes and earthquakes from their standpoint could indicate the displeasure of forces beyond human power, so they were inclined to deify and propitiate those forces, eventually seeking to harness their power.

Many Shintō and Buddhist rituals as well as festivals feature the use of fire. In Kyōto there is the Mt. Kurama fire festival, with men carrying huge torches at night. At the end of the annual o-Bon festival, the visiting spirits of ancestors are sent off on the night of August 16th with bonfires lighting up five mountainsides with huge Japanese characters such as 大, meaning ‘great.’

Although o-Bon is a Buddhist event going back to the time of Buddha in ancient India, then in Chinese religions, the aspect of mountains as the abode of deities and ancestors is native to animistic Shintō mountain worship. This displays a remarkable characteristic of Japanese culture: the peaceful co-existence of different religions, the plural religious affiliation of individuals, and the fusion of Asian religions (see McCarty, 2000).

Among the original gods in ancient Greece, one Titan was Prometheus. According to Theodore Papakostas, he empathized with human vulnerability compared to animals, and took the use of fire to humanity from the exclusive realm of the gods. In the myth he literally passed the torch. This, however, upset the existing order, placing humanity above animals with a divine element, so Zeus exacted punishment. In the end, Prometheus was freed by Hercules, a son of Zeus, and the theft of divine fire was vindicated.
Humanity was granted the survival skills of the use of fire, which were disruptive but led to civilization. The mastery of such a divine element or complex process was also associated with the cognitive evolution of humanity. Theodore Papakostas mentioned at the outset that the name Prometheus means forethought. This implies thinking about the future, with all its benefits that were not available in earlier stages of evolution. Going beyond time to past and future considerations is sometimes a mixed blessing, but it was certainly an advantage for species survival in a changing global environment.

To go beyond the present moment dominated by the five senses, humanity gained abstract thought, which has led to science and other intellectual endeavors, including writing. The mastery of fire is thus associated with the evolution from primary perception to the addition of secondary processing of information in the frontal lobe of the brain. This goes along with the symbolism of fire as generating both heat and light. Fire challenged humanity in various ways to be more resourceful. Carrying a torch can symbolize education, the transmission of knowledge across generations in cultures. Therefore, among other cognitive benefits, fire symbolizes enlightenment.

Comparing Japanese and Greek mythology with respect to fire, both place fire in the province of the gods at first. In the religious rituals of both cultures over thousands of years, fire has played a major role in representing transformation, purification, and benediction. The natural symbolism of fire as a superhuman power for creation or destruction perhaps led to the sense of collective guilt represented by Prometheus stealing fire for human use. Both cultures also maintained the sacred status of fire through religious practices.

While all individuals have their own associations with fire, the independent arising of Greek and Japanese mythology provides evidence that the symbolism of fire and other elemental phenomena is universally human. Fire perhaps ultimately symbolizes power itself, which naturally occurs or can be used for human benefit or destruction. Fire burns away all nonessentials and rationalizations. It is an arena of human competence to tame a stronger power and turn a hazardous force into a useful ally.

Note: For an interpretation of air in other Greco-Roman and Japanese myths, see McCarty (2021).
References


For works by the author on Japan or Asian Studies, see https://wilmina.academia.edu/SteveMcCarty/Japan or https://japanned.hcommons.org/japanology

Born in Boston, longtime full Professor in Japan, Steve McCarty currently lectures for Osaka Jogakuin University and the Japanese government international agency. He is also President of the World Association for Online Education. For highly cited publications on e-learning, bilingualism, language teaching, the academic life, Asian Studies and Japan, see https://wilmina.academia.edu/SteveMcCarty or https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Steve-Mccarty https://hcommons.org/members/stevemccartyinjapan https://japanned.hcommons.org (Humanities Commons)