Symbolism of Air in Greco-Roman and Japanese Creation Myths  
by Steve McCarty


As with fire (McCarty, 2021), we may ask what air is, what role it has played in human evolution, and what it symbolizes in mythology. In the literary introduction by Theodore Biros [in this book], air or wind hovers over water or the sea. Humans love to enter water, as if to return to their origins, but must return to the air to breathe. The surface marks a boundary between incompatible realms, where humans must choose to be immersed in one element or the other at any given moment.

Whereas, summing up the four elements, in Astrology, people born under fire and air signs were believed to be compatible, as were those born under earth and water signs. The stars -- related to air, sky, or space -- were believed to confer less fortune on the other combinations. C.G. “Jung saw the Four Elements as archetypes existing in the collective unconscious and thus present in everyone. Jung considered Fire and Air the active, masculine elements and Water and Earth the passive, feminine elements” (Hauck, n.d.). This is similar to yang and yin in Daoism. Jung connects the element of air with fire as well as spirit in myths worldwide: “In keeping with its original wind-nature, spirit is always an active, winged, swift-moving being as well as that which vivifies, stimulates, incites, fires, and inspires” (1968, para. 390).

Scientifically, as Theodore Biros explains, air consists of elements from the periodic table, predominantly nitrogen and oxygen. Yet air in motion takes on many forms from a caressing breeze to gale winds. Air is the main medium of sound, and with breathing most necessary for human survival, air is essential to life as we know it.

Masashi Nakamura connects air to wind, weather patterns such as clouds and thunder, and celestial bodies prominent in Japanese mythology. Two of the three most important children of the founding god of Japan were the deities of the sun and the moon. The sun goddess Amaterasu was granted the high heavens, while the moon god Tsukuyomi could rule the night. The third precious child, Susanoo was not content to rule the seas but sought to mount the heavens by negotiating with Amaterasu through a sword and a magatama ball, perhaps by linking the double meaning of tama as sphere and soul. From this
origin myth, a sword and magatama came to represent two of the three Imperial Regalia of Japan.

Amaterasu literally means Heaven’s radiance, and She is believed to be the ancestor of the first Emperor. The sun is a universally human symbol as giver of life and growth, perhaps originally viewed as a sort of fire in the sky. More than 2,000 years ago, Japan came to depend on that fire and the other elements for rice agriculture, which facilitated gradually more complex social organization, until Japan actually became a nation, with a red sun on its flag.

The sun is the chief cause of the alternating light or darkness of the air. The light and warmth of the sun change with the season, location, and weather. The capriciousness of Susanoo might represent the insecure uncertainty that ancient people felt as they needed predictable seasons, particularly to sow and reap their life-sustaining rice crop. As Masashi Nakamura reports, Susanoo took on various forms, some harmful. In one episode, his misconduct shamed Amaterasu into hiding in a cave, which darkened the world. Yet this made the development of performing arts such as kagura dances necessary to entice Her to bring back the light. Another moral of the story might be that one’s misbehavior shames other family members as well, and has negative consequences for the whole community.

Susanoo eventually redeemed himself, slaying an evil monster, and settling in Izumo, which was actually one of the most important sites in ancient Japan. Lafcadio Hearn settled in the same region of the grand shrine Izumo Ōyashiro, whose prehistoric origin remains shrouded in mystery.

For the element of air in Greek mythology, [editor] Maria Papatzelou selected Eros and Psyche as an inspiring myth. To her, this story is like the element of air: always moving, changing, not easy to catch, but it is there. We cannot see air, as Psyche was not allowed to see Eros, but it is our breath, our living element, so vital to our survival, as love is! The Eros and Psyche myth is a beautiful metaphor for the aerial, invisible, movable, and transforming feeling of love, that is our breath, which gives life, just as the element of air does.

The myth spans the Hellenistic and Roman ages, with elements in Plato and Greek art, then written in Latin by Apuleius in Metamorphoses. Variations of the story have provided a rich well of universally human symbolism. Much of the language of love and life derives from these characters. The Greek Eros is Cupid in Latin, and the Greek Psyche is Anima in Latin. The etymology of English words like erotic, cupidity, psychology, or animation is obvious.

Eros could fly, as a winged god of desire. The word psyche means soul, spirit, breath, or the animating force of life. Psyche also means butterfly, a natural symbol for metamorphosis as a creature that transforms and rises from the earth.
to the air. Psyche became immortal through the love of Eros. They finally had a daughter, whose name means pleasure. Plato regarded children as physical immortality, and creations such as writing or art as mental immortality.

For air in Greek mythology, Angeliki Koukouvou places Eros and Psyche between light and shadow. She recounts the story of the god of love and a mortal soul. The earthly beauty of Psyche, however, incurred the jealousy of Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty. The plot twists include Eros falling in love with Psyche despite his mother Aphrodite, and the envy of sisters of Psyche who dishonestly try to break up her relationship with the god. Psyche realizes her error of hurting and exposing Eros, who had remained hidden despite his perfect appearance, so she goes through trials including the hell of Hades to redeem herself. Eros finally appeals to Zeus for divine intervention, and Zeus makes Psyche immortal to seal a perfect union with Eros. The pleasure granted to humanity represented by their child was thus earned.

Angeliki Koukouvou concludes with a moral of the story that the lack of love kills joy and social cohesion, whereas this myth shows that the soul becomes immortal through love.

Even with a limited selection of Japanese and Greek myths, connections to air and the other elements were apparent. Among the commonalities between the myths across cultures were instinctive emotions such as jealousy, the consequences of misbehavior, and redemption. There was both similarity and difference, as the Greco-Roman myth prefigured Western romanticism noticeable even today, whereas the Japanese origin myth refers to the female anatomy and birth, but does not express romantic love, except perhaps subtly through the seductive charm of music and dance.

Finally, the distinction between mortal and immortal tends to be absolute in Western thought, whereas in Japan anything imaginable could be related. Ancestors have gone from mortal to immortal as kami gods. In the opposite direction, the first Emperor was believed to have descended from the goddess Amaterasu. Even Western mythology challenged the ultimate barrier, with Eros flying from the heavens to the earth, and psyche as a butterfly rising from the earth to the air. The divine and human realms in mythology are permeable in both directions. Where elements are more than one, combined and interacting, there can be transformation.
References


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

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