



Book review: *Die andere Seite des Mondes. Schriften über Japan*

Fabian Schäfer

University of Erlangen-Nürnberg, Artilleriestr. 70, 91052 Erlangen, Germany

Correspondence: Fabian Schäfer (fabian.schaefer@fau.de)

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“Flamboyant”, “incomparable”, “idiosyncratic”, “expressive”, “astonishing”, “sophisticated”, “striking”, “innovative”, “subtle”, “terrific”, “exciting”, “resourceful”, “clear” – this is the list of exuberant adjectives used by Lévi-Strauss on the condensed space of only six pages to familiarize the reader with his unrestrained appreciation of prehistoric Japanese Jōmon pottery and medieval court literature culture (pp. 30–36). In parts, this collection of short essays on Japan, published from 1979 to 2009, in fact reads like the notes of an extended hallucinogenic or epiphanous trip. Eventually, these rich and colorful descriptions and meditations by a completely overwhelmed Claude Lévi-Strauss have now been skillfully translated by Eva Moldenhauer into German as well (an English translation was published with Harvard UP in 2013, from which I allow myself to quote in this review). The essays collected in this volume are the result of five trips to Japan, which Lévi-Strauss undertook together with his wife, writer Monique Lévi-Strauss, between 1977 and 1988. Therefore, at first sight one might consider these writings as a reverberation of a heightened (sometimes exoticizing) interest of French intellectuals in Japan in the latter half of the 1960s, beginning with Sartre’s trip to Japan and culminating in Barthes visits in the following years. However, it is worth nothing that Lévi-Strauss’ first contact with Japan in fact took place much earlier and extends far back into his childhood, being in itself a reverberation of a much earlier aesthetic appreciation of Japan–Japonisme. As early as at the age of five, he received a woodblock print by Hiroshige as a present from his father, who was an impressionist painter, himself being deeply impressed with Japanese art.

Thus, although one might criticize Lévi-Strauss for not always meeting his own high standards in his observations of Japan, namely that he considers it necessary “to escape the magnetic attraction” of the Japanese culture in order to “make a valid judgment” about its “place in the world” (or of any other culture) (p. 15), he nevertheless addresses some very important questions, reaching far beyond a trivial travel itinerary or simple descriptions of Japanese culture. In this review, I would like to focus on the two most important of these issues, namely (a) the question of Japan’s place in the world, specifically the place of Japanese mythology in a global context, and (b) the methodologically interesting question regarding the possibility of comparing cultures in general, especially when one is dealing with very remote cultures and civilizations.

Lévi-Strauss begins his elaborations on Japanese mythology, once again, by positioning Japan in a somewhat unique position: “The fundamental problem of Japanese culture”, he writes, lies in the fact that this country, “placed at the far end of a vast continent, occupying a marginal position there, and having experienced long periods of isolation”, at the same time offers “in its most ancient texts a perfectly elaborated synthesis of elements found elsewhere in dispersed order” (p. 23). In particular, he compares and mutually contextualizes certain motifs and themes in the two “most ancient” Japanese texts, *Kōjiki* and *Nihon shoki* (both dating from the 8th century), with Native American and Indonesian mythology. When doing so, he is particularly interested in the motif of mediation or the mediating tertium between life and death, or the mortal and the immortal world, namely a very peculiar and central element of almost any mythology. In Japanese mythology as well, he argues, one can find various instances of ontologically ambivalent mediation between the two separated realms of the living and spirits/gods. Typically, these are moments of transition or transgression be-

tween these two actually separated spheres, such as in the “motif of the lost object”, in which the contact with the otherworld leads to a sudden ageing of the protagonist (namely a temporal mediation of life and death through a compression of time), or the spatial mediation of the earth and the sea in other episodes, often requiring the help of an ontologically ambivalent human/non-human existence as a personified “mediator”. Lévi-Strauss takes the famous story of “The White Hare of Inaba” as a prominent example, which is included in the *Kōjiki*. “The White Hare of Inaba” is a short animal story that exists in numerous versions not only in Japan but also in Southeast Asia and in the myths of North and South America, as Lévi-Strauss explains (p. 70). In all three local versions, the crossing of a body of water, which is “an intermediate element between the sky and land” (p. 72), is a crucial theme in all stories. Moreover, he argues, in each story the conduct of the respective protagonist towards the mediator between sea and land (a snake, a crocodile, or a sea monster, depending on the local version) is a mediating one as well, namely that of an “intermediate between moderation and immoderation”, because in all versions of the story the protagonist manages to persuade the mediator between the two worlds merely by means of “haggling, dupery, (or) false promises” (p. 73). According to Lévi-Strauss, the “intermediate solution” through an ambivalent mediator between the living and the dead is a “logical necessity” (p. 127) for many mythologies.

Particularly interesting and methodologically sophisticated is Lévi-Strauss’ essay entitled “The Shameless Dance of Ame no Uzume”, in which the motif of mediation is a central theme as well. This episode describes the obscene dance of the goddess Ame no Uzume by which she lures the Japanese sun goddess Amaterasu out of the cave in which she had been hiding. However, it is not the dance per se by a goddess that is said to be the first mythological medium/shaman, namely a mediator between the sphere of immortals and mortals, that prompts Amaterasu to leave her retreat but rather the mediating force of laughter of the other gods about this unusual behavior. Lévi-Strauss points out that there is also a very similar variation of this story in ancient Egyptian mythology, dating from the end of the second millennium BC. In the Egyptian version it is the sun god as well, Pre-Harakhti, who retreats into his pavilion and can only be convinced to leave his seclusion by the god’s laughter caused by the behavior of his daughter Hathor, who – strikingly similar to the behavior of Ame no Uzume – lifts her dress and reveals her genitals in this episode.

It is these two elements, namely the fact that in both narratives the protagonist deity is the sun god/goddess and that the mediator of action lies in the decisive function of laughter caused by revelation of genitals, that Lévi-Strauss rules out chance as a reason for this coincidence or “independent invention”: “(G)iven the extent to which the myths of these three regions correspond even in their details”, we must “therefore endeavor (...) to discover a single origin for

them?” (p. 23). Lévi-Strauss argues that with such fundamentally similar motifs we are certainly rather dealing with a transnational “archaic mythological stratum”. However, that “in no way” should imply “that genealogical relationships can be established between their manifestations”. Instead, he suggests that one could learn from the “modern form of systematics of the animal kingdom, known as *cladism*” that has taught us “to distinguish primitive from derived characteristics”. Based on this assumption, it is strictly forbidden “to conclude, based on the presence of primitive characteristics in common, that two species are closely related”. If one “transpose(s) this distinction to mythology, we may say that the primitive characteristics of myths consist of mental operations that are formal in essence” (pp. 126, 128). His aim is to reveal what others have called “*Urmythos*”, namely “primordial myths” that “must have been common to humanity as a whole at the origin of time” (pp. 22–23). Based on this research, Lévi-Strauss hypothesizes that a great number of myths might actually have their origins in Asia, “from which they could have traveled in both directions” (p. 96). This leads me to the other important subject in the book, namely the problem of comparison in general.

It is a very serious problem of any comparison, according to Lévi-Strauss, that “cultures are by nature incommensurable”, since all “the criteria we could use to characterize one of them come either from it, and are therefore lacking in objectivity, or from a different culture, and are by that very fact invalid” (p. 15). Accordingly, if comparing cultures from within one culture is out of the question, the only thing a comparator could do is either to construct an artificial *tertium comparationis* or indulge in what according to Lévi-Strauss is the special task of anthropology, namely “to propose an overall view – one reduced to a few schematic outlines, but which those indigenous to the culture would be incapable of attaining because they are located too close to it” (p. 18). It is particularly the latter perspective that Lévi-Strauss has exercised in the abovementioned comparative remarks on mythology.

Of great importance in this regard is an essay entitled “Domesticating Strangeness”. In this essay Lévi-Strauss discusses one of the earliest English encyclopedic accounts of Japan, namely Basil Hall Chamberlain’s book *Things Japanese* (1890), in which he describes the relationship between Japan and the West as “topsy-turvy”. According to Chamberlain, “the Japanese do many things in a way that runs directly counter to European ideas of that is natural and proper”. Lévi-Strauss argues that attributions of this kind are always the result of essentialization and containment of the entities under comparison and thus often arise from the act of comparing things itself. Instead, he argues that it is necessary to take a closer look at the proposed “demarcation line” between allegedly contained entities when comparing them. This becomes very obvious in Chamberlain’s way of comparing, because by merely focusing only on Japan and his country of origin, he misses that the demarcation line in fact

“passes between insular Japan and continental Asia”, and not between Japan and The West (p. 114). It is one of the greatest pitfalls of comparisons, according to Lévi-Strauss, that, in order to be able to compare, one tries “to make all the contrasts fit the same mold”. This is based on the urge to move “beyond mutual unintelligibility” in order to bring “to light transparent relationships of symmetry”, because the “recognition of a symmetry between two cultures unites them, even as it places them in opposition. They appear both similar and different, the symmetrical image of ourselves reflected in a mirror, an image irreducible to us, even though we find ourselves in every detail” (p. 116).

In summary, although Lévi-Strauss at times falls for his own, sometimes unbridled, admiration of Japan, at one point even crediting Japan with a certain cultural superiority over the West (supposedly offering a “model” of “mental hygiene”, better to be adopted by the West, p. 50), this collection of essays by Lévi-Strauss surely remains a valuable and worthwhile outsider’s perspective on Japan. Particularly refreshing to the reader will be the “cladist” perspective on Japanese mythology, or the critical examination of the more general problem of comparison by one of the great French critical thinkers of his times.