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# Incest and Rebirth in *Kojiki*

by FUMINOBU MURAKAMI

**I**N *Kojiki* 古事記, Izanami 伊邪那美 is referred to as an *imo* 妹, a term meaning both wife and younger sister in ancient Japanese, and scholars have generally considered this to mean that she was only the wife, and not the sister, of Izanagi 伊邪那岐.<sup>1</sup> The first scholar to suggest an incestuous union between the two was Oka Masao 岡正雄, who claimed that the tale of Izanagi and Izanami is based on a myth about an incestuous brother-sister union that is common in Southeast Asia, Central India, and other Asian regions.<sup>2</sup> According to this myth, long ago there was a great flood that exterminated all mankind with the exception of two people, a brother and sister, on a mountain. After performing a rite to abolish the incest taboo, they tried to produce children, but on their first attempt the woman gave birth to deformed offspring. But they succeeded in producing normal children on their second attempt and thus became the ancestors of present-day human beings.<sup>3</sup> Oka points out the similarity between this myth and the Izanagi-Izanami story, and claims that the latter closely parallels the Asian myth about the incestuous union between brother and sister.

Hattori Asake, on the other hand, finds three significant differences between the two versions: (1) the Izanagi-Izanami myth does not mention a flood; (2) there is no clear indication that Izanagi and Izanami are in fact brother and sister; and (3) the theme of the myth in *Kojiki* is the birth of lands, whereas

THE AUTHOR is a lecturer in the Department of Japanese, University of Hong Kong. The present article is a revised version of a paper read at the 10th International Conference on Japanese Literature held in Tokyo in November 1986; a summary of the conference paper was published in the Proceedings of the Conference in March 1987. The paper was also read in a seminar at the National University of Singapore in December 1986. The author wishes to thank those present for their helpful comments.

<sup>1</sup> As long ago as 1896, the British scholar W. G. Aston referred to the two meanings of

the term, but added, 'It may be doubted whether this justifies any adverse inference as to the morals of the Japanese in early times.'

W. G. Aston, tr., *Nihongi: Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest Times to A.D. 697*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1956 reprint, p. 22, n. 7.

<sup>2</sup> In Ishida Eiichirō 石田英一郎 *et al.*, *Nihon Minzoku no Kigen* 日本民族の起源, Heibonsha, 1958, pp. 45 & 232-33.

<sup>3</sup> Indonesian myths of brother-sister incest are collected in W. J. Perry, *The Megalithic Culture of Indonesia*, University of Manchester Press, 1918, Chapter 12.

that of the incestuous union between brother and sister is the birth of humans. Hattori concludes that Izanagi and Izanami are not brother and sister.<sup>4</sup>

Saigō Nobutsuna, however, has studied the use of the term *imo* in *Man'yōshū* 万葉集, and shows that when the word refers to a wife, it is used by only the husband to address his wife in person. He suggests that because *imo* is mentioned by the compiler only in the narrative part of *Kojiki*, the term must refer to a sister. In other words, Izanagi and Izanami are brother and sister, and therefore commit incest.<sup>5</sup> But Nishimiya Kazutami disagrees, arguing that the examples from *Man'yōshū* are not necessarily applicable to *Kojiki*.<sup>6</sup>

The purpose of the present article is not to resolve the above difference of opinion but to analyze the incest theme throughout *Kojiki*, assuming that the theme is in fact present in the work. It seems fair to make this assumption in view of the prevalence of the incest theme in various myths of different regions and in light of the relevant theories of Freud and Levi-Strauss.

### Rebirth

*Kojiki* describes how three noble deities, Amaterasu-ō-mikami 天照大御神, Tsuku-yomi-no-mikoto 月読命, and Susa-no-o-no-mikoto 須佐之男命 came into existence when Izanagi purified himself after Izanami was burned in the genitals and died while giving birth to the fire deity, Hi-no-kagu-tsuchi-no-kami 火之迦具土神.<sup>7</sup> In the *Nihon Shoki* 日本書紀 version, however, the three deities are born as a result of Izanagi and Izanami's union as husband and wife before the latter's death.<sup>8</sup> Tsuda Sōkichi takes this latter version to be the true one,<sup>9</sup> and if this is indeed the case, we can accept the interpretation that the three noble deities were born before Izanami died. The story then continues in both *Nihon Shoki* and *Kojiki* with Izanagi's visit to the Yomi land, or underworld.<sup>10</sup>

As regards Izanagi's visit to the Yomi land, Matsumura Takeo points out that Izanagi's inspection of Izanami's corpse is related to the *mogari* 殯

<sup>4</sup> Hattori Asake 服部旦, 'Kuni Umi Shinwa no Kōzō' 国生み神話の構造, in *Kōza Nihon no Shinwa* 講座日本の神話, Yūseidō, 1976, 3, pp. 76-101.

<sup>5</sup> Saigō Nobutsuna 西郷信綱, 'Kinshinsōkan to Shinwa: Izanaki Izanami no Koto' 近親相姦と神話—イザナキ・イザナミのこと, in *Kojiki Kenkyū* 古事記研究, Miraisha, 1973, p. 78.

<sup>6</sup> Nishimiya Kazutami 西宮一民, 'Saigō Nobutsuna-cho "Kojiki Chūshaku Dai Ikkān"' 西郷信綱著「古事記注釈第一巻」, in *Bungaku* 文学, 44:2 (1976), pp. 278-79.

<sup>7</sup> Kurano Kenji 倉野憲司 & Takeda Yūkichirō 武田祐吉, ed., *Kojiki* 古事記 (NKBT 1), Iwanami, 1958, pp. 60-61 & 70-71; Donald Philippi, tr., *Kojiki*, University of Tokyo Press, 1968, pp. 56-57 & 70.

<sup>8</sup> Sakamoto Tarō 坂本太郎 *et al.*, ed., *Nihon Shoki* 日本書紀 (NKBT 67), Iwanami, 1967, 1, pp. 86-88; Aston, *Nihongi*, pp. 18-19.

<sup>9</sup> Tsuda Sōkichi 津田左右吉, *Nihon Koten no Kenkyū* 日本古典の研究, Iwanami, 1948, 1, pp. 366-69.

<sup>10</sup> Sakamoto, *Nihon Shoki*, pp. 92-93; Aston, *Nihongi*, pp. 24-25. Kurano, *Kojiki*, pp. 62-65; Philippi, *Kojiki*, pp. 61-63.

Sugano Masao 菅野雅雄 takes the interpretation that Izanami's being burnt to death means that she is reborn with a stronger soul as a result of Izanagi's incantation and that they then give birth to the three noble deities. *Kojiki Setsuwa no Kenkyū* 古事記説話の研究, Ōfūsha, 1973, p. 78.

magico-religious funeral rite that is believed to have been performed in ancient Japan. When someone died, his family built a hut called a *mogari* near their house and laid the corpse there; they then went to inspect the corpse everyday until it turned putrid. This rite is believed to be a way of praying for the rebirth of the dead.<sup>11</sup> Although Izanami's rebirth is not mentioned in *Kojiki*, the story relates not only her death but also Izanagi's overwhelming desire for her return to life.

The above analysis suggests that Izanagi and Izanami committed incest and gave birth to the three noble deities, and that the rebirth of Izanami, after she had been burnt to death, was prayed for through the *mogari* magico-religious rite. The four elements—incest, sacred birth, death, and rebirth—are all present.

In the story of Amaterasu and Susa-no-o bearing offspring to test the sincerity of the latter's motives, the two give birth to the important deities, Ameno-oshi-ho-mimi-no-mikoto 天忍穗耳命 and Takiri-bime-no-mikoto 多紀理毘売命. Although Yokota Ken'ichi has denied the incestuous union between Amaterasu and Susa-no-o,<sup>12</sup> we presuppose it here again.

According to this story, Susa-no-o becomes violent after the birth of the offspring, makes a hole in the roof of the sacred weaving hall, and drops into it a dappled pony that he has cruelly skinned. At this, the weaving maiden becomes alarmed, strikes her genitals against the shuttle, and dies. As *Nihon Shoki* specifically mentions that Amaterasu herself is also injured in the same way,<sup>13</sup> Orikuchi Shinobu and Matsumura Takeo suppose that the deity who is wounded and dies in the original version of the story is Amaterasu herself.<sup>14</sup>

The *chinkonsai* 鎮魂祭 rite may well have been based on the myth of Amaterasu's secluding herself in the heavenly rock-cave, recorded immediately after the above story; certainly the rites in this tale are very similar to those of the *chinkonsai* ceremony. The *chinkonsai*, or *tama-shizume-matsuri*, that is, spirit pacification, was performed every winter. As the emperor was believed to be the descendant of the sun-goddess Amaterasu, his soul was thought to become weaker as the weather became colder. He therefore performed the *chinkonsai* every winter to prevent his soul from leaving his body or to summon it back into his body. In *Kojiki*, therefore, Amaterasu, the divinity of both the sun and the emperor, dies and is reborn by entering and leaving the cave, as symbolized in the *chinkonsai*.

Thus we can suppose that, at a deeper level in the *Kojiki* version, the section from Amaterasu and Susa-no-o's bearing offspring to Amaterasu's hiding in

<sup>11</sup> Matsumura Takeo 松村武雄, *Nihon Shinwa no Kenkyū* 日本神話の研究, Baifūkan, 1954–1958, 2, pp. 445–48.

<sup>12</sup> Yokota Ken'ichi 横田健一, 'Ama-no-manai Ukei Shinwa Iden Kō' 天真名井誓約神話異伝考, in *Nihon Shoki Kenkyū* 日本書紀研究, Hanawa, 1970, 4, p. 339.

<sup>13</sup> Sakamoto, *Nihon Shoki*, pp. 112–13; Aston, *Nihongi*, p. 41.

<sup>14</sup> Orikuchi Shinobu 折口信夫, 'Jōdai Sōgi no Seishin' 上代葬儀の精神, in *Orikuchi Shinobu Zenshū*, 20, Chūō Kōronsha, 1956, 20, pp. 353–54; Matsumura, 3, pp. 43–45.

the cave relates how Amaterasu and Susa-no-o produced the sacred deities, Oshi-ho-mimi and Takiri-bime, as a result of their incest, and then how Amaterasu died by being struck in the genitals and is brought back to life by the *chinkonsai*. But what do these repeated four themes of incest, sacred birth, death, and rebirth signify?

Yanagita Kunio has studied the rebirth of the ancestral soul, and describes a custom in Okinawa whereby the first son is named after his grandfather and the first daughter after her grandmother. He suggests, 'There might have been a time when the ancient Japanese people believed that the grandparents were reborn as their grandchildren.' He goes on to dismiss this theory by observing, 'A span of two generations is too short to allow the rebirth of the soul.'<sup>15</sup> That is, if the grandparents are still alive when their grandchildren are born, then the grandchildren's bodies come into existence too soon for their grandparents' souls to be reborn into them.

But an examination of the *daijōsai* 大嘗祭 ceremony reveals a different perspective. The *daijōsai* is the rite marking the enthronement of a new emperor and is performed the day after the *chinkonsai*.<sup>16</sup> In the *daijōsai*, the new emperor performs a symbolic enactment of death and rebirth in order to free himself of his old soul and receive Amaterasu's soul. On the analogy of this rite, therefore, we may suppose that the ancient people may have believed that children's bodies could receive their grandparents' souls through the symbolic enactment of death and rebirth after the grandparents' deaths.

I personally consider that it was an ancient belief that the grandparents' souls could be reborn in their grandchildren's bodies. Orikuchi Shinobu supports this view, pointing out that *mima* in *sumemima* 皇孫, or emperor, has two meanings, body and grandchild. According to Orikuchi, the ancient Japanese recognized the emperor as a soul called *sumera-mikoto-no-mitama* 天皇靈. Taking into account that the person whose body receives this soul in the *daijōsai* ceremony can become the next emperor, Orikuchi takes *mima* to mean body.<sup>17</sup> But let us examine the meaning of 'grandchild' that Orikuchi rejects. The *sumera-mikoto-no-mitama* is the ancestral soul of the emperor's family, and consequently Amaterasu's soul. Although Amaterasu's soul was believed to have been passed on to each new emperor's body, it is passed on from the grandparents' to the grandchildren's bodies in *Kojiki*, 1, as mentioned below. If this is the case, then we can readily accept both the Okinawan custom to name children after their grandparents, as noted by Yanagita, and also Orikuchi's etymological theory that *mima* means grandchild as well as body. Further, if we apply this supposition to the analysis of the incestuous unions

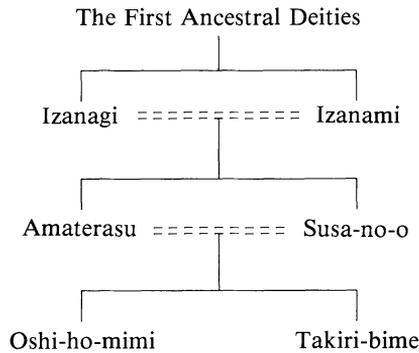
<sup>15</sup> Yanagita Kunio 柳田国男, 'Senzo no Hanashi' 先祖の話, in *Shimpen Yanagita Kunio Shū*, Chikuma, 1978, 5, p. 380.

<sup>16</sup> These two ceremonies are described in detail in *Engishiki* 延喜式, Chapters 7 & 8.

Felicia Bock, tr., *Engi-Shiki: Procedures of the Engi Era*, Books 6-10, MN Monograph 46, 1972, pp. 31-56 & 93-94.

<sup>17</sup> Orikuchi, 20, pp. 356-57.

described in *Kojiki*, it is plausible to suggest that the brother-sister union was believed to strengthen and purify the rebirth of the grandparents' souls in the grandchildren's bodies. A brother-sister union guaranteed the preservation of the parents' blood in the children's bodies. In short, Izanagi and Izanami, like Amaterasu and Susa-no-o, committed incest to allow their parents' souls to be reborn in their children.



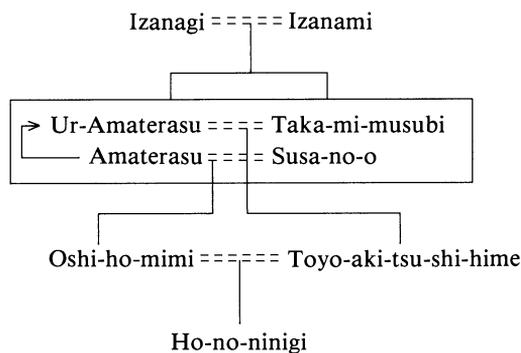
The above argument resolves several problems in *Kojiki*. Tsuda has asked why Amaterasu is called *kōsoshin* 皇祖神, or the first ancestral deity of the imperial family, even though she had parents, and, conversely, why Izanagi and Izanami are not called *kōsoshin*. He answers that Izanagi and Izanami were necessary to produce Amaterasu, the ancestor of the imperial family, and Susa-no-o, the ancestor of the Izumo clan, elder sister and younger brother.<sup>18</sup> As is apparent, this reasoning is based on political considerations. But if Amaterasu is the deity in whom the soul of Izanagi and Izanami's mother is reborn as a result of their incest, she surely ought to be called *kōsoshin*. In other words, Amaterasu has two identities, (1) the daughter of Izanagi and Izanami, and (2) the mother of Izanagi and Izanami reborn through their incest. She should be seen as transforming herself successively from one identity to the other, rather than possessing the two identities or playing the two roles simultaneously. The occasion of the transformation was her death and rebirth in the heavenly cave. In this way, incest, sacred birth, death, and rebirth are now related to each other.

The second consideration is that Taka-mi-musubi-no-kami 高御産巢日神, the deity who first appears in the Takama-no-hara in *Kojiki*, suddenly re-enters in the story of Ho-no-ninigi-no-mikoto's 彦能邇邇芸命 descent from heaven. Before this story, *Kojiki* focuses on the genealogy from Taka-mi-musubi and Kami-musubi-no-kami 神産巢日神 through Izanagi and Izanami to Amaterasu and Susa-no-o. It is therefore clearly not logical that in and after the story of

<sup>18</sup> Tsuda, 1, pp. 382–83.

Ho-no-ninigi's descent, Taka-mi-musubi suddenly reappears with Amaterasu as a ruler of the Takama-no-hara, as if they were husband and wife. Oka Masao points out that originally there may have been two different myths, one concerning Amaterasu and the other, Taka-mi-musubi. He suggests that Taka-mi-musubi's myth comes from Korea while that of Amaterasu originates in Southeast Asia.<sup>19</sup> But the structure of *Kojiki* lends itself to another explanation, namely, that the apparent problem is also the result of Amaterasu's death and birth. Possessing her grandmother's soul by means of death and rebirth in the heavenly cave, Amaterasu returns to the same generation as Taka-mi-musubi.

The third point concerns the question why Ho-no-ninigi rather than his father, Oshi-ho-mimi, descends from heaven. By way of explanation, we should bear in mind that Ho-no-ninigi's mother is Toyo-aki-tsu-shi-hime-no-mikoto 豊秋津師比売命, the daughter of Taka-mi-musubi. If, as mentioned above, Amaterasu receives her grandmother's soul in the heavenly rock-cave and returns to the same generation as Taka-mi-musubi, Toyo-aki-tsu-shi-hime must be Amaterasu's daughter as well as Taka-mi-musubi's. Then the incestuous relationship between Oshi-ho-mimi and Toyo-aki-tsu-shi-hime is obscured by their marriage. Thus Ho-no-ninigi is conceived through the incest between Oshi-ho-mimi and Toyo-aki-tsu-shi-hime, and as a result has the body in which Amaterasu's soul is to be housed. This would explain why Ho-no-ninigi, rather than Oshi-ho-mimi, descends from heaven.



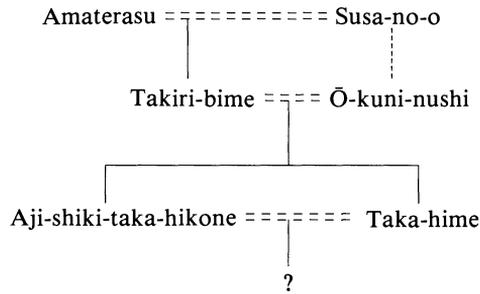
The structure of *Kojiki*, from the viewpoint of incest, sacred birth, death, and rebirth, now becomes clear. First, Izanagi and Izanami commit incest to bring about the rebirth of their parents, and give sacred birth to Amaterasu and Susa-no-o; Izanami then dies. Although there are prayers for her rebirth in the *mogari* funeral rite, her rebirth is not mentioned, probably because Izanami does not, according to *Kojiki*, have any grandparents. Second, Amaterasu and Susa-no-o, the sacred children of Izanagi and Izanami, commit

<sup>19</sup> In *Nihon Minzoku*, 1, pp. 45-48.

incest and give birth to the sacred children, Oshi-ho-mimi and Takiri-bime, who may be regarded as the bodies housing the souls of Izanagi and Izanami. Amaterasu then dies and is simultaneously reborn in the heavenly cave with her grandmother's soul. Lastly, Ho-no-ninigi, conceived through the incest of Oshi-ho-mimi and Toyo-aki-tsu-shi-hime, descends from heaven possessing Amaterasu's soul.

### *Sacred Birth*

The theme of incest is found not only in the myths of the Takama-no-hara sequence but also in those of the Izumo sequence, and it is instructive to study the deities Susa-no-o, Aji-shiki-taka-hikone 阿遲志貴高日子根, and Taka-hime 高比売, as well as Ho-muchi-wake-no-miko 本牟智和氣御子. The father of Aji-shiki-taka-hikone and Taka-hime is Ō-kuni-nushi 大国主, Susa-no-o's offspring, and their mother is Takiri-bime, the sacred daughter born to Susa-no-o and Amaterasu as a result of their incest. In other words, Susa-no-o, on the one hand, and Aji-shiki-taka-hikone and Taka-hime, on the other, are related as grandfather and grandchildren through the incestuous relationships in the Izumo sequence. As a result, Aji-shiki-taka-hikone possesses Susa-no-o's soul.



In *Izumo Fudoki* 出雲風土記, Aji-shiki-taka-hikone is described as 'Aji-shiki-taka-hikone, the son of the great god Ōkuni-nushi, who could make only incomprehensible cries day and night until his beard grew eight hands long.'<sup>20</sup> Susa-no-o is similarly described in *Kojiki*, for he 'wept and howled [even] until his beard eight hands long extended down over his chest.'<sup>21</sup> Both Nakanishi Susumu and Takasaki Masahide assume that Aji-shiki-taka-hikone and Taka-hime are husband and wife as well as brother and sister, because of the pairing of their names Taka-hime and Taka-hiko (the abbreviation of Aji-shiki-taka-hikone) and for other reasons.<sup>22</sup>

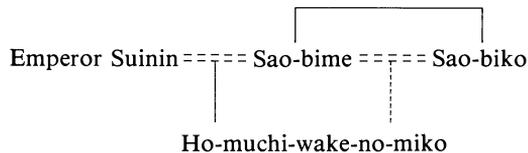
<sup>20</sup> Akimoto Kichirō 秋本吉郎, ed., *Fudoki* 風土記 (NKBT 2), Iwanami, 1958, p. 227; Michiko Yamaguchi Aoki, tr., *Izumo Fudoki*, MN Mongraph 44, 1971, p. 133.

<sup>21</sup> Kurano, *Kojiki*, pp. 72–73; Philippi, *Kojiki*, p. 72.

<sup>22</sup> Nakanishi Susumu 中西進, *Kojiki o Yomu* 古事記を読む, Kadokawa, 1985–1986, 2, p. 30; Takasaki Masahide 高崎正秀, *Bungaku Izen* 文学以前, Ōfūsha, 1958, pp. 290 & 309–10.

There is yet another prince in *Kojiki* who is unable to speak until his beard grows eight hands long down over his chest. He is Ho-muchi-wake, a son of Emperor Suinin 垂仁 and Empress Sao-bime 沙本毘売. When Sao-biko 沙本毘古 asks his younger sister, Empress Sao-bime, whom she loves more, her husband or her brother, she admits that she loves her brother more. Sao-biko then urges her to stab the emperor to death while he is sleeping. But she cannot bring herself to murder her emperor husband, and tells him about the plot. Sao-bime flees from the palace and joins her brother Sao-biko in a rice-stronghold to share his fate. There the prince Ho-muchi-wake is born.<sup>23</sup>

In this story the incestuous desire of Sao-biko and Sao-bime is so strong that they are prepared to risk their lives, and after the brother was killed, the sister apparently committed suicide to join him. So although *Kojiki* describes the prince Ho-muchi-wake as the son of Emperor Suinin and Empress Sao-bime, there exists the strong possibility that he is in fact the result of the incestuous union between Sao-biko and Sao-bime.



*Kojiki* records that Ho-muchi-wake was unable to speak even when his beard extended eight hands down over his chest. Both Takasaki Masahide and Moriya Toshihiko suppose that this phenomenon of crying and howling (*nakiisachi* 啼伊佐知) may have been an ancient magico-religious rite to summon down the deities or give rebirth to a dead person.<sup>24</sup> But what is common to all three cases cited above is that not only are they unable to speak but they are also the offspring of incestuous unions and are associated with the Izumo lineage. This suggests that the act of crying and howling is a rite not merely to summon down the deities but, more specifically, to receive the grandparents' souls by means of an incestuous union. It should be noted that although the Izumo sequence refers to the various incestuous relationships, it makes no mention of a sacred birth; on the contrary, deformed children are born. Thus, according to *Kojiki*, Takama-no-hara is the place where incestuous union results in sacred birth, while Izumo is the place where the deformed children resulting from incestuous birth are exiled.

### Death

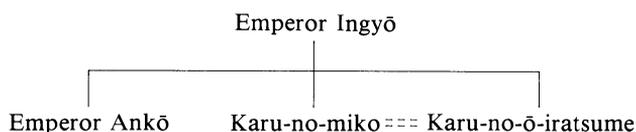
The desire for incest in *Kojiki* reaches its climax with the love story of Kinashi-no-karu-no-hitsugi-no-miko 木梨輕太子 and his sister Karu-no-ō-iratsume

<sup>23</sup> Kurano, *Kojiki*, pp. 186–87; Philippi, *Kojiki*, pp. 213–19.

<sup>24</sup> Takasaki, pp. 155–68; Moriya Toshihiko

守屋俊彦, *Kiki Shinwa Ronkō* 記紀神話論考, Yūzankaku, 1973, pp. 127–49.

輕大郎女 in Book 3. After the death of his father the emperor, Crown Prince Kinashi-no-karu was to have assumed the sun-lineage, but before he ascended the throne, he fell in love with and seduced his younger sister Karu-no-ō-iratsume. Betrayed by various officials, the prince is arrested by Emperor Ankō 安康, who has ascended the throne in his stead, and banished to the hot springs of Iyo. Unable to stop loving her brother, Princess Karu follows him into exile and there they kill themselves.<sup>25</sup>



Although, as noted above, the incestuous unions in *Kojiki*, 1, are related to sacred birth, death, and rebirth, such unions in Books 2 and 3, involving Sao-biko and Sao-bime, Prince Karu and his sister, are connected with rebellion and suicide. The question arises whether this difference has any particular significance in the implications of incestuous union as recorded in *Kojiki*.

The difference is surely not due to any social development from intermarriage to exogamy or to increased cultural sophistication. As seen above, the incestuous union of brother and sister brings about the rebirth of a grandparent's soul as a result of a sacred birth; to prohibit such a process, therefore, would make impossible the rebirth of the ancestral soul. If one recognizes oneself as a body in which one's ancestral soul is housed, one can obtain eternal life. In this sense, the ancient people do not die. But their soul is not theirs alone—it is something to be passed on perpetually from their ancestors through themselves to their offspring. To prohibit the rebirth of the ancestral soul would therefore mean rejecting eternal life. This sacrifice of eternal life gives rise to the concept of a human, a creature who lives and dies in this world, being distinct from a deity.

It is in the imperial line that eternal life, sacrificed elsewhere to make way for the concept of the human being, is preserved. In the *daijōsai* ceremony, the emperor appears in front of the people and receives his ancestral soul by symbolically enacting death and rebirth. This represents the ancient people's desire to preserve the notion of eternal life (which they had discarded for themselves) in the imperial line, destined to last forever.

<sup>25</sup> Kurano, *Kojiki*, pp. 292–99; Philippi, *Kojiki*, pp. 333–40.