



## *Tagori-hime, the Goddess of Green Growing Things*

### *Shinto - Japan*

Amaterasu, the benevolent goddess of the Sun, decided that she would never see her brother, Tsukiyomi the god of the Moon, again. She did not know what had exactly happened during his visit to Uke Mochi, the goddess of fertility and nourishment, of flora and fauna. All she knew was that Tsukiyomi had murdered Uke Mochi with his sword.

'He's a savage!' Amaterasu repeated over and over again. She could not believe that she and her brother were born to the same father, the creator god Izanagi.

The fact is that Amaterasu and Tsukiyomi never saw each other again, and that is why the Sun and the Moon never share the same part of the sky, as Tsukiyomi tries to hide himself from her sight fearing her divine wrath.

Amaterasu could not shake off what had happened to Uke Mochi, until, a few days later, she was greatly astonished to hear that vegetables, cereals, legumes, fruit trees, insects and other animals, trees and plants were growing from Uke Mochi's corpse. This was as if all the fertility that the goddess had harboured inside her was now seeking to reach out into the world in order to continue its existence.

They said that rice seeds had emerged from her eyes, millet from her ears, pinto beans from her nose, wheat from her genitals and soya from her lower abdomen. From her mouth came fish and animals of all kinds, and cows and horses emerged from her head. From her hair came mulberry trees, and silkworms from her eyebrows. All kinds of animals,

trees and plants were being born and springing to life from her lifeless body.

‘How strange,’ reflected Amaterasu, ‘that from such a vile, wicked and despicable act, from an act of death, so much life and so much good can now arise!’

Amaterasu mused on her beloved Earth, upon whom she had been lovingly shining since time immemorial.

‘And what if Uke Mochi’s death was not in vain,’ thought the goddess, as an unceasing stream of ideas flooded her enlightened divine mind.

Amaterasu arranged for all the life that was arising from the lifeless body of Uke Mochi to be brought down to Earth. She had the wheat, barley and beans springing from her planted in the dry places and rice seeds were planted in the wetlands. She ordered mulberry trees to be planted on the hillsides, and silkworms to be placed on them, so that human beings could begin the art of silk weaving.

And when she had finished spreading all the life that had sprung from Uke Mochi’s body on the Earth, Amaterasu thought that she would need help to tend and care for so many beings and so much beauty that now filled the Earth. So she called her second brother, Susanoo, god of the sea, of storms and battles, and asked him to send his daughter, Tagori-hime, to Earth so as to take care of all the green things that grow.

The young Tagori-hime descended to Earth at once but, finding nowhere to dwell, she wandered all over Nippon for some time. She was sprouting all kinds of grain, vegetables and fruit trees, making sure that crops did not freeze in the harshness of winter or wither in the scorching heat of summer. She painted the fields, wetlands and hills with the full range of greens, colouring the fruits of summer and the leaves of autumn with reds, oranges and yellows, until one day, tired and in need of a safe place to close her eyes for a few days, she decided to seek help from the humans. She didn't want to bother her father, Susanoo, and much less the great Amaterasu – she had enough to do giving light and life to the worlds!

That day, a fisherman, called Sakino, was casting his nets into the sea near Okanoshima Island when he suddenly caught sight of a strange

boat with a red sail coming towards him. When the boat reached him, he saw that the goddess Tagori-hime was on board. Puzzled by the numinous apparition, Sakino asked the goddess:

‘Ma'am, is there anything you need, anything I can do for you?’

‘Yes, Sakino,’ she replied, calling him by his name. ‘For many days I have been going back and forth throughout the Islands of the Land of Many Blades, tending the life-giving seeds that Amaterasu bestowed upon you and planted in fields, wetlands and hills. I saw to it that you all had plenty of rice and barley. Furthermore, I’ve provided for you, your children and your children’s children so that you can sustain yourselves with every green thing that grows. But now I have no sanctuary where I can take refuge and rest. Perhaps you human beings can come and help me to thank me for the sustenance I provide for you - maybe find me a place where I can dwell in peace.’

And Tagori-hime asked Sakino sweetly:

‘Could you go to the Empress to ask her to build me a shrine on Itsukushima Island. Tell her that I’ll give protection to the Mikado lands forever and ever?’

‘Of course my lady’ Sakino replied.

Ten days later, Sakino was entering the Mikado’s palace in Kyoto to tell the Empress about what the goddess Tagori-hime had requested of her. At that time, news was reaching Kyoto about a great famine in the farthest provinces of Nippon.

‘When the goddess Tagori-hime learns what is happening, she’ll no doubt take pity on my people and make food grow in abundance where it’s most needed,’ the Empress reflected aloud, and then added compellingly, ‘Hurry back to your islands and ensure that a shrine is built on Itsukushima to honour Tagori-hime. Choose the best place for the goddess. One of my stewards will go with you to represent me before the governors and he will take care of the expenses. A good troop of soldiers will also accompany you, in order to protect you and help with the construction work.’

Sakino was thrilled to be commissioned by the Empress to locate the site for the shrine. Having met the goddess herself, he thought he

could find her a place which would be to her liking, a place befitting her sensitive personality.

So, as soon as he returned to southern Honshū, Sakino sailed off in his boat in search of the right place to build the shrine. He wandered around Itsukushima until, suddenly, from the top of a mountain, he saw a huge bird flying overhead. The bird circled Sakino's boat and then flew ahead of him as if to show him the way.

Sakino, taking the strange occurrence as a good omen, did not hesitate to follow the bird, until it hovered in the sky and began to circle over a wooded hill on the island.

'Here we'll build the shrine of Tagori-Hime-no-Kami, the sweet goddess of all green growing things! Here we will honour her!' He shouted jubilantly. 'The *torii* of the shrine will emerge from the sea, light-bearing pillars will guard the entrance, and people will come from all over the world to visit the sweet goddess in her home in the Land of Many Blades.'

And so it was done.

The goddess found the place to her liking and was very happy with the beauty of her shrine, one of the most beautiful in the East, to the point that she invited her sisters, the goddesses Ichikishima-hime and Tagitsu-hime, to live with her. And the goddess of all green growing things continued to care for the food that grew from the body of the ill-fated Uke Mochi, in order to ensure the sustenance of the people of Nippon for many generations, and to care for the beauty of the Land of Many Blades. For this the Goddess of All Green Growing Things is still honoured to this day. □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda (2022).

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## Comments

Itsukushima Shrine is the world's best-known Shinto shrine, with its famous *torii* (gate marking the point of transition between the mundane and the sacred). It rises from the sea and is located in an inlet on



Itsukushima Island (called Miyajima since 1950), just 500 yards off the coast in Hiroshima Bay.

This island is one of the most stunning natural sites in Japan, with primeval forests of great beauty, as well as a place where people have always felt a certain aura of holiness. This is why it is not only a place of Shinto worship, but also of Buddhist worship. In fact, Itsukushima comes from *kami o itsuki matsuru shima*, meaning ‘island dedicated to the gods’ (Cali and Dougill, 2013, p. 237).

According to tradition, the *Jinja* – shrine – was built in 593 by one Saeki Kuramoto, during the rule of Empress Suiko (592-628 CE). However, the earliest record of the shrine dates back to 811 CE. The present shrine is attributed to Taira no Kiyomori, an important nobleman of the imperial court who contributed greatly to the construction of the shrine when he was governor of the region in 1168.

As noted in the story, at the main shrine of Itsukushima, the three Munakata goddesses, the sisters Tagori-hime, Ichikishima-hime and Tagitsu-hime, who together are considered to be goddesses of the seas and storms, are worshipped. However, Kiyomori believed that the goddesses were ‘manifestations of Kannon’, in other words the well-known bodhisattva of compassion Kuan-yin. Hence the island was believed to be her home.

Since Kiyomori times, the shrine has undergone a number of restorations and extensions due to various events, including two major fires in 1207 and 1223. It was also severely damaged by a typhoon in 1325. Part of the shrine was ruined in 1555, when Mōri Motonari, a feudal lord, desecrated the holiness of the island by bringing war to Itsukushima. According to Shinto, blood cannot be shed in a holy place - by confronting Sue Harukata, a samurai of the Ōuchi Clan. Mōri Motonari himself rebuilt the shrine in 1571, the same year of his death. This was, perhaps, as a way of atoning for his defilement ... after completely annihilating the Ōuchi Clan, of course.

## Sources

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### *Associated text of the Earth Charter*

Principle 4: Secure Earth's bounty and beauty for present and future generations.

### *Other passages that this story illustrates*

Preamble: Universal Responsibility.- Everyone shares responsibility for the present and future well-being of the human family and the larger living world.

Principle 2b: Affirm that with increased freedom, knowledge, and power comes increased responsibility to promote the common good.

Principle 7: Adopt patterns of production, consumption, and reproduction that safeguard Earth's regenerative capacities, human rights, and community well-being.

Principle 9a: Guarantee the right to potable water, clean air, food security, uncontaminated soil, shelter, and safe sanitation, allocating the national and international resources required.