

THE *SHINANSHA*: MYTHOLOGICAL ORIGIN OF COMPASS AND BOAT

Eric Soreng, Ph. D.
Associate Professor
Department of Psychology
University of Delhi
Delhi

Abstract

The mythical tale of the Shinansha narrates man's creativity to locate him in nature and move from one location to the next with a sense of cognitive map regarding his presence and movement. Besides 'knowing oneself', it is also a psychological virtue to be aware of one's place and physical presence within the invisible lines of measurements in nature. An attempt is made herein to interpret and reflect on the tale that highlights man's creative endeavors.

THE *SHINANSHA* (Ozaki, 1903)

"The compass, with its needle always pointing to the North, is quite a common thing, and no one thinks that it is remarkable now, though when it was first invented it must be a wonder.

Now long ago in China, there was a still more wonderful invention called the *Shinansha*. This was a kind of chariot with the figure of a man on it always pointing to the south. No matter how the chariot was placed the figure always wheeled about and pointed to the South.

This curious instrument was invented by Kotei, one of the three Chinese Emperors of the Mythological age. Kotei was the son of the Emperor Yuhi. Before he was born his mother had a vision which foretold that her son would be a great man.

One summer evening she went out to walk in the meadows to seek the cool breezes which blow at the end of the day and to gaze with pleasure at the star-lit heaven above her. As she looked at the North Star, strange to relate, it shone forth vivid flashes of lightning in every direction. Soon after this her son Kotei came into the world.

Kotei in time grew to manhood and succeeded his father the emperor Yuhi. His early reign was greatly troubled by the rebel Shiyu. This rebel wanted to make himself King, and many were the battles which he fought to this end. Shiyu was a wicked magician, his head was made of iron, and there was no man that could conquer him.

At last Kotei declared war against the rebel and led his army to battle, and the two armies met on a plane called Takuroku. The emperor boldly attacked the enemy, but the magician brought a dense fog upon the battlefield, and while the royal army was wandering about in confusion, trying to find their way, Shiyu retreated with his troops, laughing at having fooled the royal army.

Kotei returned to his Palace, and thought and pondered deeply as to how he should conquer the magician, for he was determined not give up yet. After a long time he invented the *Shinansha* with figure of a man always pointing South, there were no compasses in those days. With this instrument to show him the way he need not fear the dense fogs raised by the magician to confound his men.

Kotei again declared war against Shiyu. He placed the *Shinansha* in front of his army and led the way to the battlefield.

The battle began in earnest. The rebel being driven backward by the royal troops when he again resorted to magic, and upon his saying some strange words in a loud voice, immediately a dense fog came down upon the battlefield.

But this time no soldier minded the fog, not one was confused. Kotei by pointing to the *Shinansha* could find his way and directed the army without a single mistake. He closely pursued the rebel army and drove them backward till they came to a big river. This river Kotei and his men found was swollen by the floods and impossible to cross.

Shiyu by using his magic art quickly passed over with his army and shut himself up in a fortress on the opposite bank.

When Kotei found his march checked he was wild with disappointment, for he had nearly overtaken the rebel when the river stopped him.

He could do nothing, for there were no boats in those days, so the Emperor ordered his tent to be pitched in the pleasantest spot that the place afforded.

One day he stepped forth from his tent and after walking about for a short time he came to a pond. Here he sat down on the bank and was lost in thought.

It was autumn. The trees growing along the edge of the water were shedding their leaves, which floated hither and thither on the surface of the pond. By and by, Kotei's attention was attracted to a spider on the brink of the water. The little insect was trying to get on the floating leaves near by. It did so at last, and was soon floating over the water to the other side of the pond.

This little incident made the clever Emperor think that he might try to make something that could carry himself his men over the river in the same way that the leaf had carried over the spider. He set to work and persevered till he invented the first boat. When he found that it was a success he set all his men to make more, and in time there were enough boats for the whole army.

Kotei now took his army across the river, and attacked Shiyu's headquarters. He gained a complete victory, and so put an end to the war which had troubled his country for so long.

This wise and good Emperor did not rest till he secured peace and prosperity throughout his whole land. He spent a great deal of time in making inventions which would benefit his people, and succeeded in many besides the boat and the South Pointing *Shinansha*.

He has reigned about a hundred years when one day, as Kotei was looking upwards, the sky became suddenly red, and something came glittering like gold towards the earth. As it came nearer Kotei saw that it was a great Dragon. The Dragon approached and bowed down its head before the Emperor. The Empress and the courtiers were so frightened that they ran away screaming.

But the Emperor only smiled and called to them to stop, and said: "Do not be afraid. This is a messenger from Heaven. My time here is finished!" He then mounted the Dragon, which began to ascend towards the sky.

When the Empress and the courtiers saw this they all cried out together:

"Wait a moment! We wish to come too." And they all ran and caught hold of the Dragon's beard and tried to mount him.

But it was impossible for so many people to ride on the Dragon. Several of them hung on to the creature's beard so that when it tried to mount the hair was pulled out and they fell to the ground.

Meanwhile the Empress and a few of the courtiers were safely seated on the Dragon's back. The Dragon flew up so high in the heavens that in a short time the inmates of the Palace, who had been left behind disappointed, could see them no more.

After some time a bow and an arrow dropped to the earth in the courtyard of the Palace. They were recognized as having belonged to the Emperor Kotei. The courtiers took them up carefully and preserved them as sacred relics in the Palace."

ARCHETYPAL AMPLIFICATION (Hypothetical Interpretation)

The compass was not invented; it was primarily discovered in nature. Compass belongs to the nature, to the magnetosphere of the earth, with the geomagnetic lodestone pointing towards the magnetic poles. Besides the fire, the wheel, the steam and the electricity, the discovery and invention of gadgets of magnetism is a landmark in the history of mankind because it made us aware of earth's axis and of its rotation in antiquity, enabled mankind to rule the vast expanse of water, helped the mariners to navigate their journey on the back of the waters without losing sight of destination, extended the view of the world through exploration of new lands *via* sea, opened conquest and colonization, and established sea commerce as the earliest roots of globalization.

Without the compass, man would remain in the dense fog and without direction. Without the sense of direction man is lost—psychologically and physically. Locating oneself in the natural environment, on the map of the world and within the Milky Way is a virtue. Sense of direction is basic to human existence in nature and in navigation to overcome the experience of being lost, to unveil the gloomy climatic conditions and to lighten up the dark night. Knowing the direction is also basic and essential military technique. Determining the direction aligned to the earth's magnetic field is to locate and place oneself in harmony with nature and order the built environment in accordance with the geomantic principles of *Feng Shui*.

The discovery of the compass is a mythic invention of Kotei and lies far back in the mist of time beyond the Chinese text of 4th Century B. C. by Wang Xu, who gives us the earliest reference to the lodestone that attracts iron and that the south-pointer helped the people of Zheng to know their precise position. The history of the compass could also be traced back to the Olmec hematite artifact in Mesoamerica (1400-1000 B. C.). However, the presence of the *Shinansha* is noteworthy as it transcends the question as to where and when the compass was invented for the sake of contemplation.

Kotei, one of the three Chinese Emperors of the Mythological Age, is the inventor of the *Shinansha*: the compass-carriage. The immaculate conception of Kotei is divine. Dream and vision prophesy the birth of a god, a hero and a great soul. The same is experienced by Kotei's mother who is foretold in her vision about the greatness of her son. The vision prepares the maiden to copulate and conceive the divine child. The act of copulation and conception is symbolized as a walk in the meadows to seek the cool breeze in the evening of a summer and to gaze with pleasure at the star-lit firmament. In Greek symbolism of animals representing the four seasons—the spring, the summer, the autumn and the winter—are associated with a sheep, a dragon, a hare and a salamander respectively. Hence, the summer season is the time of the dragon, which is generally intimate to the Chinese kingship. The summer season is also equated to the growth subsequent to the germination in the spring season followed by the ripeness in the autumn season. The evening is the appropriate time for intimacy and to partake in the fruits of the day. Therefore, the mythic imagination of the summer evening symbolically suggests the sexual act. As the tale goes, one summer evening the maiden went out to walk in the meadows. The movement of the feet (and the legs) in classical psychoanalysis has sexual significance. In order to copulate, the maiden must step out of the confinement of self—house—and take a walk in the meadow, which is symbolic of the womb. The maiden out of the house, taking a walk in the meadows seeks the cool breeze. The wind that the maiden seeks also has sexual connotation. In the Indian epic Mahabharata, Yayati teaches Ashtaka that at the time of *ritu* the wind carries the seed to the womb mingled with the menstrual fluid and makes the embryo grow. Furthermore, it is due to the strength of the wind, air, that after nine months the child is driven out of the mother-gate (*yonidvara*) and takes birth. The divine intervention of the god of wind called upon to have intercourse with virtuous Kunti, since King Pandu is cursed to refrain from the marital act, blessed the couple with the warrior Bhima. Therefore, the maiden seeking the cool breeze means that she desires to see her vision become a living reality. As she gazes with pleasure the starry heavens, the North Star, symbolic of the male

divine principle, shot forth vivid flashes of lightening in every direction, symbolical of ejaculation. Thus, the mother of Kotei is impregnated and Kotei came into the world.

Stella Polaris—the Northern Pole Star—is aligned with the earth's axis of rotation and remains fixed and overhead to the sight, unlike other stars changing their celestial positions in the course of the night, irrespective of the position from where it is viewed, thus it is a dependable source of direction in navigation compared to the *Sigma Octantis*—the South Star—which is faint to the naked-eye. The North Star, as the indicator of the North Pole and the father, begets Kotei, the son of the North Star and who is the North Pole, is destined to invent the carriage—compass—pointing in the southern direction and determine the South Pole. Kotei, the son of the North Star, discovers the magnetic field of the earth and invents the compass: the *Shinansha*.

The invention of the *Shinansha*, as the tale goes, was indispensably required because when Kotei grew up and succeeded the Emperor Yuhi, his reign was greatly troubled by the rebel Shiyu whose head was made of iron and who was a wicked magician. Shiyu could not be defeated in the battle because he always used magic to create a dense fog that would envelop the royal army of Kotei and made them wander about in confusion, leaving them to make desperate attempts to find their way in the battlefield. After long reflection, Kotei invented the *Shinansha* to overcome the dense fog and the confusion it caused.

The mythic event of encounter between Kotei and Shiyu in-itself is the second root of the discovery of earth's magnetic field and invention of the compass. Even though the tale is not negative in meaning and not precisely about a battle between a hero and his opponent, the invention of the compass and subsequently of the boat had to be presented in the context of a battle because 'war is the mother of invention'. Shiyu characterized with an iron head is symbolic of the lodestone, which is a naturally magnetized ore of iron pointing southward. In the mythic sense, where there is Shiyu there is the *Shinansha*, as the compass and the magnetized iron, and also the non-magnetized iron that get attracted to the magnet, are directly and positively correlated. Shiyu and his troops are men from the South or belong to the South that is why Kotei had to invent the *Shinansha* with the figure of a man always pointing in the South direction. The *Shinansha* was created using the lodestone, which attracts iron and is always facing the South Pole: Shiyu with iron head from the South.

Creation of the *Shinansha*, using the lodestone, the southern position of Shiyu, helped to conquer the confusion of direction in the dense fog. The mythic battle between Kotei and Shiyu is the struggle to make sense of one's position and locate the direction in the layout of the natural environment. Wicked magic and the dense fog is the veil of uncertainty in nature and the experience of being lost. Shiyu the rebel with iron head is the mineral magnetite whose magic had to be harnessed. Knowing the North, the South direction had to be discovered: the rebel and his army were always in the southern direction, thus compass-carriage was constructed to point in that direction which, furthermore, as the struggle continued resulted in the invention of the boat/ship to travel southward, indicating navigational usage of the compass and human settlement reaching a new phase when the enemy—dislocation, misdirection, losing the way and improper sight in nature—was defeated. The new phase of mankind, beyond the confusion of the dense fog, is expressed in the act of crossing the river: the tale evolves from the North Star to the South Pointing Carriage, from wandering about in confusion to always finding the way, from the summer to the autumn, from the *Shinansha* to the spider, and from the compass to the boat.

The decisive moment comes in the myth and consequently in the history of mankind when having found the direction, Emperor Kotei had to cross the river and reach the other side to establish peace. In the summer season of mankind, man had already learnt to interact with the stars, knew the ways of the heavenly bodies and invented the medium to discern the directions latent in nature. As man stepped into the autumn of his history, he had to mature to navigate by inventing a way to conduct journey on the water. Having invented the compass for navigation on land and found the direction with a single mistake, the next challenge was to invent the boat and use the compass on water.

Pursing the rebel army in spite of the dense fog, Shiyu was pushed backwards till they came to a big river, which he quickly passed over with his army with the aid of his magic. Now Kotei had to work out a human way to imitate the magic of Shiyu to perform the same act of traveling on the water. Every magic is not a problem, it is an opportunity to progress; magic when translated into an equipment through human endeavor becomes science and technology. Transition from magic to physical mechanism is due to mythic-divine intervention, or a creative dream, vision, intuition or inspiration.

Kotei in the autumn season, encamped on the bank of the big river, observed (got attracted to) a spider on the brink of the water that gets on a leaf floating on the water and reaches the other side of the pond. The experience of the spider is transported into the world of Kotei who then invented the first boat to get his army across the river.

Spider is symbolically perceived as being blessed with the limitless creative power as exemplified in the ceaseless weaving of its web. Once Kotei had the vision of the spider, later he spent a great deal of time making inventions, which would benefit his people, and he succeeded in many besides the South Pointing *Shinansha* and the boat. Presence of the spider in the tale marks the progressive passage of time in the history of man to weave the tools in life—thinking, feeling, sensation and intuition—effectively for progress and peace and in manifold manner to construct a meaningful life. Thus Kotei reigned for about a hundred years, denoting bringing to fullness the human potentiality and resourcefulness.

The presence of the spider also takes us to the culmination of the tale. Having initiated creativity (spider) and brought the human craft to a stage of fullness (reign of a hundred years), the divine destiny being fulfilled, Kotei ascended towards the sky and in return a bow and an arrow dropped to the earth in the courtyard of the Palace—the social space of the Paradise. In Egypt, goddess Neith is associated with the spider because she is a weaver with a shuttle (a tool used for weaving) in her hand. She is also the goddess of hunting and often depicted with arrows. Having gifted mankind with the *Shinansha*, the boat and other inventions (as narrated in the tale), Kotei finally offers the bow and an arrow marking the end of the Mythological Age and the beginning of the period of patriarchy going beyond the agricultural stage to hunting and war as dominating way of life. Prior to patriarchy, the presence of the symbolism of the boat makes matriarchy evident.

In the autumn season of the history of mankind boat was invented, which indicates the predominance of mythic matriarchy. The appearance of the boat goes back to matrifocal civilization when the female genitalia symbolized “the cosmic womb of the Goddess, the source of the waters of life” (Gimbutas, 1989) and also the boat. Gimbutas research assembly of some two thousand symbolic artifacts from Neolithic and Paleolithic sites in Europe, which includes boats correlated with vulva, constitutes the system of “aquatic symbolism” since water symbolize femininity, sexuality and motherliness. “Vulva, womb, uterus, fish, bird, triangle, and V shapes belong to this category, as does the image of the boat. The boat, like its masculine counterpart the serpent, also stood for regeneration. Renewal and regeneration were the credos of the Great Mother’s cult, and thus the boat images inscribed on the artifacts, megalithic tombs, and burial grounds of that period were metaphors for the transcendent energy of renewal and eternal life” (Medvedev-Mead, 2005).

The invention of the boat as celestial vehicle is symbolic of Queen Inanna’s vulva in Sumeria, and like the Father Enki, god of wisdom, in the same culture, who set sail on the Boat of Heaven, Emperor Kotei too makes use of boat as the carrier of civilization, regenerating mankind from the dense fog of confusion and ignorance—the symbolism of the “night sea journey”. ‘As an emblem of the “day sea journey” and as a concrete object, the boat played a crucial role in the expansion of consciousness. Knowledge, and changing *weltanschauung* (worldview), being instrumental in trade and commerce’ (Medvedev-Mead, 2005). The boat as a terrestrial vehicle used to travel across the river, and the journey culminating in the descent (dropping) of the bow and an arrow are merely primitive instruments of subjective well-being, warfare and peace; they are also the tools of making a shift from complete faith and dependence on gods to human beliefs and efforts.

The tale of the *Shinansha* narrates the sacred history of the origin of the compass and the boat. The tale right from the outset is pointing towards the southern direction. It is significant to note that the entire human warfare in the tale inclines towards the southern direction until peace is established and further progress in knowledge and inventions are realized during the reign of Kotei. Uprooting Shiyu the rebel is bringing mankind out of the chaos and reinstating peace and order in the South: the world of the mortals. In the Tibetan creation myth our own world is in the South and it is called *Zambu Ling*.

The tale of Kotei who invented the *Shinansha* is the story of man’s struggle to settle in harmony with his environment and the ascension of Kotei is the beginning of the Age of Man as a discoverer and an inventor.

REFERENCES

Gimbutas, M. (1989). *The Language of the Goddess*. New York: Harper-Collins.

Medvedev-Mead, I. (2005). Soul Boats. *The San Francisco Jung Institute Library Journal*, Vol. 24, No. 3, 10-28.

Ozaki, Y. T. (1903). *The Japanese Fairy Book*. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co.

