



Orihime, Kengyuu, and Tanabata

Adapting Chinese Lore to Native Beliefs and Purposes

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Perhaps one of the best examples of adaptation of infused star lore is the story of Orihime and Kengyuu (Nojiri, 1973). This legend was probably imported from China in the Heian Era (794-1185), and its associated Tanabata Festival has developed through the centuries. The story involves the stars of Vega and Altair and their apparent proximity to the Milky Way.

Krupp (1991) provides an excellent account of the story in its Chinese form. Essentially the same in character, there are some noticeable adaptations made in the Japanese version based on unique social values and seasonal needs. In Japan, the star Vega is often called Orihime Boshi (Weaving Princess Star), and Altair is often called Kengyuu Boshi or Hiko Boshi (Puller of Cows Star). To give the reader one Japanese version of the legend, we will paraphrase Hara (1975):

Members of royalty were, of course, associated with the heavens; Tentei (the emperor) being centered at the North Pole. One day, the emperor's daughter, Orihime, was sitting beside the river of heaven (Milky Way). She had been weaving because her father, the emperor loved the beautiful clothes that she made. On this particular day, she was very sad because she realized that she had been so busy that she didn't have time to fall in love. Her father, Tentei, the ruler of the heavens, felt sorry for her and arranged a marriage with Kengyuu (who lived across the river, the Milky Way). Their marriage was one of sweetness and happiness from the start; and everyday thereafter they grew happier and happier. But Tentei became very angry, because in spending so much time in her happy marriage, Orihime was neglecting her weaving. Tentei decided to separate the couple, so he placed them back in their original places, separated by the Milky Way. On only one night of the year would he allow them to meet, the 7th day of the 7th month. Every year on that day, from the mouth of the river (the Milky Way), the boatman (of the moon) comes to ferry Orihime over to her beloved Kengyuu. But if Orihime has not done her weaving to the best of her skills and ability, Tentei may make it rain. When it rains, the boatman will not come (because the river is flooded). However, in such a case, Kasasagi (a group of magpies) may still fly to the Milky Way to make a bridge for Orihime to cross.

Related to this legend, ancient Japanese celebrated the festival of Tanabata on the 7th day of the 7th month each year (lunar calendar). The 7th day of the 7th month generally falls in August or September in the Gregorian calendar. At this time of year, of course, the constellations of Lyra and Aquila are prominent in the evening sky with their major stars (Vega and Altair) separated by the Milky Way. The 7th day of the 7th month also, of course, finds a waxing crescent moon reaching its first quarter. If it is not raining, both Orihime Boshi (Vega) and Kengyuu (Altair) are quite conspicuous at the time of the Tanabata festival.

Tanabata may be translated as "weaving with the loom (bata) placed on the shelf (tana)", and the festival celebrates improvement of technical skill and ability. As in China, ancient Japanese added specific values to her skills and work hard so that modern celebrations of Tanabata, wishes (generally for themselves Orihime on colorful strips of Tanabata, they tie these paper Wishes may be for increased skills specific vitalistic and optimistic anything that reflects a person's Summer vegetables such as prepared, and horse or cow figures are decorated. While the myth significance in its Chinese origins, the end of the rainy season rain), it found a variety of seasonality in its Japanese form. agricultural development in Japan, of Tanabata ranged from desire for weather depending on the whether a crop was to be planted



Decorated Strip of Tanabata of Japan. Note the representation flanked stars in Aquila) at the top flanked by two stars in Lyra) near

Following Shinto practice and purification (generally including festival (centered on the 15th day added to the Tanabata festival.

from China, a ritualistic festival had been held to welcome the water kami at this time of year; infusion of the legend of Orihime and Kengyuu added a motif of the ritual celebration of the marriage of a weaving lady and the water god (Okada and Akune, 1993). In eastern parts of Japan, an associated ritual called Nebuta was celebrated. On the early morning of Tanabata, bamboo would be set afloat in the river, and people would brush their bodies with leaves from "silk" trees. By doing so, they were said to take their sleepiness (nebuta) away, another form of purification and preparation for Bon (Yoshinari, 1996). The close relation of Tanabata to the indigenous Bon Festival has obviously led to a number of adaptations of the imported Chinese mythology. In short, one makes the coming of the Bon festival sacred by excluding impure spirits from the body at the first quarter moon, thus being pure for the coming of Bon at full moon. It is interesting that in some regions of Japan, Tanabata is accompanied by a taboo forbidding swimming or bathing in a river. Noting the relation with the celestial "river" or milky way, the taboo is based on the idea that a Kappa or water deity resides in the river, and one should not make the pure water dirty by entering the water deity's home.

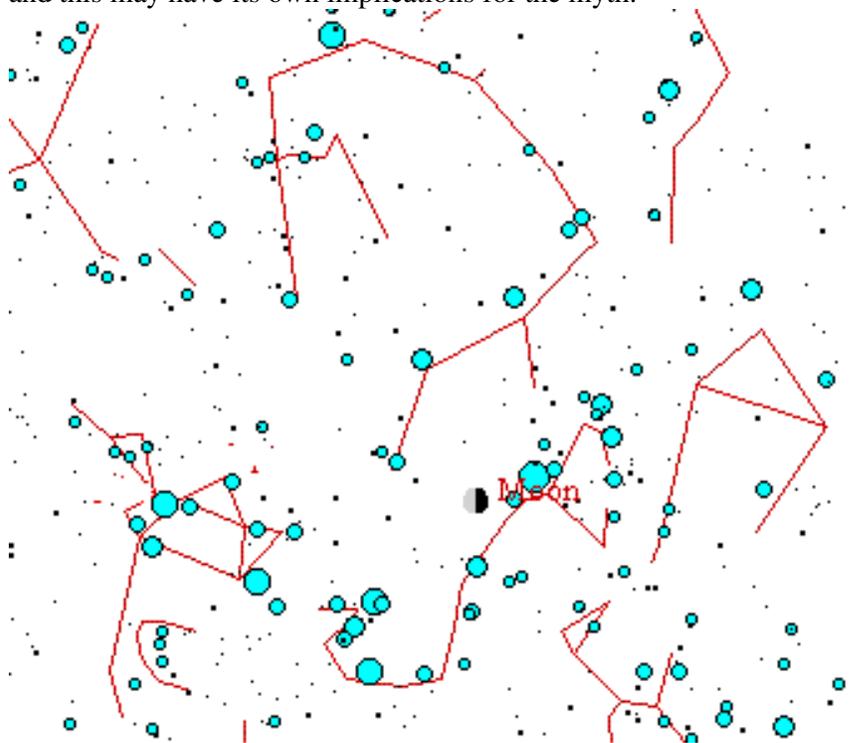
their wishes that Orihime hone she could meet Kengyuu. In people throughout Japan write or relatives) to the kami (deity) paper. On the evening of wishes to freshly cut bamboo. in work or school (reflecting values) but may also be for dreams and hopes for the future. eggplant and cucumbers are made out of straw and water oats probably held seasonal specifically the celebration of (reflected in a desire that it not interpretations related to Particularly in relation to "wishes" related to celebrations dry weather to desire for wet particular geographic region and or harvested at this time.

Bamboo from the Tottori Region of Hiko Boshi (Altair and two and Orihime Boshi (Vega the middle. (From Nojiri)

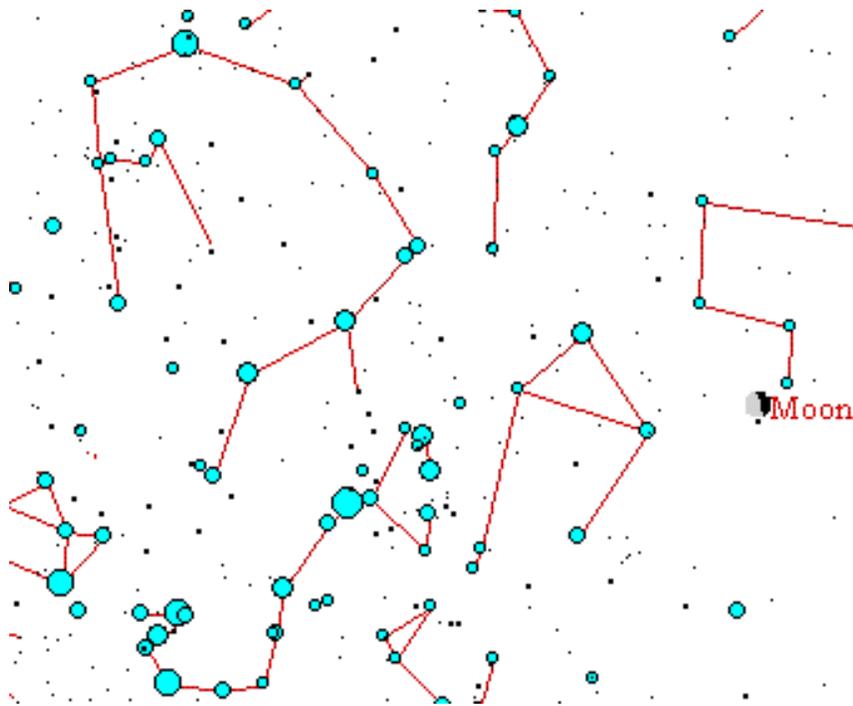
ancient values, the concept of use of water) before the Bon of the 7th month) was also Before the legend was brought

When it was first recognized in Japan, Tanabata was celebrated only by imperial court officials. It was considered a graceful event, full of the simple elegance so associated with the Heian era of Japan. Lanterns were lighted, and poems were written on mulberry leaves still holding their dew (Nojiri, 1973). Of course, as the custom spread to local areas, towns became covered with bamboo at Tanabata, and the festival took on more of the values inherent in Japanese consciousness and purpose.

The general astronomical phenomena and seasonality associated with this myth are similar in China and Japan. However, there is one particular aspect mentioned in Hara's account above which does not seem to appear in versions of the Asian continent and may have arisen in Japan following its Heian Era introduction. This is the reference to the "boatman of the moon" coming from the "mouth of the Milky Way". This probably refers to the 1st quarter moon being in the sky at the same time the two lovers are anxiously waiting. Having been a waxing crescent, its "poetic" association with a boat would seem obvious. But what about the moon's position relative to the "mouth of the Milky Way"? Simulating more ancient times and accounting for precession, the 7th day of the 7th month would generally place the 1st quarter moon quite close to the Milky Way (Scorpio/Ophiuchus region) and also, of course, at a quite southern point on the ecliptic. Perhaps observing from the view of ancients, one can conceive the southern part of the Milky Way being considered the "mouth" of the river and the boatman of the moon approaching his entrance there on successive nights up to the night of Tanabata. Such a position would seem to coincide with that era in which the legend was imported into Japan. Note that in more modern times, the 1st quarter moon of Tanabata tends to be in the Libra/Virgo area, somewhat shifted from the river over the centuries. Of course, the Milky Way would be difficult to see in the glare of the 1st quarter moon on the night of Tanabata, and this may have its own implications for the myth.



Tanabata Moon around 1000 AD [Simulation using **The Sky** from **Software Bisque**]



Tanabata Moon in the late 1990's [Simulation using **The Sky** from **Software Bisque**]

The process of adapting this imported legend and developing indigenous practices evolved in complex ways over the centuries, and we have touched on but a bit of this complexity. In modern times, the festival is generally celebrated on a solar July 7th, a date that is generally still within the rainy season. Sadly, the festival has lost much of its seasonal significance with modern industrialization. Of course, the vitalistic ethic of improved work and skill is still valued, regardless of whether or not the day of celebration is attuned astronomically.

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