

## ESSAYS

## LESSON PLAN

## Acting Out History and Literature

## JAPAN

## A Story about the Origins of Japan or Creation Myth

By Marianna McJimsey

*Acting Out History* through the creation myth of Japan is a lesson designed to engage students in history and literature through a storytelling narrative and role playing.

## PROCEDURAL DESCRIPTION

The teacher selects the important concepts to be learned and emphasizes those before, during, and after the activity. The students will have prepared for the activity through assigned readings and class discussion.

To create space for the narration and action, students move their desks to the periphery of the classroom, leaving the center of the room open. The students will have selected or been assigned roles which they will perform in pantomime. The name of the role is printed on a piece of cardboard and hangs by a string around the player's neck. (This visual "naming" of the role reinforces the importance in the story of that role and helps keep the roles straight in the attention of the students.) Before the narration begins, the teacher will show and discuss with the students the props or artifacts. As the example here illustrates, the use of props is minimal. The teacher tells the story or reads a script that the teacher has written. The script will emphasize key historical or literary concepts that the students are to learn, understand, and demonstrate. As the teacher tells the story, he/she signals the students, at the appropriate times, to pantomime their assigned roles, using the props when relevant.

This procedure is hitherto unrehearsed; it is not a formal production. *Acting Out History* is an interactive telling of the story of history. No one has to learn a script, though with experience, students will gain the confidence to interject appropriate speeches or comments in their own words.

The acting out portion of the lesson is preceded with the teacher's clear explanation of the words and concepts that are to be learned in the course of the lesson. At the conclusion of the lesson, the teacher immediately assesses, through a variety of assessment tools, what the students have learned.

This lesson was used in Colorado College Gifted and Talented classes of twenty middle school students in three-week-long summer classes on Japan. I have also employed the acting out history concept in teaching literary works and historical events

to students of all reading levels. Middle school students respond enthusiastically to this type of dramatic presentation in which they can participate; they enjoy acting. When the students regularly "act out history," their understanding of historical empathy matures over the course of the nine months of the academic year. They will have taken many roles, from that of peasants during the Reformation to those of czars in nineteenth-century Russia, and in this example, to the Kami in the creation myth from Japan. Elementary school teachers have adapted the concept for their students as well.

In the following example, acting out history through the creation myth of Japan, the students participate in the telling of the creation myth story. The teacher assigns the twenty pantomime roles to be taken by the students, roles that they will play as the teacher narrates the creation myth story. The students wear placards around their necks with the names of their roles printed on the cardboard signs, e.g., generation five Kami or Amaterasu.

The general topic of creation myths provides a common theme in world literature and world history that the students study throughout the year. Furthermore, the lesson places an emphasis on rice, religion, and the place of the emperor in Japanese history and literature that forms a framework for subsequent class discussions of the economics, religion, history, art, and literature of Japan.

The multiple learning styles employed in reinforcing the concepts of this lesson have contributed to the students' abilities in remembering the stories. They apply what they have learned to other topics in their study of Japan. For example, they understood rice importation discussions among the Japanese; they followed the history of the position of the emperor from its origins through the twentieth century; they distinguished between the Shinto beliefs and the imported Buddhist religion and grasped the reasons that Shinto and Buddhism coexist in Japan. They grasped the eagerness with which the Japanese anticipated an heir to be born to the Crown Prince and his wife. The students also repeatedly found, in literature and in art, themes of rice, Shinto, and the emperor.

## CONTENT STANDARDS

The students will know:

**HISTORY STANDARDS**

Standard 2: Students know how to use the processes and resources of historical inquiry.

2.2: Students know how to interpret and evaluate primary and secondary sources of historical information (interpreting oral traditions and legends as "histories").

Standard 3: Students understand that societies are diverse and have changed over time.

3.2: Students understand the history of social organization in various societies.

Standard 6: Students know that religious and philosophical ideas have been powerful forces throughout history.

6.1: Students know the historical development of religions and philosophies.

**READING AND WRITING STANDARDS**

Standard 4: Students apply thinking skills to their reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing.

Standard 6: Students read and recognize literature as a record of human experience.

The students will be able to:

- Define or describe the following terms:
  1. Oral tradition
  2. **Symbol**
  3. **Chaos**: formless void
  4. **Shinto**: shin to; way of the gods
  5. **Kami**: minor god or spirit
  6. **Generations** in a family: grandparents, parents, children
  7. **Izanagi**: eighth generation of **Kami**
  8. **Izanami**: eighth generation of **Kami**
  9. **Floating Bridge of Heaven**
  10. **Rice**
  11. **Land of Darkness**
  12. **Amaterasu**: Sun Goddess
  13. **Storm God**
  14. **Sake**: rice wine
  15. **Ninigi**, Divine Grandson
  16. Imperial **symbols**: mirror, sword, jeweled necklace
  17. Benevolence: wishing to do good; charitable (bene, or good: derivatives include benefit, beneficiary, benefit, benediction, benefactor, Benedictine).
- Narrate (tell the story), illustrate (through drawing, painting, sculpture, music), or demonstrate (through dramatic form), the story of the origins of Japan.

**PEDAGOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS  
OF ACTING OUT HISTORY**

The fostering of an understanding of history as the story of humankind.

- A highly structured approach in which the text that the teacher has written emphasizes a few key concepts.
- An integration of knowledge through making connections between what has already been learned and the new concepts to be learned, e.g., What are the similarities and differences among creation myths from different parts of the world that we have already studied this year?
- The use of cooperative learning in which there are frequent brainstorming discussions between two students or among those in a small group.
- The employment of a variety of learning styles, e.g., visual learning (what is to be learned is reinforced by information on the board, on the role placards, or on a poster, and by the use of simple artifacts or props), auditory learning (story-telling by the teacher and in cooperative learning groups by the students), and kinesthetic learning (acting out the roles and handling the artifacts/props).
- The repetition of key concepts and words before, during, and after the acting out history component.

**JAPAN**

***A Story about the Origins  
of Japan or a Creation Myth***

Setting the stage:

(In this article, the words in boldface type are words and terms that require special attention as to their meaning.)

Here are a mirror, a sword or dagger, and a jeweled necklace. Why are these three items found in **Shinto** temples in Japan?

We know the stories about the origins of the Scandinavians, the Aztecs, the Greeks, and the Pueblo Indians. (Brief review in cooperative learning groups.)

Today we will act out the story about the origins of Japan.

The mirror, sword, and jeweled necklace are **symbols** of something that we are going to learn about.

*What is a “symbol”?* (Turn to the person on your right and prepare a definition of “symbol.”)

**Symbols:**

*National symbol:* A national **symbol** is often the flag of the country, or it could be a caricature such as John Bull for England or Uncle Sam for the United States. A **symbol** for India is a spinning wheel because the Indian leader for independence from England, Mahatma Gandhi, spun the threads for weaving his own clothes rather than buying cloth from England.

*Leader’s symbol:* The Presidential seal is a **symbol** of the authority of the President of the United States. If you are chairing a committee meeting, you may wield a gavel to bring the meeting to order. The gavel is a **symbol**.

*Imperial symbol:* An imperial **symbol** represents the highest authority in the country in which, in some cases, the head of the state is a hereditary rather than an elected position. An imperial head of state may be an emperor or empress or a king or a queen. The scepter and the orb are **symbols** of the authority of Elizabeth II, Queen of England.

**Questions to answer at the end of class:**

1. Why is the rising sun a **symbol** of Japan?
2. Why is **rice** so important to the Japanese, both as a food and as a kind of national **symbol**? Why do they prefer **rice** grown in Japan and do not like to import **rice**?
3. In traditional celebrations, why do the Japanese prefer wine made from **rice** to wine made from grapes?
4. What are the three imperial **symbols** of the Japanese royal family?

**Acting Out History characters:**

Two people for each of the seven **generations** of **Kami** for a total of fourteen.

**Izanagi**

**Izanami**

**Amaterasu**

**Moon God**

**Storm God**

**Ninigi**

## ESSAYS

*Acting Out History* supplies:

- Blue tissue paper for the void, **chaos**, and the sea
- Mirror, sword, necklace
- A cardboard placard or sign for each player identifying the role to be played

## THE STORY

(While the teacher reads the following script, the designated students demonstrate the action.)

(Roll out the blue tissue paper.) This represents **chaos** or a **formless void**. If we try to imagine what the **chaos** or **formless void** looked like, it might be that it resembled a brine or a soup with the consistency of a mixture of oil and egg whites. In this brine were germs of life and from a little sprout there appeared two **Kami** or minor gods. (What is the difference between major and minor leagues in baseball?) These were the first **generation Kami**. The first **generation Kami** were followed by the second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh **generations** of **Kami**.

The **Kami** were the minor gods or spirits of a form of religion that is known as the **Shinto** religion. **Shinto** means “way of the gods.”

Then we come to the eighth **generation** of **Kami**. We can give a name to the two most important **Kami** in the eighth **generation**. They are **Izanagi** (the man who invites) and **Izanami** (the woman who invites). **Izanami** and **Izanagi** noticed that a beautiful bridge, called the **Floating Bridge of Heaven**, stretched over the oily, syrupy, egg white brine we call **chaos**, and they decided to walk over it. **Izanagi** was carrying a long spear with a point on it. When they strolled to the middle of the **Floating Bridge of Heaven**, **Izanagi** couldn’t help but lean over and put the tip of his spear in the brine and swirl it around. When he did this, the brine began to curdle and thicken. He was surprised and lifted the spear up out of the water. Then the most astounding change occurred. There were drops of brine at the end of the spear, and when the drops fell into the brine they began to form islands.

**Izanami** and **Izanagi** thought this was fun so they kept dipping the spear in the water and became more and more reckless in the way they swung the spear to let the drops fall. Wherever the drops fell, the islands formed. These drops from the brine were amazing, for when they stopped forming islands, the drops created other geographic features such as an ocean, mountains on the islands, forests on the sides of the mountains, small fields of **rice**, and rivers. The drops also produced four seasons—summer, fall, winter, and spring. **Izanami** and **Izanagi** were amused and were enjoying themselves when . . . tragedy struck. One of the drops created Fire. **Izanami** wanted to hold the fire, and as she tried to do so, she was terribly burned and died. When she died, she descended to the **Land of Darkness**.

**Izanagi** was very sad when **Izanami** died. He knew better than to touch the fire. He slowly walked to the other side of the **Floating Bridge of Heaven**, and sat down beside one of the newly formed rivers and grieved.

While he sat by the river, three children were born to him. From his left eye came **Amaterasu**, a sparkling sun goddess; from

his right eye came the **Moon God**, and from his nose came the **Storm God**, who was dark and was often angry. With shining, beautiful **Amaterasu** and sulking and angry **Storm God** as powerful siblings, the **Moon God** felt rather insignificant and faded slowly away, for the time being.

The **Storm God** asked to go to the **Land of Darkness** to see **Izanami**, but **Izanagi** forbade him to go. Upon receiving **Izanagi**’s orders, the **Storm God** became angry and stormed all over the islands during which he destroyed the neat **rice** fields and the crops.

The **rice** fields, you may remember, had been created at the time that the Japanese islands were formed. The fields were small and could be terraced on the sides of the mountains. **Rice** was well suited for growing in Japan. **Rice** was, in the future, to become very closely connected with being Japanese. At the time of our story, **Amaterasu** was very protective of the **rice** fields and wanted them to be successful.

You can understand how the destruction of the **rice** fields upset **Amaterasu**. Both out of her sorrow and her anger with the **Storm God**, she entered a cave, closed the entrance with a rock, and refused to come out.

**Amaterasu** was light and sun, and when she disappeared, darkness fell over the islands. Time and space passed, and there was no light. By this time there were about 8 million **Kami**, and they all were milling outside **Amaterasu**’s cave begging her to come out and restore light to the islands. Some of the **Kami** began to have a party, and soon they were laughing and having a wonderful time. **Amaterasu**, who was sulking in her cave, was curious as to what all the **Kami** were doing outside, so she moved the stone just a little bit so that she could peek. Then she moved it a little bit further and peeked around more. A few of the wise **Kami** were waiting for her with a rope and a mirror. They first held the mirror in front of **Amaterasu**, and she, for the first time, looked at her own reflection. (The mirror prop is used here.)

She became very curious about her reflection and came all the way out of the cave to get closer to the mirror. The **Kami** were quick and ran the rope behind her, blocking off any retreat into the cave. They rolled another stone in front of the entrance, further hindering her escape. Suddenly the islands were light again, and all the **Kami** laughed with happiness. **Amaterasu** was pleased that she was welcomed back. She restored the **rice** fields, and the crops were huge.

However, **Amaterasu** was not going to endure the **Storm God**’s temper any longer, so she banished him to an island in the west. While he was traveling there, the **Storm God** saw chopsticks floating in a river, and walked upstream to find out to whom they belonged. He found a man, a woman and their beautiful daughter. But all three were crying forlornly. When he asked why they were crying, they explained that there was an eight-headed, eight-tailed monster that had terrorized the island for eight years. Each year he had devoured one of the nine daughters of the man and woman, and now their last and ninth daughter was to be eaten by the monster. While they were telling the **Storm God** their troubles, he had fallen in love with the daughter. He offered to kill the monster if he could marry the ninth daughter. The man, his wife, and daughter all

agreed. The **Storm God** then asked the man to make **sake** or wine made from **rice**. The **Storm God** cleverly gave so much **sake** to the monster that he became drunk and finally fell asleep. The **Storm God** killed the monster, and found, hidden in his middle tail, a sword. (The prop of the sword is used here. I create one out of cardboard and paint it silver.) The **Storm God** sent the sword to his sister, **Amaterasu**, as a peace offering. This sword had magical properties and protected its owner from the bad effects of poisonous herbs.

**Amaterasu** now had a mirror and a magic sword. Equally important, she had a grandson, **Ninigi**, the Divine Grandson. She decided that he should become the first emperor of the group of islands that were to be called Japan. And in order that he be a wise emperor, **Amaterasu** presented **Ninigi** with the mirror, the sword, and a beautiful jeweled necklace. (The prop of a "jeweled" necklace is used here.)

She told **Ninigi** that each of the three items represented important characteristics or traits of an imperial ruler.

- The necklace of jewels represented benevolence.
- The mirror represented purity.
- The spear represented courage.

The necklace, mirror, and spear became the **symbols** of imperial authority of the Japanese emperor, and have remained so ever since. These three **symbols** are found in **Shinto** shrines in Japan.

From its ancient origins, **rice** became the central feature of the diet of the Japanese. It can be grown easily on terraces on the sides of mountains, and it tastes delicious with fish that are caught along the extensive shores of the Japanese islands. Today the Japanese do not like to import **rice**, for they believe their own **rice** is the tastiest of all.

## ASSESSMENT

### *Analysis and synthesis*

Why do you think the rising sun appears on the flag of Japan?

### *Understanding*

Review of the meanings of the words on the vocabulary list.

### *Independent demonstration*

The students will narrate (telling the story), or illustrate (through drawing, painting, sculpture, music), or demonstrate (through dramatic form), the story of the origins of Japan. ■

## REFERENCE

Tsunoda, Ryusaku, William Theodore de Bary, Donald Keene, (compilers). *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, Volume 1. New York: Columbia University Press, 1964.

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