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**NEGATIVE ORIGIN OF A CULTURAL TRAIT?
MYTHS OF THE LOSS OF LITERACY**

ABSTRACT. Since the 19th century, myths of the loss of literacy have been collected and analysed by scholars such as Mason, Ōbayashi, Riffin, Onohara, Oppitz, Tapp, and Scott among others. As a result, we now have a fairly clear picture of their distribution and classification, as well as their implications. The relevant tales are distributed in Southeast Asia, Far East and in Europe. The once-possessed letters are said to have been lost in various ways: they were washed away by water, eaten by a human or an animal, and so on. In some narratives an eaten book changed into the omasum of an animal. Not only handed down orally, but also literally in some cases, these traditions have the characteristics of a “negative origin of a cultural trait,” while at the same time they tell of acquired techniques such as broidery patterns or divination methods. They reflect also the view of the self and others. In these myths, similar to those of lost paradise or the origin of death, a fundamental problem for human beings is expressed — whether to follow fate passively and negatively, or to choose an option actively and positively. It is for this very reason that they have been transmitted in various places with different transformations over time.

KEY WORDS: myths of the loss of literacy, interethnic relationships, culture hero

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I. INTRODUCTION

Is it appropriate to assume that myths about lost literacy are an expression of the negative origin of a cultural trait? This paper reconsiders a wide range of meanings contained in relevant myths and the types that deliver them. For this purpose, I review first the history of research on the topic, confirm the distribution and different types of myths, and proceed to a discussion and a conclusion.

II. HISTORY OF RESEARCH

The earliest recorded myths in this context known to me are those published by US missionary and natural historian, Francis Mason (1799–1874), who worked among the Karen in Burma (Myanmar). They are without doubt valuable documents, although one has to take into account that Mason was convinced of the Karen being degenerated Christians.

M1: Burned book — The Karen, Burma

The Red Karens say that anciently, after the transgression, God called all the different races of men together to learn to read, and all went, and every one studied zealously except the Karen, who did not study in earnest like the White Foreigner, the Chinese, and the Burmese. He went to and fro, and played, and did not understand books like the others. After a while, God dismissed the people and all returned home, but the Karen was not skilled in books, like the other nations. Still God had given him a book, but when he would study it at home, his wife scolded him, and drove him off to work. He therefore forgot what he had learned, and did not take care of his book.

One day, while he was absent, his book fell into the fire, and was burned and being unable to write, the Karens have had no books from that time to the present. However, they observed the variegated marks left by the letters of their books in the ashes where it was burned, and they made diligent efforts to embroider those forms on their dresses. Hence it is that the Karens are able to embroider different forms on their dresses. Had they not looked, and imitated the letters of the book that was burned, the Karens would not be skilled in any thing (Mason 1865: 177).

M2: The book eaten by a fowl — The Karen, Burma

In the beginning, say the elders, God gave to the Chinese a book of paper, to the Burmese a book of palm leaf, and to the Karens a book of skin. The Chinese and the Burmese studied their books, and taught them to their children; but the Karens were indolent, did not value their book and laid it on the end of their house, where it was thrown down on the ground, and a hog came and tore it up. After the hog had gone, a fowl came and picked up all the fragments.

It soon became apparent even to the Karens that the Chinese and Burmese greatly excelled them in knowledge through their acquaintance with books; and they then regretted the loss of their own book.

They concluded, however, that the fowl which had eaten up the book must possess all the knowledge that the book contained. They resolved therefore to consult its thigh bones, and note the marks and indentations made by the tendons on them as letters, and pray to it to reveal its knowledge.

There is no superstition so commonly practised among the Karens as this. No measure of importance is undertaken, till a favourable response had been obtained from the fowl's bones (Mason 1865: 231).

These myths comprise interesting aspects such as differences between foreigners and “us,” or acquired techniques in place of lost letters (embroidery and divination by fowl bones) among other things. Let us now review the history of research, however, without considering these ethnographic elements in detail.

The first study of lost letters was carried out arguably by ethnologist Taryō Ōbayashi (1929–2001) (cf. Riftin 1998: 156; 2001: 159). As a young scholar, he participated in the 33rd International Congress of Americanists held in July 1958 at San José, Costa Rica. In his presentation “Divination from Entrails among the Ancient Inca and Its Relation to Practices in Southeast Asia,” Ōbayashi showed the distribution of the custom of entrails divination in Southeast Asia and Polynesia (Ōbayashi 1959: 330; 1963: 234). After his fieldwork among the Lawa and the Karen in Northwestern Thailand, in April 1963, Ōbayashi then published the story of lost literacy collected by himself in Umphai Village of the Lawa and in Huai-Ragmai-Nūa Village of the Karen. In the latter part he also referred to some parallel tales found in literature (Ōbayashi 1964a: 118–119, 122; 1964b).

It seems that Ōbayashi's interest in this theme had grown as a result of his own fieldwork experience. In the 20th joint conference of the Japanese Society of Anthropology and Ethnology, held from October 16 to 18, 1965, at Tohoku University, he read a paper on the traditions of lost letters in Southeast Asia. The article would be published in the proceedings and later in his book *Myth and Mythology* (Ōbayashi 1966a; 1975). This important contribution shows the distribution of the named myths — albeit without the sources — as follows: ranging from the Gurung in the west to the Rhadé in the east, along with examples from the Malayan Peninsula, Borneo, the Ami of Taiwan, Fiji, New Zealand, the Ainu, the Gilyak (Nivkh) and the Yakut (Sakha). The motif (A) of the skin on which letters were written being eaten by a human is known from mountainous horticulturalists such as the Gurung, Garo, Khasi, Abor, Dafla, Angami Naga, Kampetlet Chin, Kachin, Akha, Kache, Kha, and the Dayak along Barito River in Borneo, while the motif (B) of letters being eaten by an animal is found from the Sema Naga, Maring Naga, Chüngma, Mru, Chin, Hnaring Chin, Karen, Tavoy Karen, Sgaw Karen, Radé, Chuan Miao, Chiang, and Mantra. Ōbayashi also pointed out that 1) in Southeast Asia animal skin used to be widely employed beside palm leaves, and that 2) the distribution of motif B overlaps with that of divination from entrails. Thus the latter point was a continuation of his earlier study of the divination custom. Finally in 1966, Ōbayashi published

his *Introduction to Mythology*, in which he wrote that such myths explaining the lack of certain cultural traits are “as it were negative origin myths of culture, filled with self-indulgence, dissatisfaction, and sometimes fervent anger towards civilized peoples from the side of primitive peoples, who were the have-nots” (Ōbayashi 1966b: 127–128).

Ōbayashi’s student, Teruo Sekimoto, also referred to some parallels with sources (Sekimoto 1975), and Jacques Dournes (1922–1993) mentioned a narrative of letters on skin eaten by a dog, recorded among the Jōrai and the Sré in Indochina (Dournes 1981: 1058). In the latter half of the 1990s, Russian scholar Boris Riftin investigated the topic thoroughly with the related sources from the Hani, Dai, Lahu, Jinuo, Miao, Puyi, Shui, Nong, Bahnar, Sré, Mngong (Pngong), Semang, Ede, Jarai, Chin, Hkaku, and Karen (Riftin 1998: 155–179; 2001: 157–182), while photographer Mikio Miyamoto added parallels from Himalayan peoples partly based on his own researches (Miyamoto 1998). So far the most exhaustive study on this topic is that of Takashi Onohara (2002), in which he revised the distribution of pertinent tales and classified them at the same time.

In relatively recent years, Swiss ethnologist Michael Oppitz found more than 100 parallels from more than 60 ethnic groups. His research results were published first in the periodical *Lettre Internationale* (Oppitz 2002), then in his Frobenius lecture given on June 30, 2005 (Oppitz 2006), and finally in his lecture at the Ethnological Museum of Zürich University on December 20, 2007 (Oppitz 2008), the last mentioned unfortunately without describing the source materials. Anthropologists and ethnographers specializing in mountainous peoples of Southeast Asia have also paid attention to myths of lost literacy among those groups. So Nicholas Tapp (1952–2015) referred to the relevant myths of the Hmong, Miao, Karen, Kachin, Akha, Chiang and Meo in his *Sovereignty and Rebellion* (Tapp 1989: 121–130; 2005: 107–118). Inspired by this work, some Japanese scholars discussed similar myths of the Lahu and the Dong as well as their politico-economical appropriation (Kataoka 1998; Nishimoto 2009; Jin 2017; cf. Kya leh 2008). The influential monograph, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, by James C. Scott deals with the myths of lost letters among the Akha, Lahu, Wa, Karen, Khmu (Lamet), Chin and Hmong on several pages, and regards them as autonomous measures for avoiding being governed by strong powers (Scott 2009: 220–237).

III. DISTRIBUTION

From the above studies, we have a fairly clear picture as to the distribution of the relevant tales: They are densely found among the mountainous peoples in Mainland Southeast Asia and Southwestern China, sporadically in Insular Southeast Asia (including Taiwan) and Oceania, while there is another cluster in East, North and Central Asia. I have elsewhere confirmed their distribution among the Austronesian peoples (Yamada 2002: 367) as follows:

A. In the old time we had our own letters.

B. The letters of the Austronesian were written on a stone, those of the Chinese on bamboo.

C. The letters of the former got lost in water.

Bunun 1:	A	(B)		Takitodo — Qatu. (Sayama 1919: 19)
Bunun 2:	A		C	Takbanuaz — Landun. (Ogawa & Asai 1935: 635)
Bunun 3:	A	(B)		Takbanuaz — Katungulan. (Sayama 1919: 11)
Bunun 4:	A		C	Takivatan — Asang-Daingaz. (Ogawa & Asai 1935: 608–609)
Ami 1:	A	(B)	C	Place unknown. (Kōno 1915: 19)
Ami 2:	A	(B)	C	Nan-shih — Sakor. (Sayama 1913: 4)

Afterwards some Kavalan parallels became known to me (Onohara 2002: 2; Shimizu 1998: 290–295). The next quotation is the above “Ami 1”:

M3: About the letters — The Ami, Taiwan

In the olden days three people got together in the village and wrote letters: One on a piece of *hinoki* wood, another one on a piece of *'araway* wood, and the last one on a stone. They then plunged their respective thing in water. The *hinoki* wood could float on water with the letters clearly legible, the *'araway* wood only barely managed to float with the letters becoming unclear, and the letters on the stone sank and were gone. The person with the letters on *hinoki* was the ancestor of the Japanese who are good at letters, the one with the letters on *'araway* was the ancestor of the Taiwanese, and the one with the letters on the stone was the “savage,” whose letters are still lost to this day (Kōno 1915: 19).

Now, some parallels from outside the above distribution picture are also known to me. The first example is of the Gypsy in Eastern Europe.

M4: The eaten holy book — The Gypsies in East Europe

...But such “proofs” [of the Gypsies’ alleged once possession of the Bible] mainly reveal how regrettable it is that the Gypsies do not have a Book of their own — although, according to another legend, they once did. I heard nothing of this kind in Albania but, according to a tale from Bulgaria, when God was handing out the different religions the Gypsies wrote theirs down on cabbage leaves, and before long the holy book was a donkey’s dinner. Another weird tale of alimentary blasphemy comes from Romania: The Gypsies built a church of stone and the Romanians built one of bacon and ham. The Gypsies haggled until the Romanians agreed to exchange buildings — and prominently ate their church. The Serbian version has the church made of cheese, and also offers an explanation for Gypsy begging: the reason Gypsies go from door to door looking for money, the fable says, is that the Serbs still owe them for their church; the beggars are only collecting what is their due (Fonseca 1995: 88–89).

In citing this story, Scott rightly points out that it “accomplishes the neat trick of simultaneously conveying greed, improvidence, illiteracy, irreligion, trading, and craftsmanship!” (Scott 2009: 387). The next one was recorded by a Finnish linguist Yrjö Wichmann (*1868–†1932) among the Mari (Cheremis) in the midstream region of the Volga. The “Blättermagen” or the omasum refers to the third stomach of cattle consisting of fine folds, thus also called the “bible” or “manyplies.”

M5: The omasum — The Mari (Cheremis), Russia

Once upon a time, it is said that the Cheremis also had a book in the Cheremis language. A Cheremis cooked straw soup inside for a cow and brought in the cow for feeding. But that Cheremis book, for some reason, was put on the edge of the stove by the Cheremis and he forgot to take it away. While the cow was eating the soup, she consumed his Cheremis book, but the Cheremis did not notice. Having fed his cow and led her out, the Cheremis searched everywhere for his Cheremis book, but did not find it, and thus the Cheremis book disappeared.

Thereafter, after several years, the Cheremis slaughtered his cow. When he killed his cow, he saw the omasum inside the cow. Such an omasum in the interior of cattle had not existed before. Then the Cheremis carried that omasum to the well to wash [it]. While he was washing it there, he saw [it as] his own book and recognized it saying, “This is [yes] like my old book!” The Cheremis thought he had [his book] again, but he could not read [it]. And so he put it with the meat to eat it. After that, the stomach of the cattle got covered in leaves, but the Cheremis book of the Cheremis was not to be found anymore! (Wichmann 1931: 160–162)

It is very interesting that the book is the origin of the omasum. The same is true for the Tibeto-Burman Mru who live in the hills of Chittagong, Bangladesh.

M6: Origin of the cattle ceremony — The Mru, Bangladesh

When God created the world, he sent a cow to impart to all peoples the rules for their way of life. The cow went first to the Bangalis and told them everything — among other things, that they should weed once and harvest three times a year. Then the cow ascended the mountain with the scroll for the Mru in its mouth. As midday neared, however, it grew hot, the cow became hungry and thirsty and moved its tongue around its mouth; and before long it had swallowed the scroll. When the cow finally came to the Mru, it told them that they should weed three times and harvest once. Dissatisfied with these instructions, the Mru went to God and complained. God summoned the cow, and the beast had to admit that it had swallowed the true message and imparted the false one. When God heard this, he became angry and hit the cow in the mouth — this is the reason that, until today, the top front teeth of the cow are missing. God then commanded the Mru to bind the cow to a post, dance around it, and finally kill it. They were then to cut out its tongue — the tongue which had given them the wrong message — and nail the tongue to the post.

In the cow's third stomach the Mru were to find the book which God had intended for them. Apart from this, however, there was nothing else that could be done regarding the rule, as it had already been declared and hence stood: weed three times and harvest once (Brauns & Löffler 1990: 235–236).

It is an interesting issue whether these myths on the lost literacy connected with the omasum spread due to diffusion. According to Professor Yuri Berezkin (personal communication), similar myths are found also in Europe, the Caucasus and West Siberia. In addition, the parallels of Oceania, such as Fiji and New Zealand, which Ōbayashi (1966a; 1975) mentioned, should also be explored in the future. Anyway, the view that the distribution of the stories of shooting the sun and the myths of the lost letters shows a common pattern, as Riftin once stated (2001: 176) requires reconsideration.

IV. TYPES

As for type classification of the myths of lost literacy, the study of Takashi Onohara (2002) is the best. According to it,

I: Water-washed letters: broadly divided into Northeast Asian group and Austronesian group (cf. M3 above).

II: Eaten letters.

IIa: Letters eaten by a human: Mountainous horticulturalists from Himalayas, Assam, through Burma to Laos, and Borneo. Many reports are also found from Yunnan minorities (M7 below).

IIb: Letters eaten by an animal: Almost identical to the distribution of type IIa, but the Chinese ethnic minorities, especially Yunnan, are weak compared with type IIa (M2, 6 above).

III: Complex type, that is, a mixture of the elements of type I and type II: Distributed from southwestern China to Indochina peninsula except for the case of South Siberia (M8, 9 below).

Of these, let us give examples of the types we have not mentioned so far.

M7: Origin of science — The Kachin, Upper Burma (type IIa)

Ningkong wa [creator of the earth and one of the ancestors] summons all men to his palace in the middle of the earth. To the Chinese, Shans, Burmese, Kalas, he distributes science in books. But it is on parchments that he gives it to the Kachin. These, driven by hunger on their return home, roast and devour them; since then they have all their knowledge in their bellies, while the other peoples have them on paper (Gilhodes 1908: 686).

M8: Leather book — The Chin, Upper Burma (type III)

In the beginning, when the stones were soft, all mankind spoke the same language, and there was no war on earth. But just before the darkness called *Chun-mui* came to the earth, God gave different languages to different peoples and instructed them to write on something else. While the Chin ancestors carefully inscribed their language on leather, the Burman ancestors, who were very

lazy, wrote their language on stone, which was soft. However, soon after they had made the inscription of their languages, the ‘darkness’ came and the Sun disappeared from the earth. During the ‘darkness’ the stone became hard but the leather got wet. Before the Sun came back to the earth, and while the wet leather was still very smelly, a hungry dog ate up the leather, and in this way, the Chin ancestors lost their written language.

When the Sun came back to the earth, the Chin ancestors realized that while they had lost their written language, the Burman language which was written on the stone had turned into ‘the magic of letters’. Moreover, while the sons of Burman spoke the same language, the sons of Chin spoke different dialects because their common language was eaten up together with the leather by the hungry dog. Thus, the ancestor of the Chin prepared to make war against the Burman in order to capture ‘the magic of letters’. Although the Burmans were weaker and lazier, the Chin did not win the war because ‘the magic of letters’ united all the sons of the Burman. Since the sons of Chin spoke different dialects, their fathers could not even give them the war order to fight the Burman. It was for this reason that the Chin broke into distinct tribes and speak different dialects (Sakhong 2003: 14, cf. Oppitz 2006: 28–29).

M9: “Gourd King” — The De’ang, Yunnan (type III)

There used to be a person named “Gourd King” who had mysterious power and created the heaven and the earth. Later on, the flower of the gourd opened, giving birth to many peoples. A total of 72 tribes, including the Han, Palaung, Wa, Dai, Lisu, Bai, Miao, and so on came out of the gourd flower. When they came to the place where their mother lived, they found that it was under the jurisdiction of one female *tusi* (chieftain). The female *tusi* built two huge towers within her jurisdiction. One was a steel tower and the other a copper one, which made it the boundary of the living area. The Palaung and the Dai lived in the lower part, and the others belonged to the upper part of Awababapo (in contemporary Burma).

The female *tusi* said, “You, you have to read a sutra when someone dies, otherwise the dead will be lost.” So a Palaung decided for the first time to learn how to read a sutra, and when he came back with the sutra rolls, he was blocked by a large river. When trying to cross the middle of the river, the Palaung inadvertently dropped the scripture. A Han rushed to put the scripture into his bag, so he didn’t drop it, but only one book was half swallowed by a large fish, making it impossible to read. The Han could not help asking the help of the female *tusi*, who advised that it would be all right if the Han should make a wooden fish to be beaten while reading the sutra. For this reason, even today, when a Han Chinese monk reads a sutra, he always beats a wooden fish (Yunnansheng Bianjizu ed. 1987: 122–123; cf. Oppitz 2006: 30–31).

Now, Onohara assumes the historical relations of these myths as follows. First of all, type I, which presupposes that the letters are lost by water, is largely divided into the Northeast Asian group and the Austronesian group, and there

are traces in the Miao tribe of the continent, so this form is the oldest and widest. Next, type II, where the characters were eaten by a human or an animal, spread around the mainland of China, but this type could not expell the older type I, thus emerged type III, which mixes the motif of eating the letters with that of transpassing water. This agrees with Riffin's statement that the myths among the Amur peoples and in Taiwan are the simplest (Riffin 1998: 172). An old layer is thus exposed among the Northeast Asian and Taiwanese peoples (Onohara 2002: 8).

This view is still valid. However, the positioning of the western cases according to Professor Berezkin's suggestion will be a future issue. By the way, Onohara (2002: 8) has mentioned some special types in addition to the above three to four types:

The letters were blown away by the wind: Gilyak (Nivkh), Oroch.

The gourd that the heavenly woman gave to her child exploded, and the books and school were burned: Hani, Nu.

Stolen: Ainu, Hakka.

Lost a competition with Tibetan monks: Naxi (Oppitz 2006: 40–41).

Among these, there are many reports of an Ainu narrative that their books were stolen by Minamoto Yoshitsune (e. g. Riffin 2001: 161–162). Let me give an example.

M10: Books stolen by Yoshitsune — The Ainu, Hokkaido

According to another tradition, which seems to be among those most widely spread, the Japanese hero Yoshitsune arrived on the scene some time after Okikurumi had begun teaching the Aino men how to fish and hunt, and Turesh had begun teaching the Aino women how to sew. Being of a wily disposition, he ingratiated himself so well with the divine pair, that they bestowed on him their only daughter in marriage. The wedding took place at Piratori in the district of Saru. Yoshitsune was thus enabled to penetrate the secrets of the Ainos. By a fraud, to which his wife was an unwilling partner, he obtained possession of their treasures and of their books, and fled, carrying all with him. Okikurumi and Turesh, incensed at this insult, disappeared through a cavern at the summit of Mount Hayopira near Piratori. Since that time, the Ainos have lost the arts of writing and of pottery, and have taken to buying their clothes, etc., from the Japanese. — When interrogated on any point of which they are at a loss for an answer, the almost invariable Aino reply is: “We do not know; for we have no books. Those that our ancestors had, were all stolen by Yoshitsune” (Chamberlain 1887: 17; cf. 1888: 51–53).

This legend appeared arguably under the influence of one of the *otogizōshi* works, *Onzōshi Shimawatari* (Ichiko 1958: 102–123, originally written in Muromachi Period), in which it is said that Yoshitsune traveled to Ezogashima (Hokkaido), married the daughter of a certain Kanehira Daiō, and obtained a tactics book called *Dainichi no Hō* (cf. Abe 2002; 2012: 177). In China too, we find myths of lost letters which have been handed down also as written

stories such as *Tangseŋ Qujing* or *The Monk Sanzang Fetching Sutras* (the influence is also seen in the above mentioned De'ang's M9). Namely, in the 99th episode of *Xiyouji*, the monk Sanzang (Xuanzhuang) and his fellows went to the Tongtianhe River. A turtle, being angry about the wanderers having forgotten to ask its own lifespan, plunged into the river with Sanzang etc. on its back. As a result, the scriptures got wet. Though dried on a rock, part of them were stuck to the rock and lost (Nakano tr. 1998: 294–323). It has already been pointed out that these kinds of lost letter myths are widely found (Riftin 1998: 158–161; 2001: 162–165; Onohara 2002: 2, 7; Oppitz 2006: 44).

V. DISCUSSION

Can we think of the letter loss myths as “negative origin myths of culture” — with Ōbayashi as mentioned above? It is true that they have such a side. At first glance, the myths of losing letters share in common a certain sense of resignation with those of the lost paradise (M8: “There was no war on earth”), or those of the origin of death (cf. Onohara 2002: 9). However, in the myths of lost literacy, various positive acquisitions may be mentioned, such as the embroidery patterns (M1: Karen), the method of divination by fowl bones (M2: Karen), or the origin of divination by entrails, of augury, of the own group's intelligence etc. The same is sometimes true for myths of the origin of death. The following is an example.

M11: The origin of death — Madagascar

According to another Malagasy legend, God created two people, a man and a woman. Some of these legends say that God created mortals. Therefore, it is all people's lot to die. According to other myths, God gave the first man the choice of living childless on earth or having children. In the former case, they should be like the moon, which “constantly renews itself”; in the latter case their lot should be that of the banana, which bears fruit only once and then dies, but propagates itself through its root shoots and brings new fruits. There was now a long discussion about this matter among the first pair of people. If they preferred childlessness, they would escape death. but then their existence would resemble the “stone, which stands unchanged, without life in its place,” and with such a stone-like existence they could not be satisfied. Without children, they would feel lonely on earth; they would have no one to work for. Nor would there be anyone who could inherit everything that they had received from God. Furthermore, they could not get everything alone. They would get tired if they wandered the earth and were alone with the things God had given them. So they finally decided to ask for children, although they knew that would lead to their eventual death. But God spoke to the first pair of people: “Well, it may be so. I gave you the choice. You could have chosen an everlasting life without children; but now death shall come upon you.” Then God killed the people and since that time, the legend says, people do not last long on earth. The legend implies

that God did not particularly enjoy the choice of the people. This is clear from other legends, according to which God directly forbade man to have children, and when the first human couple did not obey this prohibition, they were made mortal by God as a punishment for their disobedience (Vig 1907: 45).

Here we can see a narrative of not following fate passively, but actively selecting a way of life of generational alternation (the way of death) by will. Furthermore, it may lead to a millenarian movement, such as the Lahu, who claim that the Christian missionaries brought back a lost book (Kataoka 1998). In other words, the anarchist or Marxist claims of Scott that nonliterate peoples themselves chose illiteracy in order to escape rule cannot immediately be accepted. But such a shift in perspective may also be useful. The myths of lost literacy also show how the people themselves recognized interethnic relations (cf. Yamada et al. 2016: 320). Such a perception often appears also in flood myths, such as the following.

M12: Flood myth — The Kamu (Kmhmu), Laos

A sister and brother from the first creation are spared in a great flood as a result of the magical intervention of a bamboo rat. Seeking food, the siblings catch him in his burrow, but for their merciful act of freeing him he repays them by warning of the coming deluge and advising them how to escape in a hollow wooden drum (or, in some variants, a bronze drum). From their incestuous match after the flood was born a great bottle-gourd. Hearing sounds from inside the gourd, the brother-husband-father heated an iron rod over a fire until it was red-hot and pierced the gourd to free his children. They poked it, and out came the Africans, who rubbed off the charred gourd. Then came the Lamet (Rmeet) who are still very dark. The Kamu came out next. Then came the Chinese, the Hmong, and the Mien. Americans and French came out last, therefore they are so white (Proshan 2001: 1002–1003, abridged).

In this story, the Kamu's familiar ethnic groups are distinguished by skin color. As Proshan argued, "the order in which the other groups emerge correlates with their skin color — beginning with the darkest-skinned peoples and continuing to those of lightest skins. Thus the Kmhmu are always the first or second group to emerge" (Proshan 2001: 1007). Also in the letter loss myths, mentions are made of the whites (M1: Karen) or the Japanese (M3: Ami). People have interwoven their views of different ethnic groups into myths in line with the recognition of that era. There we can see the plasticity or variability in myths or oral traditions. In addition, we might recognize a sense of humor similar to ethnic jokes (cf. Davis & Abe 2003; Hayasaka 2006) where multiple ethnic groups are compared in different ways with each other.

VI. CONCLUSION

In the group of myths dealt with here, ancestors who lost their characters, or humans and animals who robbed the letters from the ancestors might

be regarded as negative “cultural heroes.” However, it is not the only purpose of these myths to only lament the fate of losing letters. In these myths, in common with those of lost paradise or the origin of death, a fundamental problem for human beings is expressed — whether to follow fate passively and negatively, or to choose an option actively and positively. It is for this very reason that they have been transmitted in various places with different transformations over time.

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ОБРАТНЫЙ ХОД КУЛЬТУРЫ? МИФ ОБ УТРАТЕ ПИСЬМЕННОСТИ

АННОТАЦИЯ. Мифы об утрате письменности собирались и анализировались начиная с XIX в. Среди их исследователей были Мейсон, Обаяси, Рифтин, Онохара, Опиц, Тэпп, Скотт и др. Соответствующие повествования распространены в Юго-Восточной Азии, на Дальнем Востоке и в Европе. Письменность, которой некогда обладали люди, была, согласно мифам, смыта водой, съедена животными или людьми вместе с материалом, на который была нанесена и т. п. По некоторым версиям, съеденная книга превратилась в книжку — отдел желудка

жвачных животных. Подобные рассказы, которые передавались не только в устной, но и в письменной форме, являются примерами представления о «не-появлении фактов культуры», но вместе с тем объясняют этиологию других особенностей культуры, например, вышивки или способов гадания. Они также отражают представления людей о себе и о чужаках. В подобных мифах, близких по смыслу мифам об утрате первоначального благополучия или о происхождении смерти, отражена фундаментальная проблема, с которой сталкивается человек — выбор пассивного подчинения судьбе или активного действия с надеждой на успех. Именно поэтому подобные мифы распространились столь широко, подвергаясь со временем разнообразным изменениям.

К Л Ю Ч Е В Ы Е С Л О В А : мифы об утрате письменности, межэтнические отношения, культурный герой

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