Religious Concepts in the Japanese Folk Tale

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The Japanese folk tale contains oral tradition which reflects a variety of religious concepts. Some of them can be identified with faiths which have already received considerable attention from scholars. While some of the concepts undoubtedly have been brought into Japan from mainland Asia, other beliefs shown in the Japanese folk tale are still held among islanders to the south and still others have analogies in beliefs found among people across the far northern rim of the world. Students of Japanese religions are apt to pass by these latter two types of tradition or to employ Taoism as a catch-all for sources of miscellaneous concepts concerning nature and magic that are not readily recognizable in Buddhist or Confucian traditions. While Shinto itself is usually regarded as the native faith of Japan, its origins remain obscure and its teachings cannot be regarded as an entirely integrated body of doctrine.

Several theories concerning the racial origins of the Japanese are proposed, but they rely on evidence dating subsequent to

In the footnotes accompanying this article the prefecture from which a tale was collected has been noted, but this does not limit its distribution in Japan. Most of the stories could be duplicated in many other parts of Japan, but the selections used here are from Aomori in the northeast to Kagoshima in the southwest. The collectors (not authors) range from Yanagita Kunio, who started the movement to collect tales in 1910, to the foremost modern collector, Mizusawa Ken'ichi of Nagaoka, Niigata. Since the end of World War II, more than sixty new collections of tales have appeared in Japan and more are constantly being published.

man of antiquity. Archeological findings now point to the presence of man on the Japanese islands during the Paleolithic period, but traces of religious beliefs held in that remote past are rare. Tales are found among primitives living today, such as certain tribes in Australia, and it is not unreasonable to speculate that tales existed in Japan from the time man lived on the islands and communicated with his fellow man.

The function of the tale has always been to relate mysteries, dreams, and adventure. Along with the tale itself, there are the points of view of the narrator, the listener, and that of the protagonist as well. Any discussion of religious concepts in the tale must take into account such views, for upon them the continuance of the tale depends.

A search for religious concepts can only be conducted after determining what a religious concept is. We cannot expect to find religious dogma expounded or rituals described in the folk tale, for that is not its function. The participants in the Japanese folk tale are no more articulate about their beliefs than present-day Japanese. While they are a religious people, their acceptance of religious concepts is so natural and complete that they appear to most of them as simply common sense. This is certainly true of the characters in tales, be they man, deity, animal, or whatever. The world of the tale includes all life without drawing lines between man, deity, and nature.

Survey of Religious Concepts

I would like to offer some concepts in religion in a broad sense for this study of the folk tale. In the first place, consciousness of life arises from a basically religious experience, for through

it man confronts the mysteries of his birth, growth, marriage with its progenitive function, and his passing away. Life in the folk tale concerns more than man. It is present in plants, animals, and objects. It is present in the air, in the ground, and in water and in the form of deities and spirits.

Another religious concept concerns time. It is spatial and is found on several planes. Just as man is conceived as passing from one block of time to the next in the term *toshikoshi*, "stepping from the old year to the new," an occasion celebrated with proper solemnity today, man in the folk tale can also be led into another place where things happen. He may go under the sea or through a cave into the Ryūgū, the Dragon Palace, where youth is endless, or he may follow somebody into the insect world where many things happen before his folks at home finish breakfast.

There is also a restoration of the primordial state in which man can converse with deities and spirits who reveal themselves to him. And once more man understands and speaks with all forms of life around him. He even hears objects speak which in ordinary life appear to be silent. In his conception of deities the man in the folk tale does not try to encompass a cosmological universe. He is concerned only with such deities as he happens to meet.

Other religious concepts concern the importance of dreams, the power of magic objects, and the work of augury. These are religious concepts of many people from times long ago to the present.

Concepts concerning ethics have found their way into some religions, but they do not belong to the folk tale. If a brief moral

is attached to the end of some tales, it is obviously an appendage. However, in the creation story, the *Kojiki*, deities enjoyed song and dance, and this enjoyment of religious festivals seems to be inherent in the way Japanese regard them. The offering made to deities is divided among the celebrants, and the entertainment that follows is enjoyed by all present, including the deities.

To be sure, goodness and its opposite are portrayed in the tales, but this goodness is a sort of contentment, an attitude in life. A favorite couple is the good old man and his good old woman. They are hard working and thrifty, and it is while they go about their daily activities contentedly that an unexpected, marvelous adventure comes to them. The greatest achievement for them is to become *chōja*, happy with the good fortune that comes unsought, and they remain the simplehearted, contented pair they always were.

Concepts as broad as these when applied to the Japanese folk tale would require considerable time to explore. For the purpose of this study the concept of life which encompasses all life and shares one world will be illustrated with summaries or reference to specific tales. Other concepts will also be apparent as this is done. The first step will be a study of tales concerning the life cycle of man.

The Human Life Cycle: Children

Obtaining children. Children are regarded as treasures, and a childless couple is considered unfortunate. The couple will pray to a deity for a child to which they can give their name. Sometimes prayers are offered at a shrine in a prescribed manner, such as in a series of days, perhaps three times seven days. Kan-

non is a popular deity at such a time, but petitions are also made to Suijin, the Water Deity, to the local Chinju ("village deity") or Ujigami ("tutelary deity"). In other tales no special place is mentioned, but in any case the prayer is usually answered through a revelation while the couple sleeps.

One couple that had petitioned Myōjin found a snake's egg in the grounds of the shrine. The little snake, when hatched, had a mark on its head like the character for *ichi*, so they called it Ichi and cared for it as their child. When Ichi grew bigger, the neighbors were afraid of it and insisted that he be abandoned. About that time a monster began to haunt the estate of the feudal lord. He posted a huge sign offering a reward of 50 *koku* of rice [nearly 250 bushels] to anyone who destroyed the monster. Ichi attacked the monster and killed it. Although he died in the struggle, the reward was given to his parents.[1]

A farmer and his wife prayed to Suijin for a child. When he was born, he looked like a little mudsnail, but the couple cared for him tenderly. The tale is too long to summarize here, but in the end the devotion of his little wife, the daughter of a *chōja*, and her devotion to Suijin transformed the mudsnail into a handsome youth.[2]

Other children, too, are born in an unusual way. The story of Momotarō, the little boy born from a peach, is old and has received several modifications. The version told on Sanagi Island in the Inland Sea has an old episode in which there were

1. Miyamoto Tsuneichi 宮本常一, ed., "Ichi" いち, in *Suō Ōshima mukashibanoshi shū* 周防大島昔話集 (Yamaguchi-ken Ōshima Tachibana-chō: Ōshima Bunka Kenkyū Renmei, 1956), p. 47. A tale from Yamaguchi.
2. Sasaki Kizen 佐々木喜善, "Tanishi Chōja" 田螺長者, in *Kikimimi sōshi* 聽耳草紙 (Tokyo: Sangensha, 1931), p. 10. A tale from Iwate.

two peaches floating downstream where the old woman was doing her washing. When she and her husband ate them, they were rejuvenated, and the son born to them had great strength. He attacked and destroyed the demons with the help of a pheasant and a dog.[3]

A little girl who was found in a melon floating downstream was called Urikohime. Most versions of this story end tragically, but they agree in that the girl became a good weaver. Weaving has been a significant duty of women in Japan for a long time. In one version of the story, the family of Urikohime became known as Nishiki Chōja because of the beautiful brocade (*nishiki*) produced through the girl's efforts.[4]

Divining the future. Another kind of story which concerns the birth of a child is based on the folk belief that Hōkigami, the Broom Deity, goes around to invite Yama-no-kami, the Mountain Deity, and others—sometimes including Kannon or Jizō—to go with her to where a child is to be born. They must determine the forecast for the new child. This usually concerns its span of life and sometimes its endowment of wealth. There are several types of tales in this group. A man returning from a journey is overtaken by night and seeks shelter in a little wayside shrine. In the night he overhears kami stopping by and inviting the deity enshrined there to accompany them to a parturition, but he cannot leave because of his guest. On their way back the kami report the forecast of the child. When the

3. Takeda Akira 武田明, ed., "Momotarō" 桃太郎, in *Sōrae bakubaku* 候えばくばく (Tokyo: Miraisha, 1965), p. 14. A tale from Kagawa.

4. Fujiwara Sōnosuke 藤原相之助, "Mukashibanashi no omoide" 昔話の思ひ出 [Recalling folk tales], in *Mukashibanashi kenkyū* 昔話研究 2 (1936), pp. 2-8. A tale from Akita.

man reaches home, he finds that his wife has given birth during the night to a son, and the father is sure the unfavorable forecast is that of his child. He tries to overcome that by arranging a promise of marriage between his son and a girl baby born that night whose forecast he also heard. His scheme fails to establish a permanent union, and the girl eventually becomes wealthy through her second marriage.[5]

In another type, a fisherman got up early to fish. While he waited for the tide, he went to sleep, using a driftlog lying on the beach as a pillow. In the midst of the sound of waves, he heard a voice call to the driftlog, inviting him to accompany him to the village where a child was to be born. The driftlog could not go because of his guest. When the voice came later, it reported that a girl had been born and that she would be in danger of water at the age of eighteen. When the fisherman returned to his home, he found that his wife had given birth to a baby girl. The father kept his secret. All went well until his daughter was to become a bride when she was eighteen. On the night before her wedding, the father set out a sedge hat and straw cloak in case of rain. Although it was not the custom for a father to accompany his daughter to her wedding, he went along. On the way a sudden shower came up. The girl started to take shelter below a rocky cliff, but her father put the rain things onto her and hurried her along. On the day after the ceremony, when those who had accompanied the bride were on their way home, they saw that the cliff where the girl had wanted to take shelter

5. Dobashi Riki 土橋里木, "Umaretsuki no un" 生れ付きの運 [The fortune from birth], in *Kai mukashibanashi shū* 甲斐昔話集 (Tokyo: Kyōdo Kenkyūsha, 1930), p. 182. A tale from Yamanashi.

had crumbled in the rain. She had been saved because of what her father had overheard as he lay, using the driftlong for a pillow.[6]

In another type, a third party, a pilgrim, overheard kami at a shrine of Yama-no-kami talking about a forecast that a child born in the village that night would die from a handax at the age of seven. It was seven years later when he happened to pass through the village. Everyone was excited over how the carpenter, who had tried to brush away a horsefly from his sleeping child, had accidentally cut his head open with a handax and killed him.[7]

Naming a child. The problem of selecting a good name always comes up when a child is born. While some families seem to name their children merely as a series of numbers, usually some deeper significance is attached to naming a child. In the folk tale, however, there are a number of humorous stories about selecting a name. When one young couple had their first child, they thought it would be practical to give him a short name so that they could call him easily. They named him Chotto, which means "just a second." But Chotto died shortly. The parents decided it was because his name was too short. They named their next child Itchōgiri-nichōgiri-chōnai-chōsaburō-gorogoro-atchiyama-kotchiyama-torinotokkasa-tateebōshi-tongarbyō to ensure a long life for him. When the child was playing in the

6. Yanagita Kunio 柳田國男, "The Driftlog God," in *Japanese Folk Tales: A Revised Selection*, translated by Fanny Hagin Mayer (Tokyo: Tokyo News Service, 1966), p. 98. This book is a translation of *Nihon no mukashibanashi*, rev. ed. 日本の昔話, 改訂版 (Tokyo: Kadokawa, 1960). A tale from Amami Ōshima, Kagoshima.

7. Sasaki Kizen, "Yamagami no sōdan" 山神の相談 [The talk among Yama-no-kami], in *Kikimimi sōshi*, p. 30. A tale from Iwate.

yard, he fell into the well, and by the time his little friend went next door to borrow a ladder and to make the deaf old lady understand, the child with the long name had drowned.[8]

From children to boys and girls. Tales about rites of passage are not very numerous, but the development of a little boy or girl is watched closely. There is a humorous story concerning a rite called *heko iwai*, when a boy receives his loincloth at the age of seven. The father, a huntsman, was poor, but the occasion called for a feast and inviting guests. Hunting, like fishing and farming, has its patron deities and rituals. Although mention of them is omitted in the tale, we can see that a benign providence provided the hunter with things for the celebration. He set out to hunt and shot a badger with his first shot. The animal thrashed around and dug up three long mountain yams. As the father started home with these good things, he saw a duck on a pond. He succeeded in shooting it and waded out into the water to retrieve it. When he came back to shore, he discovered fifty or sixty little fish had been trapped in his baggy pants. The huntsman then gave a fine feast for his little son.[9]

Girls grow up to be able to take responsibility for spinning, cooking, and gathering food in the *yama* ("mountain") alone or with a group of friends. In rural Japan even today this activity of gathering things starts in the early spring when

8. Fumino Shirakoma 文野白駒 [Iwakura Ichirō 岩倉市郎], "Nagai na no ko" 長い名の子 [The child with the long name], in *Kamuhara yatan* 加無波良夜譚 (Tokyo: Genkyūsha, 1932), p. 103. A tale from Niigata.

9. "Ryōshi no heko iwai" 獵師のへこ祝ひ [The hunter and the loincloth celebration], in "Fukuoka-ken mukashibanashi shū" 福岡縣昔話集 (a pre-World War II manuscript), No. 190. A tale from Fukuoka.

tender shoots, herbs, and wild tubers appear, continues through summer with its berries and wild fruit, and ends in the autumn when mushrooms and nuts are plentiful. Families depend on these foods.

The Human Life Cycle: Marriage

The next event in the life cycle, that of marriage, has a variety of portrayals. There are a number of matters concerning it which should be kept in mind when studying the tales. Most of the marriages occurred at a time in history when such unions were established without modern formalities. Until recent times a girl who was promised to another family as a bride would remain in her home until her help was no longer needed on the farm. In some instances a youth who found favor would visit the girl at night in her home and might eventually remain as a member of her family, or the girl might go later to his family to live. From long ago, even as today, there was a difference between giving a girl from her family as a bride to the family of the young man and in taking the young man as a son-in-law into the girl's family. In the folk tale we have still another kind of marriage. A strange woman comes to the door of a single man and asks to be taken in. After a short time they become husband and wife, but their families do not seem to be involved as a rule. The success of such marriages varies.

The bride. A *chōja* in Shimonoseki had a daughter whom he wished to see married, but families where he sent her did not want to keep her, and at those where she was accepted, the daughter did not want to stay. After forty-nine failures in trying to marry the girl off, the father made his petition to Ujigami. The

deity appeared to him as Makuragami, the deity that appears in dreams, and said that the only man for his girl was a charcoal-maker who lived in a bamboo-grass hut in Harima. The father sent his daughter out on her journey well provided with little gold coins wrapped in paper. When the girl arrived at the charcoal-maker's hut and asked to stay, the man said he could by no means let a girl dressed in such lovely silks stay. But the girl insisted, and in a few days they became man and wife. One day the man noticed the coins his bride was keeping carefully and he learned from her what they were. He said there was any amount of that stuff the coins were made of lying around where he worked. His bride went to see, and, sure enough, there was lots of gold there. They gathered it up and became the foremost *chōja* in Harima.[10]

The fate of a young bride taken into her husband's family is often unhappy, for it is her mother-in law that she must please and obey. While there are some humorous stories about how the bride outwits her mother-in-law, usually the stories are more serious.

Once a bride was admonished strictly by her mother-in-law to keep the fire burning in the hearth because it was the family tradition. The girl did her best to tend the fire, but on New Year's Eve it went out. She was the first one up in the morning and discovered the fire was out. As she started to a neighbor's to borrow live coals, a blizzard was blowing. An old man was passing her house carrying a coffin on his back and a bunch of burning incense sticks in his hand. The girl asked him to divide the burning sticks, but he refused, for he needed them for the

10. Suzuki Tōzō 鈴木棠三, "Sumiyaki Chōja" 炭焼長者, in *Mukashibanashi kenkyū* 2, pp. 8-48. A tale from Shimane.

funeral at the temple. She explained what had happened and said she would die if she could not start the fire. He felt sorry for her, but he could not stand there in the storm. Besides, dawn was coming on. He told her that if she would take the coffin too, he would give her the burning sticks. This was a severe test of the young bride's feeling of duty, for she did not want to defile herself by being near the dead at New Year's, but there was no time to waste. She took the coffin on her back and carried it and the burning sticks into the house. In this way the bride relighted the fire in the hearth. She placed the coffin in the now empty chest in which she had brought her bridal clothes. But the bride could not keep her secret forever. When spring came, there was an odor around the chest. She tearfully told her husband what had happened, and together they lifted the lid of the chest and looked into it. There was no more bad odor, and the chest was filled with gold coins which shone brightly when they lifted them out. The family is prosperous to this day and its *yago* or house name is *hi*, which means fire.[11]

The groom. The young man chosen by the *chōja* to be his son-in-law is fortunate because the *chōja*'s daughter is always beautiful as well as rich. Sometimes the *chōja* sets up a tall sign in front of his home to announce a competition by which he will take the winner as his son-in-law. At other times a young man may use a magic object to help him be chosen.

Gonemon was tired of always being poor and having nothing but rags to wear. He decided to make his three times seven

11. Sasaki Kizen, "Hi no okage de chōja to natta to iu uchi no hanashi" 火のお蔭で長者となったと謂ふ家の話 [The family that became *chōja* on account of fire], in *Esashi-gun mukashibanashi* 江刺郡昔話 (Tokyo: Kyōdo Kenkyūsha, 1922), p. 67. A tale from Iwate.

petitions to Kangamo Myōjin to become rich. On the twenty-first day the deity appeared to him as a white-haired man. He gave Gonemon a gold fan and a silver fan. He said that if he fanned the nose of anybody with the gold fan, the nose would grow long, and with the silver fan he could shorten it. But he told Gonemon never to use them carelessly. As Gonemon walked along carrying the fans, he saw the *chōja*'s daughter being carried in a sedan chair to view the cherry blossoms. He hid behind a tree as she passed and fanned her nose lightly with his gold fan. It suddenly grew to be three feet long. There was great excitement and the girl was taken home and put to bed. The *chōja* promised a rich reward, but nobody could cure the girl's nose. After a day or two Gonemon came by pretending to be a nose masseur and offered to cure her. He did this a little at a time until the nose was restored. The *chōja* kept his word and Gonemon began a life of luxury, wearing fine clothes and eating good things. The fan was put away and forgotten until he found it one day. He decided to see how it felt to be fanned. As he lay on his back, fanning his nose, he dozed off, still fanning it, and his nose grew until it pierced the sky and came out under the house of Raijin, the Thunder Deity. It happened that the family was toasting *mochi* at the hearth when a strange thing like a soft horn came pushing up through the ashes in a corner of the hearth. Somebody stuck a red hot chopstick through it. The pain wakened Gonemon. He began to fan his nose frantically, but it was held fast and his body was drawn up toward it. The tale says that he is still probably there, hanging in the sky.[12]

12. Dobashi Riki, "Gonemon no hana" 権右衛門の鼻 [Gonemon's nose], in *Kai mukashibanashi shū*, p. 30.

This tale also shows something of the humor in tales, and the folksy view of Raijin's family toasting rice cakes at the hearth is pleasant. We can see that Gonemon's use of a trick to get ahead was considered acceptable. It was when he used the magic object with no purpose that he met with difficulty.

Humans, deities, and animals. Two stories about visitors at night will illustrate, further, the closeness of man and deity or animal. A handsome stranger came secretly each night to visit a girl and left at dawn. The girl's mother asked her daughter who her visitor was, but she did not know. The worried mother instructed her daughter to attach a threaded needle to the skirt of his garment that night. In the morning the girl followed the thread to a tree growing by a pond. The young man came out of the tree and told her he was really the *nushi*, the Snake Spirit in charge of the pond. When he visited her he met with a misfortune that could not be reversed. After he asked the girl to take good care of the child that was to be born, he vanished. The snake died from the poison of the needle. When the baby was born, it had three snake scales under his arm. He was known as Kobunji of Igarashi when he grew up, and he had the strength of forty-five men. The mark of the scales and the great strength were inherited in the generations that followed.[13]

In the other story, a farmer who saw that a snake had caught a little frog in his rice seed bed called to the snake that he would give him his only daughter as a bride if he would free it. The snake let go of the frog and glided away, but from that night a handsome stranger came at night to visit the farmer's daughter.

13. Fumino Shirakoma, "Yonjūgo nin no chikara" 四十五人力 [The strength of forty-five men], in *Kamuhara yatan*, p. 162. A tale from Niigata.

The father asked a soothsayer who passed his house who the young man was. She said that the girl had taken a bridegroom who was not human and that the child she was carrying was not human. If she did not eat the three eagle's eggs from the nest high in a certain tree, she would die. The girl asked the young man to get the eggs for her. While he climbed to the nest, he changed to his true form, that of a snake. After he had brought down two eggs and was going for a third, the mother eagle killed him. Then the soothsayer came again and asked what had happened. She told the father to give his daughter wine sprinkled with peach blossoms on the coming festival of the Third Day of the Third Month. She said she was the little frog the farmer had saved. That is how it came about that people drink peach blossom wine at the festival in the third month.[14]

There remains one more kind of marriage to illustrate, the one in which a woman comes to the door and asks to be taken in. She is often a transformed creature come to pay a debt of gratitude to the man, or she may come from pity for the lonely man. However, a she-demon overheard a stingy man say he would take a wife if she didn't eat. She showed up at his door as a woman and asked to be taken as a bride. She declared she did not eat, so the man let her stay. But he noticed that although she never seemed to eat, his supplies went down quickly after she arrived. He spied on her one day and found she had a mouth on the top of her head into which she stuffed quantities of rice and bean soup. The man tried to send his wife home, but she carried him off to eat with her friends. He escaped by

14. Yanagita Kunio, "The Eagle's Eggs," in *Japanese Folk Tales*, p. 35. A tale from Saga.

hiding in a thick growth of iris and mugwort growing by a stream. The she-demon was blinded by the plants and fell into the stream and was drowned. The man fastened some of the plants onto himself and placed them around his door and on the roof. That is why people from that time decorated their homes with iris and mugwort and put iris into their baths at the festival of the Fifth Day of the Fifth Month.[15]

Other brides that come to the door are a bird wife, a fish wife, a frog wife, a clam wife, and even a tree wife and a snow wife. Of greater importance are the wife from the Dragon Palace and the wife from the Sky World. The latter tale explains the origin of the Tanabata Festival, the celebration for Vega, the Weaver Star, that is held on the Seventh Day of the Seventh Month. The theme of the fox wife is very old. The earliest recorded version is found in the ninth-century collection of tales, the full title of which is *Nippon genpo zenaku ryōiki*. The purpose of the tales was to teach Buddhism, but this one has every appearance of being a genuine folk tale.

There are several versions of the story about the fox wife in oral tradition, from which one will be noted here. When her true identity was discovered, the fox had to leave her husband and little son. Just as the descendants of Kobunji of Igarashi inherited great strength, the son of the fox became a great astrologer with the help of a magic object she left for him, and his line of descendants were astrologers.[16] Legend says that the

15. Yanagita Kunio, "The Wife Who Didn't Eat," in *Japanese Folk Tales*, p. 48. A tale from Iwate.

16. Nomura Jun'ichi and Nomura Keiko 野村純一・野村敬子, eds., "Kitsune nyōbō" 狐女房 [The fox wife], in *Hagino Saihei mukashibanashi shū* 萩野才兵衛昔話集 (Tokyo: Kokugakuin Daigaku, Nihon Bungaku Dai-ni Kenkyūshitsu, 1970), p. 98. A tale from Yamagata.

famous astrologer Abe-no-Seimei at the court in Kyoto in the day of Michinaga was the son of a fox.

The Human Life Cycle: Death

Spirits of the dead. The final stage in the life cycle of man is his death. Perhaps the most important matter here is the answer to the question where man's spirit goes after death. It does not seem to be a distant place, according to the tales. In some stories one who has died is restored to life when she is stroked with a life stick or a life whip. In western tradition the dead appear as "ghosts," but for this term there is no good Japanese equivalent. The word *bakemono*, usually translated as "ghost," means literally "a transformed thing" and does not refer to the dead. A *bakemono* is a living thing transformed temporarily for a specific purpose. Kami, spirits, and demons can also transform themselves into something visible, but they are not the dead. While the body of man dies and must be disposed of, the spirit of man lives on, and death is not an end in itself.

Spirits of the dead linger when they still have concern about the living. Thus the dead mother of a baby born after her burial went every night to a candy store and put her hand through the open door to buy a piece of *ame*, "a sweet," with the coin that had been placed in her coffin. In this way she she was caring for her child. The owner of the shop thought it strange and had her followed. She turned into a flame and disappeared by the new grave. After her child was found and provided for, the mother's spirit no longer appeared.[17]

17. Seki Keigo 關敬吾, "Kosodate yūrei" 子育幽靈 [The ghost that cared for her child], in *Shimabara hantō minwa shū* 島原半島民話集 (Tokyo: Kensetsusha, 1935), p. 76. A tale from Nagasaki.

The dead mother of a stepchild came to her in the form of a little white bird when the girl was gathering chestnuts. She gave her a hollyhock flute and a beautiful garment. The girl followed her mother's instructions and was chosen as the bride of the feudal lord.[18]

The spirit of the dead returns to its family at stated times. One girl died while crossing a meadow alone. Her bones were noticed by an old man who stopped to rest on his errand. He generously poured a cup of his wine over the skeleton, and he sang as he enjoyed the beautiful spring day. In the evening the girl appeared to the old man on his way home. She invited him to join her on the day her parents would hold a memorial service for her. By holding onto the girl's sleeve, the old man, too, was invisible, and he enjoyed sampling the wine and food set out on trays for the guests. Such occasions should be carried out in a spirit of peace and tranquility, but the master of the house flew into a rage at a maid who dropped and broke a plate. When that happened, the spirit girl was offended and left, telling the old man to stay and eat more. But when the spirit left, the old man became visible. He told all that had happened and led the family and priests to the girl's remains. Then a proper funeral was performed.[19]

Animal rebirth? The belief that a spirit is reborn into another form of life, such as an animal or insect, seems foreign to Japanese

18. Kawai Yūtarō 川合勇太郎, "Awabukuro to komebukuro no hanashi" 「粟ぶくろ」と「米ぶくろ」の話 [The story about Awabukuro and Komebukuro], in *Tsugaru no mugashiko shū* 津軽むがしこ集 (Aomori: Tōō Nipposha, 1929), p. 75. A tale from Aomori.
19. Iwakura Ichirō, "Haru no nomichi kara" 春の野道から [From a meadowlane in spring], in *Mukashibanashi kenkyū* 1 (1935), pp. 3-29. A tale from Niigata.

beliefs. The ancestors of the family are welcomed in the Bon festival as family members and not as animals. It is true that some stories of the origin of birds state that they are reborn folk, but most explain them as a transformation which occurred, identifying the cry of the bird with what was said or done.

An unfilial son held a burning faggot to his sick mother when she asked for water to drink. When she saw it she suddenly died. The boy was so surprised that he turned into a kingfisher. When he became thirsty and flew down to where there was water, his reflection made the water appear to be burning, and he could not drink. That is why the kingfisher can drink only when it rains, and he calls *fure-fure* ("rain, rain"), begging for it to rain.[20]

A father returned home from working in the hills and started to take off his leggings. He looked around for his little boy, Kakkō, but did not see him. He called and called but the boy did not answer. The worried father started to look for him with one legging still on. He called and called "Kakkō, Kakkō," and rushed around until he turned into the bird that calls *kakkō-kakkō*.[21]

A stepmother set ten persimmons in the cupboard and left on an errand, telling her stepdaughter not to touch them. When the woman returned, the persimmons were there, but she declared she had left eleven of them and accused the girl of eating one. The girl declared there had been only ten, but the woman cried there were eleven. The girl denied it, and this continued until she turned into a bird that calls *kakitō* ("ten persimmons"), and

20. Hayami Ka'ichi 逸見喜一, "Fure furee no hanashi" ふれふれえの話 [Rain, rain], in *Mukashibanashi kenkyū* 2 (1936), pp. 3-33. A tale from Saitama.

21. Seki Keigo, "Kata'ashi kyahan" 片脚脚絆 [The legging on one leg], in *Mukashibanashi kenkyū* 1 (1935), pp. 9-22. A tale from Fukuoka.

the stepmother became a bird which chased her, calling *jūichi-jūichi* ("eleven, eleven").[22]

And long ago the meadowlark was a money lender from whom even the Sun borrowed. When the Sun succeeded in life and climbed to the sky, he did not repay even a single *mon* of his debt. The meadowlark flew up to remind him of the debt, but the Sun refused to pay more than the original amount. The meadowlark insisted on interest, too, and it still flies up toward the Sun, calling *ritoru-ritoru* ("I'll get the interest, I'll get the interest").[23]

These stories about human beings turning into birds still do not answer the question about where the spirit goes after death. To this question there is no simple answer, but according to the tales the dead are not far away and they continue to be concerned with their families.

Animals, Objects, and Deities

Animals. In the stories examined thus far, animals cross over into the human world and can communicate with men. This, perhaps, is of the most interest in the present study, but there is a vast number of tales about animal life. I do not know of an index on the subject, but in my study I have noted tales about more than seventy kinds of animal life in the broadest sense, while trees and plants, which are included as living things in

22. Dohashi Riki, "Kakitō to jūichi" カキトウとヅウイチ [Ten persimmons or eleven], in *Zoku Kai mukashibanashi shū* 續甲斐昔話集 (Tokyo: Kyōdo Kenkyūsha, 1936), p. 3. *Kakitō* and *jūichi* are also local names for certain kinds of birds. A tale from Yamanashi.

23. Mutō Tetsushirō 武藤鐵城, *Ugo Kakunodate chihō ni okeru chōchū sōmoku no minzokugakuteki shiryō* 羽後角館地方に於ける鳥蟲草木の民俗学的資料 (Tokyo: Atchiku Miūzeyamu), p. 78. A tale from Akita.

Japanese lists, would increase that figure to nearly a hundred. In other words, life in the tale springs from the scene in which it has been cherished.

There is no complete life cycle shown in tales about animals. We find many in which family members of the animal are given roles. Animal neighbors do not get along well, and there are several tales based upon feuds among them. That the power of animals continues after death is a point which is interesting.

There was a seaman who always stayed at a certain inn. The innkeeper would prepare food especially for him to keep his favor. One night the guest saw the cat at the inn take food from the cupboard, and he reported it in the morning to the innkeeper. The cat was in the room at the time and overheard him. When the seaman returned to his ship, the cat from the inn was there and seemed to be trying to get even with him by being a nuisance. Finally one of the sailors hit the cat and killed it. The seaman took the dead cat back to the inn and told what had happened. He asked that the cat be buried in the yard. The next time the seaman came, the innkeeper decided to serve a squash that had grown early. When he cut it open, it was full of cat hair. The plant had grown from the cat's grave, and apparently the cat intended to poison the seaman.[24]

There is the well-known story about a little dog who continued to bring good fortune to his old master even after his envious neighbor had killed it. This story has older versions, but a version of recent date is the one known as "The Old Man

24. Noda Tayoko 能田多代子, ed., "Neko no shūnen" 猫の執念 [The unforgiving cat], in *Tekkiri ane sama* 手っきり姉さま (Tokyo: Miraisha, 1958), p. 251. A tale from Aomori.

Who Made Flowers Bloom."[25]

Spirits of objects. Objects in the tales open up a problem of identity with deities, but before taking that up, the object as an object will be considered. Of course, objects have no life cycle, but they take active roles in the tales, and unless an old object is disposed of properly, it will come out as *bakemono*. And forgotten treasure also comes out transformed sometimes. Objects joined with animals in helping the little crab take revenge on the monkey who killed his father. Usually there are three helpers, the bee, the chestnut, and the mortar and pestle. This list is sometimes lengthened to include a needle and cow dung.[26]

The broad bean jumped out of the pot over the fire and met a piece of charcoal and a straw in the hearth. The three decided to go on a pilgrimage to Kyoto. As they went along they came to a stream. The straw offered to be a bridge for the other two. The bean crossed safely, but there was still a little fire on the charcoal. By the time he was half way across, he burned the straw and the two fell into the water. At first the bean laughed heartily to see them, but he laughed so hard, his belly burst. Then he began to cry. A medicine pedlar from Toyama came along and felt sorry for him. He took a needle and some black thread out of his case and sewed the bean up. The black line on the broad bean remains as a mark on it.[27]

25. Sugihara Takeo 杉原丈夫, "Hanasaka jiji" 花咲爺 [The old man who made flowers bloom], in *Mukashibanashi kenkyū* 1 (1935), pp. 8-34. A tale from Fukui.

26. Dobashi Riki, "Kani no ada'uchi" 蟹の仇討 [The crab's revenge], in *Zoku Kai mukashibanashi shū*, p. 224.

27. Mizusawa Ken'ichi 水沢謙一, "Wara to sumi to mame" ワラとスミとマメ [The straw, the charcoal, and the bean], in *Akai kikimimi zukin* 赤い聞耳ずきん (Sanjo-shi, Niigata-ken: Nojima Shuppan, 1969), p. 32. A tale from Niigata.

Some of the *bakemono* of objects seem to be happy little spirits. It was rumored that a certain vacant temple was haunted, but a brave traveler decided to stay in it one night. Toward evening he heard sounds and after a big noise a drum came rolling out from somewhere. Then with a crash an old winnowing basket was followed by an old *furoshiki*, a "wrapping cloth," and finally an old chipped bowl. A voice said, "Now that we are all here, let's start!" The four of them began to dance as they sang,

"Oh, the old winnowing basket, the *furushiki*, the old drum,
And the old chipped bowl from inside the cupboard,
Whatever and whichever, we don't care what,
Oh, *dokkoi*, *dokkoi*!"

When dawn began to appear, the drum ran off to the inner room, the chipped bowl to the cupboard, and the winnowing basket and *furoshiki* went off somewhere. It is said that if old things are not thrown away, they come out this way.[28]

There is a frightful ghost called an *ōnyūdō* that reportedly appears in vacant temples. It kills and sometimes eats a luckless wayfarer who takes shelter for the night. An itinerant priest was refused a place to stay one night. The villagers told him to go to the vacant temple at the edge of town. Three times during the night a fierce ghost with three eyes and two sets of teeth came out and struck the priest, but the priest had a kettle on his head. Each time he took a piece of firewood and split the head of the ghost open and tossed it outside. When the villagers came in the morning to see what had happened to the priest, he told them. He said if they would hold the things he threw out where the morning sunlight could shine on them,

28. Yanagita Kunio, "The old winnowing basket, the old *furushiki*, and the old drum," in *Japanese Folk Tales*, p. 60. N. B.: *furushiki* is Sado dialect for *furoshiki* ("wrapping cloth"). A tale from Niigata.

their true form could be understood. They proved to be old wooden clogs. After they were burned, they no longer appeared.[29] In this tale the enjoyment of puns by Japanese is apparent. The three holes through which the thongs of the clogs are tied are called *me* ("eyes"), and the two vertical supports are called *ha* ("teeth"). This accounted for the appearance of the ghosts. They really were *geta* or "clogs."

Objects as deities. There seems to be considerable hesitancy on the part of scholars to accept the concept of an object as a deity rather than a sacred spirit in the object. Some are willing to admit a certain amount of ambivalence in the concept. There is no ambivalence, actually, for both concepts are present in the folk tales. The proper use of tools and utensils does not spring only from a utilitarian point of view. The plow and other tools are polished carefully and set aside to rest at New Year's, and offerings are made to them.[30] The proper way to handle a broom and to dispose of an old one are a common tradition. Mizusawa Ken'ichi, the foremost collector of folk tales today, found that setting up a broom in the room where a child is to be born is part of an old proverb.[31] The relation to the belief that Hōkigami ("broom deity") is present at parturition is obvious. And the Drift Log Deity could not go with other kami because a man was using him as a pillow in the tale already mentioned.

29. Ogasawara Kenkichi 小笠原謙吉, "Bakemono dera" 化物寺 [The haunted temple], in *Shiwa-gun mukashibanashi shū* 紫波郡昔話集 (Tokyo: Sanseidō, 1942), p. 14. A tale from Iwate.
30. Haga Hideo 芳賀日出男, *Japanese Folk Festivals Illustrated*, translated by Fanny Hagin Mayer (Tokyo: Miura Printing Co., 1970), p. 90. This book was translated from an unpublished manuscript. A custom reported in Akita.
31. Mizusawa Ken'ichi, *Tonto mukashi ga atta gedo* とんと昔があったげど, vol. 2 (Tokyo: Miraisha, 1958), p. 12. Reported in Niigata.

In the following example the objects became deities, whose identities turned into still another group of deities, but that presents no questions in the minds of the listeners. Kyūhei worked hard to plant his rice, but in spite of his fine crop, it looked as though sparrows would eat up the grain before he could harvest it. He was advised by a neighbor to erect scarecrows and prepare a feast for them at the New Year as thanks. He made three scarecrows that looked like cute little girls. Every day he offered them good things to eat and by the seventh day no more sparrows came around. On New Year's Eve he told his wife to prepare three trays of good things to eat and to set them in the *tokonoma*, the special alcove. Just as Kyūhei was preparing to meet the New Year, a pretty girl came through the opening for smoke under the roof beam and settled down in front of one of the trays in the *tokonoma*. Then another came and another until there was a girl at each tray. That surprised Kyūhei's wife. She accused him of deceiving her and carrying on with other women. He denied it and a quarrel started. When this unpleasantness started, one of the visitors flew up and then the next. Kyūhei managed to catch the third and held her fast. In the morning his neighbor came and found him with his arms around a bag of rice. When he heard what had happened, he declared that the visitors must have been Fuku-no-kami, the Deities of Good Fortune, and that if Kyūhei's wife had not been so stupid, they would have turned into bags of gold. As it was, Kyūhei had only one bag of rice.[32]

32. Mizusawa Ken'ichi, "Kagashi no kamisama" かがしの神様 [The scarecrow deity], in *Echigo no minwa* 越後の民話 (Tokyo: Miraisha, 1957), p. 41. A tale told in Niigata.

Kami, demons, and nushi. A deity is usually identified by adding *kami* or *shin* (*jin*) to the name, but the titles *sama* or *son* also indicate a benevolent being. Thus, *o-shogatsu sama*, New Year Deity, can be mentioned without naming the deity. Yama-no-kami, the Mountain Deity, and Ta-no-kami, the Field Deity, are also unidentified. In the case of Kannon or Jizō, which are recognized as being of Buddhist origin, the title *sama* is added and they are regarded as kami in the tales. We find Kannon or Jizō housed in *dō* or shrines as well as in temples.

For the origin of the greater kami, we must look, of course, into the creation story, but we find a new kami created in one tale. It was the stump of an old camphor tree who was suffering. The tree had been cut, but water dripping from the eaves of the new tea house built by it kept it alive. When it sent up new shoots, they were cut off. In that way it could neither live nor die. An old man heard of its misery from the talk of crows and advised that the stump be dug up. It was dug up and placed in the corner of the estate where it had grown. It was enshrined and worshipped as *Ki-no-kami*, the Tree Deity.[33]

The glimpse of the family of Raijin around the hearth toasting rice cakes gives a family scene of deities. In another tale the son of a widow found that Raijin had two daughters who helped him make lightning and summer showers.[34] Some children learned that South Wind was the brother of North Wind and that

33. Yanagita Kunio, "The Listening Hood," in *Japanese Folk Tales*, p. 133. A tale from Iwate.

34. Sasaki Kizen, "Tenjō ni nobotte Raijin no muko to narō to shita musuko no hanashi" 天上に昇って雷神の聟となろふとした息子の話 [The young man who climbed to the sky to be the son-in-law of Raijin], in *Esashi-gun mukashibanashi*, p. 33. A tale from Iwate.

the two kami lived with their mother, who was a "very large woman."[35]

Demons also may have families in the folk tale. Kotsuna was the son of a girl whom a demon carried off and held as his wife. The girl's father searched until he found her and together they fooled the demon and escaped.[36] Demons seem to be angry beings. They have the power of transformation and they are said to kill and devour men, but unlike kami, they can be outwitted and even destroyed.

Nushi are spirits in charge of some object or place. They can transform themselves and communicate with man. The story of the snake bridegroom has been noted. There is also a story of the snake wife.[37] They do not go far from the place they guard. Some *nushi* are discontented and malicious, but in some tales a *nushi* is good-hearted.

These beings—kami, demons, and *nushi*—are respected by man, and to a certain extent they are feared, but when he meets up with them, he is not overawed. The occasion might prove to be beneficial to him. In case of danger a man keeps his wits about him and tries to escape. There is, however, a spirit of piety in his regard for kami. He prays to them and gives them offerings. And we find that characters, including animals and objects, make pilgrimages to Kyoto or to the Grand Shrine of Ise. The

35. Mizusawa Ken'ichi, "Kaze no kami to kodomo" 風の神と子供 [The wind deities and the children], in *Tonto mukashi ga atta gedo* とんと昔があったげど, vol. 1 (Tokyo: Miraisha, 1957), p. 162. A tale from Niigata.

36. Ariga Kizaemon 有賀喜左衛門, "Oni o warawaseru" 鬼を笑はせる [Making the demon laugh], in *Tabi to densetsu, mukashibanashi gō* 族と傳説・昔話號 n. v. (1931), p: 52. A tale from Nagano.

37. Sasaki Kizen, "Haha no medama" 母の眼玉 [The mother's eyeballs], in *Kikimimi sōshi*, p. 182. A tale from Iwate.

pilgrimages blend into a spirit of adventure and are recalled as such.

Folk Tales in Japan Today

Some brief comments about the participants of the folk tale will conclude this study. The teller of tales has always been held in high esteem where tales exist. The earliest record of a narrator in Japan mentions Hieda-no-Are, an attendant at the Imperial Court of Emperor Tenmu (reigned A.D. 672-686). His recitation of events on the origin of Japan were put into book form in the *Kojiki* in 712 by Oho-no-Yasumaro at the command of Empress Genmei (reigned A.D. 707-715). It was she who also issued the decree to local authorities in 713 to compile the *Fudōki*, local records describing certain areas. Among items to be included were tales told by village elders. The importance attached to local tales and legends continues to this day in the *gunshi*, "local records," and similar district studies, which usually reserve a section for this kind of material.

The storyteller is a particularly gifted person. Not everyone who hears a folk tale can recite one although he may have heard it many times. The narrator possesses a high degree of auricular perception coupled with a keen memory. He is also able to articulate passages in a smooth, rhythmical flow of words. He tends to identify himself with the characters in the tale, and with changes of facial expression, voice, and gesture, he brings the protagonist and others into the presence of the listener. The prose tales of the Ainu are rendered in the first person as though the hero were recounting his own adventures.

As the tale proceeds, the listener makes responses in ejacula-

tions which vary according to locality, but the purpose is to encourage the narrator to proceed and it expresses anticipation as well as approval. One may ask: does the narrator believe the story? or does the listener believe the story? The folk tale is regarded as fiction and the narrator establishes in the opening formula that it is something said to have happened long ago. He is only repeating what he has heard. The closing formula states that the end of the story has come, there is no more. But while the story is in progress, the narrator and the listener join the protagonist in spirit, and therein lies the fascination of the tale.

The folk tale still lives in rural communities. City folk can no longer gather to hear tales, but their fascination continues through versions told by professional storytellers or produced on radio and television. I rode with a taxi driver in the midst of Tokyo traffic listening to a folk tale and we joined in a laugh at the conclusion. I heard a busy politician on a broadcast interview tell how he reads folk tales at night to clear his mind, to purify it. And I met a busy publisher in the hub of Tokyo publishing houses who enjoyed recalling tales he had heard as a boy. Volume after volume of newly collected folk tales continue to find a market throughout Japan.

The examples that have been offered are simple tales. They lack the sophistication and embellishment of literary tales, but in them are religious concepts found among many Japanese. The concept that all life shares a single world without drawing lines between man and the supernatural or man and the natural world is one of the most fundamental of those concepts.