Fauna and Flora in Japanese Folktales

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The process by which beliefs of the Western world in the presence of deities, spirits, and other supernatural life was overlaid by the spread of Christianity and the sophistication of Greece is difficult to trace now. However, the persisting need of people in Europe for such creations in their tales and ballads is apparent. This need was answered in part by dubbing such elements fairies and tales about them, fairy tales. Belief in an intelligence in the natural world and various spirits is still present in tales in the East. The tendency of Westerners to baptize these elements, also, as fairies and tales about them as fairy tales is regrettable. It reflects an intellectual arrogance reflected in colonization carried out by the West in the past.

The present study is limited to the roles of fauna and flora in Japanese folk tales, the *mukashibanashi*. It is based upon my survey of 3,000 tales which have been recorded in Niigata prefecture. The published collections are listed chronologically and they will be referred to by number. To begin with, a student must recognize the concept of a single world of reality in Japanese thinking. It is shared by human, animal, and plant life as well as by spirits, demons, and deities. This places the role of fauna and flora in a world of reality, not an imaginative one. They may be transformed into humans, but in many tales the animal life remains as such and the same is true of plants and trees.

I have divided fauna into four-legged animals, birds, fish, miscellaneous animals, and insects. Those mentioned most often will be introduced in a brief version of a tale. Those mentioned ten or more times will be named. The same plan will be carried out for plants and trees.

The fox, the monkey, the horse, and the rat appear most often

among the four-footed animals. The fox is known for its ability to transform itself to outwit men or other animals. Its continual feud with the badger, who is also clever at transformations, furnishes a number of amusing tales. For example, the two agreed to compare tricks one day. The badger invited the fox to a mountain pass at night. A bright, full moon was shining there. Since it was only the 5th Night of the moon, the fox realized that the full moon was a trick of the badger. He asked for a little time to prepare his show. He made sure that the daimyo of Nagaoka would be traveling on the next 5th Night and invited the badger to the mountain pass to see his performance. The badger was there, sitting on a tree stump, when the feudal procession passed. He exclaimed, "You've done very well!" But a samurai in the procession saw him and cut him down. Commoners were supposed to kneel with head bowed to the ground when a feudal procession passed (No. 25, p. 305). But the fox and the badger are ficticious animals in the tales, so that could not have been the end of the badger. Neither animal is prevalent in Niigata.

The monkey's relationship with a mortal is present in the story of how he helped a farmer weed his millet patch in the hills. His reward was to be the daughter of the man as his bride. One can not help pitying the monkey as he tried to please his bride by breaking off sprays of wild cherry blossoms for her. She insisted that he go far out on the branch. It broke and the monkey fell into the stream below and was carried away (No. 9, p. 6). But the monkey can be a sharp bargainer, too. He tried to outwit a toad when the two of them schemed to get newly pounded *mochi* (rice cake) from a prosperous family in the village. The toad jumped with a big splash into the well in the yard. Everyone rushed out of the house to see if the master's little son had fallen in. The monkey took that time to carry the mortar filled with *mochi* up a hill behind the house. The toad followed slowly. When he caught up, the monkey proposed that they roll the mortar and all down into a little valley. Whoever reached it first could eat all the *mochi*. It was hardly a fair deal, but the toad had to agree. Off flew the monkey after the mortar, but the toad could only make his way slowly. He discovered that the *mochi* had fallen out of the mortar, so he settled down to eat it. The monkey was surprised to find that he had chased an empty mortar. He climbed back crestfallen. He asked the toad to divide, but he refused (No. 2, p. 13).

The horse is present in many tales, but it is not seen. Its rider is usually a deity. The bells on the harness jingle as the deity comes to invite the deity at a little mountain shrine to accompany him to the village below. There is to be a parturition there and he wants to read the

fortune of the new baby. A traveler who has taken shelter at night there hears his host deity refuse because of his guest. The bells jingle on the harness as the deity rides away and returns again to report the outcome. The traveler will overhear the fate of the child, but there is no way to obstruct it in the story (No. 13, p. 30).

Rats are everywhere in Niigata, but they are tolerated. They are said to be companions of Daikoku, one of the Seven Gods of Happiness, the God of Prosperity. There is a story about an old man who dropped his rice ball he had brought to eat when he went to work in the mountains. It rolled down a rat hole. When he followed it, he came to where rats lived. They had eaten his rice ball, but they gave him other good things to eat. When he started to go home, they gave him gold coins. A greedy neighbor tried to imitate him. When he saw the rats pounding gold in the corner, he imitated a cat's meow to scare them off. He came to with his head in a rat hole, his clothes torn and covered with his blood (No. 30, p. 195).

Other animals appearing ten or more times in the folk tales are the dog, the cat, the rabbit, the cow, the wolf, the otter, and the weasel. Altogether twenty two kinds of four-footed animals make their appearence in one story or another 849 times. The only ones that are not native to Niigata are the *tatsu*, a mythological animal named in the zodiac calendar, the sheep, the tiger, and the lion. The sheep also belongs to the zodiac, which was adopted in Japan in 604 A.D. Tigers are usually referred to as Korean tigers. Many tigers are in Korean folk tales. The lion is identified with India, a land more distant.

Birds are of importance next to the four-footed animals in the tales. They are not always named. The crow, the sparrow, the nightingale, and the stork are mentioned most often. The crow is certainly a conspicuous bird in Niigata. He seems to know whatever is going on. One story is about an old man who received a red treasure cap from a deity. He could understand what birds and trees said when he wore it. Once when he tried it out, he overheard two crows talking about the illness of the daughter of the village official. A snake had been fastened down by a board accidentally when the official's storehouse had been built. The snake's suffering and resentment caused the girl's illness. Unless the snake were freed, both it and the girl would die soon. The old man pretended to be a fortune teller and hurried to the official's house. In that way, the snake was rescued and the girl's life was saved. The old man received a great reward (No. 25, p. 1).

Sparrows are everywhere in Niigata. Farmers make a show of scaring them from their fields of ripening rice, but there is a good-natured acceptance of them as of rats. In olden times, the sparrow and the

woodpecker were sisters. They were in the midst of putting on their makeup when word came that Buddha was dying. The sparrow flew to him immediately and arrived before the end. She received the reward of living near men and eating the grain they did. The woodpecker took her time to blacken her teeth and to put on rouge before she set out. She arrived too late. For that reason, she was left to hammer on the bark of trees and to barely get three worms a day. She cries because her beak hurts (No. 10, p. 303).

The nightingale is not an especially beautiful bird, but it has a bright call that is the first to be heard in the spring. Country folk say it has a beautiful mansion far back in the mountains where travelers can be put up for the night and feasted bountifully. It is called *Uguisu Jōdo* (Nightingale Paradise). The bird is said to be a servant of the Mountain Deity. There is a story of a traveler who saught shelter at night at a huge mansion in the mountains. He was feasted and invited to stay to work for the young woman who lived there. Three storehouses were on the place. He was told he could look into two of them, but not into the third. He was an honest man and did not look into any of them. He worked hard for a year and was fed well, but he said he wanted to go home. The young woman gave him a single coin wrapped in white paper. When he showed it to the wealthy man in the village, he was told it was a nightingale farthing, a treasure it took thousand years to make. The young man was offered a thousand *ryō*, a great sum of money, for it. His neighbor heard about his fortune and set out to find the mansion. He, too, was feasted and offered work, but he looked into all three of the storehouses. A nightingale was at work in the third, making a farthing. It cried it would have to leave because it had been seen and it flew away. The house and storehouses vanished, and the man went home empty-handed (No. 13, p. 135).

The stork is not seen commonly in Niigata, but there is a well-known story of a young farmer on Sado Island who found a stork with an arrow in its body. He removed the arrow carefully and the bird flew off. A lovely girl came to his door a few days later and asked to stay. He had nothing for her, but he took her in. She stayed on and asked to be his wife. She told him to make her a loom and she wove a length of beautiful brocade on it. He took it to the Imperial Court and received a thousand *yen* for it. When the young man returned, he asked his wife to make one more length of the cloth. She set about to do it, but forbade him to look at her while she wove. He could not endure his curiosity and peered through a knothole. He saw a stork plucking her feathers one at a time and weaving them into the fabric. She noticed her husband and asked why he was looking in spite of her asking him

not to. She flew away, leaving her weaving half done (No. 7, p. 67).

Other birds that appear in tales ten or more times are the kite, the pheasant, the cuckoo, the pigeon, the owl, and the wild duck. The total variety amounts to thirty five birds in 526 tales.

In all, eighteen kinds of fish are mentioned 109 times in Niigata tales. It can be seen from this that they are not as important as birds or four-footed animals, but the carp, the mackerel, and the jellyfish appear more than ten times. Fish without designation are mentioned almost as often.

The carp seems to have special intelligence. The carp (*koi*) from Niigata have become a comodity in the international market. The carp also reaches a great age. When I visited a carp hatchery, the owner showed me how they would come to him when he called them by name. One old carp which must have measured around three feet was said to be a hundred years old. Carp have a way of leaping up from water to catch an insect. One such carp misjudged its distance and landed on the edge of a pond. A young man who was passing by saw it flipping and struggling. He picked it up and tossed it back into the pond. A few days later, a young girl came to his house and asked shelter for the night. She prepared his breakfast in the morning and asked to stay as his wife. The young man was poor, but he agreed to take her if she would accept matters as they were. The soup which she prepared every day was especially delicious, but the young man could not find out how she prepared it. One day he hid and watched her. She set out a kettle, straddled it, and seemed to defacate into it. That night the young husband refused to drink the soup. His wife realized that he had watched her make it. She told him she was really the carp which he had saved and that she had come to him to pay a debt of gratitude. She would have to leave because her true identity had been learned. She left him and returned to the pond (No, 22. p. 579).

Mackerel in folk tales are usually salted and dried. They are carried by itinerants to sell in the back hills and have no other role. But the jellyfish was on the staff at the Sea Palace on the bottom of the sea. The princess there became ill, and doctors said that the only cure was monkey live liver. The tortoise was sent up to the seashore to get a monkey. It deceived the monkey who was in a pine tree and invited him to get onto his back for a ride to see the Sea Palace. The monkey found all kinds of entertainment and good things to eat at the Sea Palace. The jellyfish looked on and laughed at him and said he was there to furnish live monkey liver for the princess. The monkey was startled, but he called the tortoise and said that he had forgotten and left his liver hanging on the pine tree to dry. He was worried because it looked

like rain. The tortoise hurriedly offered to take him back to the shore to get the liver. Once back to the shore and up the pine tree, the monkey refused to come down. He said the jellyfish had told him why he had been invited to the Sea Palace. When the tortoise returned, he reported what he had heard. All the bones were taken out of the jellyfish as punishment (No. 20, p. 208). I have eaten raw jellyfish which has been shredded in Niigata. It is considered a summertime delicacy, but I found it tasteless and grisly.

The snake and the frog are the most popular among the miscellaneous animals. The snake is usually considered a sinister being. He may transform himself into a young man and claim a bride, but he can be destroyed in the end (No. 26, p. 69). The frog also can transform itself, but with good intentions. I have never found out why one arrived as a woman at the door of a man one night and asked to be taken in. She was a good worker and he kept her as his wife. When she asked to go home for a memorial service, he followed to see where she lived. She turned into a frog and jumped into a rice paddy. The man tossed a rock into the water in disgust and went home. When his wife came back, she said that a big rock had fallen on the priest while he was reciting the sutra, and he had been hurt badly. The man told his wife to go home because he wanted to live alone once more (No. 20, p. 244).

Other miscellaneous animals which appear ten or more times are the crab, the toad, and the mudsnail. A total of nineteen varieties of miscellaneous creatures appear 224 times.

Insects, too, have their roles in Niigata tales. The bee, the horsefly, the ant, and the louse are mentioned the most often. A young man who set out on a pilgrimage saw children tormenting a bee they had caught. He paid the little money he had for it and set it free. As he continued on his way, he came to a mansion with a big sign set up. It announced that the family would chose as son-in-law a young man who could qualify. The young man inquired about it and was invited in. He was asked to spend the night there and he was served a good meal. In the morning, the head of the family told the young man that if he could state the exact number of bamboo in the thicket behind the house, he would qualify as son-in-law. The young man went outside and stared at the bamboo in a daze. Just then the bee he had rescued came flying to him and buzzed, " Thirty-three thousand three-hundred thirty-three, buzz-buzz." When the master of the house asked him what he had decided, he gave the correct number. He was accepted into the family (No. 7, p. 56).

The horsefly is significant because it may represent the spirit of a man that leaves his body when he sleeps. It can fly off and return again,

leaving the man to think he has had a dream. Two itinerants rested on their trip and one of them fell asleep. When he woke up, he declared he had dreamed he had seen a willow tree by the bank of a river that looked like Shinano River. A jar of gold at its base looked as it would fall into the water. His companion asked to buy the dream so he could say that he had one, so the man sold it to him. After a few days, the buyer set out to look for the willow tree and found the jar of gold pieces. He took it home and lived as a properous man after that (No. 31, p. 128).

Several stories tell how an ant acts as arbitrator and comes off with the big end of the settlement. When a pigeon, a snipe, and a heron were traveling along a road, they found a purse. They quarreled over how to divide its contents. The ant came out of its hole to settle the matter. The story depends upon a wordplay for the names of the birds and the number of coins they would recieve. The heron received three coins, the snipe got four, and the pigeon, eight. The ant took the remaining coins (also a play on words) for payment of his service (No. 3, p. 47). This reminds one of legal fees required in human society.

I have never seen a louse in Niigata, but it seems that lice and fleas in folk tales are continually feuding. Two of them raced to see which could cross a stream first. The flea jumped with all its might, but he landed midstream. The louse fastened onto the legging of a pilgrim who came along and crossed first (No. 33, p. 215).

The spider, the fly, and the centipede all appear ten or more times in the tales. Insects in seventeen varieties show up in 244 stories.

Trees have roles in folk tales as well as a background or setting. A young couple on a pilgrimage to the Grand Shrine of Ise stopped at an inn. They told the innkeeper their names were Matsutarō (Pine Boy) and Matsuko (Pine Girl). In the morning, they said they had spent all their money and could not pay the bill. They were a good looking pair, so the innkeeper trusted them and even gave them more money for the trip. He told them that they could repay the loan when people from their village came the following year. The young couple were relieved and told the name of their village. The innkeeper asked men from that village the next year about the debt. They could not recall any young couple with such names in their village, but they promised to look into the matter when they went home. A village council was called when they returned, but nobody could explain what had happened. Then one man said that there was something like a shrine talisman in the top of one of the two-forked pines on their shrine grounds. He climbed it and found a charm from Ise there. The villagers decided the village owed the debt and they settled it in the following year (No. 32, p. 259).

The chestnut tree, the pine, the persimmon, and bamboo are men-

tioned the most often in the tales, but the cherry, the plum, the cryptomeria, the camillia, the peach, the pear, and the willow tree are named ten or more times. Unnamed trees also furnish settings. A total of thirty-seven varieties of trees are named in 758 instances.

A great number of flowers are also named, but often not named. Plants on the whole are not important as characters in tales, but those mentioned ten or more times are the bean, the gourd, millet, the iris, the mugwort, *daikon* (long radish), wild yam, mellon, the morning glory, the wisteria, and miscanthus. Altogether sixty-four kinds of plants are named in 537 tales.

While mushrooms can hardly be called plants, there is a story about mushroom ghosts. The sound of singing and dancing went on every night behind the village shrine around midnight. Nobody was brave enough to investigate until one brave young man volunteered. He found a throng of Little Folk dancing and he joined them. When he asked them who they were, they said they were mushroom ghosts and asked what he was. He said he was the ghost of a man. They asked what he disliked the most, and he declared that he was afraid of gold coins. Then he asked what they were afraid of. They said it was salty eggplant juice. The dance started up again, and one by one a ghost threw a gold coin at the young man. He cried out as though he were frightened and ran home. He prepared a bucket of salty eggplant juice and took it to the shrine. He poured the juice, a dipperful at a time, onto the heads of the ghosts. They disappeared. When the young man returned in the morning to gather the coins, he saw mushrooms behind the shrine toppled over and limp. The ghosts never came out again (No. 20, p. 358).

The impression should be clear from this study that a hundred eleven varieties of fauna and a hundred-one varieties of flora are well represented in Niigata folk tales. The land seems to teem with animal life and a rich variety of trees and plants is there. One can see that people share roles with them in the region, roles that are of reality.

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