

On Certain Tales of the *Konjaku Monogatari* as Reflections of Japanese Folk Religion

By

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In recent years, American and British folklorists have been coming to see more and more clearly that studies of the various genres of folklore, especially of tale and song, can be barren and even misleading if done with no concern for the context in which the genres exist. New questions have been proposed which threaten to make many past studies obsolete and, sad to say, to make a good amount of the material that has been collected, often with great care, almost useless.

If the object of folktale study should be, for example, the tale as a reflection of culture, or the manifold functions of the tale as it works to control attitudes, form behavior, transmit ethical principles and religious notions; if the study of the tale should be considered as part of the general attempt to determine and define the world view, the *Weltanschauung*, of a certain people, then study of the text alone cannot be sufficient. At least as important are such questions as when the tales were customarily told (During formal religious instruction? In large gatherings? On the spur of the moment, to illustrate a point?), by whom they were told, and to whom (By priests? By mothers to their children? By professional storytellers?), and the reactions of the audience. None of the answers to these questions may be inferred from the text.

A good example of the truth of this point was made to me by the Indian scholar Hari S. Uphadyaya. He told me a tale of a pair of jackals who married their daughter to a king. Since, in India, the parents of the bride cannot accept food within the realm of their new son-in-law, as soon as the ceremony was performed the jackals began running to get out of the kingdom.

Unfortunately, the kingdom was very large, and before they reached the frontier, they died of hunger.

On hearing the story, I laughed. The jackal is, after all, a funny creature, and the idea of their having to run full-speed to get to the frontier seemed not a little ludicrous to me. But Mr. Uphadyaya quickly informed me that this story could bring an Indian to tears. The jackal is not necessarily a comic creature, and the point is that these parents sacrificed their lives to give their daughter a good marriage.

If the tale itself cannot be rightly understood without a knowledge of its cultural context, neither can its motifs or its *dramatis personae*. Fox seems to be present in folktales the world over, but it would be very unwise to conclude from this that it is always the same sort of fox. In Europe, the fox is typically sly and tricky, as in Aesop's fables. Among the pueblo Indians of the Southwestern United States, a distinction is made between three types of foxes, one of which is a trickster, another just a fox (he does not appear in story, myth, or ritual), and the other is a totem animal, after which clans may be named, toward whom prayers may be addressed, and whose tail is often part of the ceremonial costume. And in Japan, as Richard Dorson puts it, "the Japanese fox inhabits a different universe from the fox of Europe, for he is no animal but a demon, a transformer, and a degenerate deity."¹

Given all this, one must wonder about the value of the collections of tale and legends that give only texts, motif numbers, and name and age of informants. Nevertheless, where good contextual material is lacking, we must do our best with these, and they can serve as a basis for determining more precisely the limitations and possibilities of the texts as documents.

One such collection, which is of great value simply by virtue of its age, is the great Japanese work, *Konjaku Monogatari*, "Tales of Long Ago." Attributed to one Minamoto Takakuni, it was probably completed about the year 1075. It is a collection which may well be compared to the *Jatakas*, the *Panchatantra*, and the great medieval collections of *exempla* in Europe. Indeed, with its more than 1,000 items, it is a larger collection even than the world-reknowned *Gesta Romanorum*.

The complete work has unfortunately never been translated

1. Richard M. Dorson, Introduction to *Folktales of Japan*, ed. Keigo Seki (Chicago, 1963), p. xiii.

into English, but a good description of its contents is given in the *Introduction to Classical Japanese Literature*:

The work consists of thirty-one books and is divided into three parts, covering India, China and Japan. Not counting the three books which have been lost, the Indian section (Books I to V) includes 187 tales, the Chinese section (Books VI to X) 180 tales, and the Japanese section (Books XI to XXXI) 736 tales.

Although the work is so voluminous and its contents most varied, each of these three divisions has its own characteristics. The Indian section is concerned with the career and personal doings of Buddha, tales of his disciples, of birds and beasts, of karma, of the Buddhist Nirvana and of Buddha after his entrance there, and of Buddhist benefits, miracles, and folklore. The Chinese section tells of the introduction of Buddhism into China, of the virtue of the sutras, of dutiful sons, and of historical traditions and secular stories. The Japanese section contains tales and traditions concerning the propagation of Buddhism in Japan, the erection of temples and pagodas, the virtue of the sutras, priests, conversion to Buddhism, miracles, karma, the various arts, brave deeds, inevitable retribution, demons and goblins, popular superstitions, practical jokes, thieves, and birds and beasts. Obviously, therefore, the work contains a wealth of exceedingly valuable material for the study of contemporary culture and the folklore of these three countries.²

Certainly, however unreliable such a work as this may be in documenting the world view of the people who read and heard the tales, their informative content is not insignificant. And with regard to the motifs present, surely the presence of such motifs as that of the man swallowed by a fish is significant in that it shows that the Japanese were able to fit it into their conceptual frame of reference, even though we have little evidence from the tale as to how they did so, on what the motif may have meant to them. More on this point later.

Fortunately we do have one good if small sampling of the *Konjaku Monogatari* in English; that made by S. W. Jones under the title of *Ages Ago: Thirty-seven tales from the Konjaku Monogatari Collection*.³ Although thirty-seven tales can hardly be an adequate sampling of a collection that contains over a thousand, the translator has obviously selected his texts with

2. Kokusai Bunka Shinkokai, *Introduction to Classical Japanese Literature* (Tokyo, 1948), pp. 97-98.

3. S. W. Jones, trans., *Ages Ago: Thirty-Seven Tales from the Konjaku Monogatari Collection* (Cambridge, Mass., 1959).

care, has tried to convey through his translation not only the content of the tales, but as much as possible of the form and style as well. He provides good background notes, references, and bibliography. He divides his work in the same manner as the original scrolls were divided, into Indian (1-10), Chinese (11-18), and Japanese (12-37) tales, and maintains something of the proportion of tales of one origin to tales of another.

But a question immediately arises: Were any of these stories known to the folk, or were they known only to the educated, wealthy classes? Both Jones and the Kokusai Bunka Shinkokai agree that some of the stories derive from oral tradition. The *Introduction to Classical Japanese Literature* states, without giving any reasons, that "Many of the tales are derived from various sutras and from earlier collections, histories and literary works, while others, dealing with popular customs and everyday life, have probably been taken from oral tradition and local report."⁴ Jones is more explicit. He says that

According to the Uji-shui preface, written more than a century and a quarter after Takakuni's death, it had been his custom to spend the hot months, fifth to eighth, at Uji. He would sit in his south spring-house, convenient to the scriptural library of the Byodo-in, a big round fan in his hand, barbered more for coolness than for dignity, and would round up passers-by and get them to tell him old stories.⁵

Unfortunately, neither authority seems to know which of the tales are from oral tradition, and neither tells us whether such investigation has even been done. The texts can afford us two major clues: (1) Stories that are obviously close versions of *Jataka* tales can be considered as not having come to the compiler of this collection from oral sources. On the other hand, variations from the original will be worthy of note. (2) Motifs, incidents, or tales that do not derive from Buddhistic literature can be taken as Japanese, and as part of their ancient conceptual framework. Stories involving water-spirits and so forth may give us clues to ways of religious thought among the Japanese folk. Certainly the modifications Buddhism itself had to undergo in order to maintain itself among the Japanese can give an indication of what the Japanese, as opposed to South Asians, consider essential aspects of religious perception.

4. Kokusai Bunka Shinkokai, *Introduction*, p. 98.

5. Jones, *Ages Ago*, p. xvi.

The stories in this collection bear one striking stylistic constant: the endings, which all carry a one-sentence commentary, like the moral at the end of Aesop's fables but not necessarily edifying. The statement is always in the same form: "That...is the tale that has been handed down." The commentary sounds unnecessary to Western ears, but seems to serve a number of purposes, not the least of which is the bringing of the reader or listener back from the world of the tale to the real world by rephrasing the theme in analytical rather than dramatic form. It also sometimes brings the audience full circle to where the tale began. For example, in tale 19, "The Might of Assistant High Priest Jitsu-in of Hieizan," the tale begins

Ages ago, there was at the West Pagoda of Hieizan a man called assistant high priest Jitsuin. . . . He was a very strong man physically.

and ends

That this assistant high priest had such great strength is the tale that has been handed down.⁶

In other tales the final statement adds something more to the narrative, as in tale 21: "That when word of it reached the neighboring provinces the feast was loudly acclaimed is the tale that has been handed down."⁷

Sometimes the final statement interprets what has happened. Tale 36 tells of a man who had been away from home for a long time, and, upon returning, had a dream that his wife was being unfaithful to him with a boy. The wife had the same dream. The statement at the end tells why: "That what caused them to dream as they did was extreme concern is the tale that has been handed down."⁸ (It is a little surprising, by the way, to see such a naturalistic interpretation given of this dream, in the light of the many tales in which dreams have supernatural significance.)

Many of the tales are religious tales; in this case the endings of often make a religious point. Sometimes the endings are didactic; at others, they simply sum up the argument; but in almost all cases they are concise, even aphoristic. This charac-

6. Jones, *Ages Ago*, pp. 57 & 59.

7. Jones, *Ages Ago*, p. 63.

8. Jones, *Ages Ago*, p. 105.

teristic of the *Konjaku Monogatari*, one would suspect, serves not only purposes relevant to the story itself, but serves also as a convenient mnemonic device. Whether this ending is uniquely Japanese is not made clear by the commentators.

Most of the didactic endings are from the Chinese and Indian tales, the tales not known, presumably, to any great extent among the folk. Jones tells us that the India and China stories "have the effect of presenting some of the furniture of the court ladies' inner world as fashionable Buddhists with a smattering of continental philosophies and a passion for T'ang poetry."⁹ In the Japanese religious stories, though, the endings are generally briefer and less didactic. Tale 25 tells of a diviner who could not only foretell the future, but saved a man from the malign ghost of an ex-wife. The ending validates the truth of the story in the classic manner of legendry: "That grandsons of these persons are now living and that descendents of the diviner are now at the Otonio-dokoro is the tale that has been handed down."¹⁰ Tale 29 (of which more later) tells of a time in which human sacrifices were made to a monkey-god, and of a hunter who put an end to it. The tale ends, "That afterwards there was no more living sacrifice and that the province was well content is the tale that has been handed down."¹¹ Tale 31 ends with "That people said he really was a water spirit in human form is the tale that has been handed down."¹² This statement shows not only the belief in water spirits, but the high authority for belief given by the people to what "the people said," and to what "has been handed down." Thus, the ending serves to transform a narration that might otherwise be taken as only an entertainment into a true happening, a legend.

One tale which is full of deeds of witches, magic boxes, and even death as the result of breaking a tabu nevertheless ends with a moral concerning womanly behavior: "That even while making allowances for a woman's nature all who heard of this occurrence blamed the wife is the tale that has been handed down."¹³ So by its not deeming it necessary to point out the supernatural elements, the ending points out how they were taken for granted.

9. Jones, *Ages Ago*, p. xii.

10. Jones, *Ages Ago*, p. 73.

11. Jones, *Ages Ago*, p. 87.

12. Jones, *Ages Ago*, p. 92.

13. Jones, *Ages Ago*, p. 95.

Finally, a traditional symbolic act of filial devotion is explained by the last tale in Jones' sampling. The ending generalizes from the particular case: "Hence that a fortunate man will plant asters and look at them regularly and that an unfortunate man will plant day-lilies and look at them regularly is the tale that has been handed down."¹⁴

Since the endings serve to sum up the theme, it is revealing to compare their key phrases in the Indian and Japanese tales represented. The Indian tales abound in such phrases as "in a previous rebirth," "the way of merit," "the acts of devout monks," "the power of the Lotus," "the true teaching." On the other hand, the Japanese tales show such phrases as "Grandsons are now living," "the province was well content," "all blamed the wife," "the fortunate man." In contrast to "the Buddha taught," in the Japanese tales we have "the people said"; in contrast to the theme of merit acquired in past existences and rewarded in this, we have merit both acquired and rewarded in this life. The Indian religious tales continually look before and after this life, while the Japanese tales speak of supernatural occurrences as part of everyday life.

Tale 29, "How in Mimasaka Province a God was Trapped by a Hunter and Living Sacrifice Stopped" is an extraordinary one, treating of a time when people believed themselves to be under the power of a malevolent monkey god. Apparently the story has a basis in truth, for Brinkley says, speaking of the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries in Japanese history:

The most characteristic feature of the time was a belief in the supernatural power of reptiles and animals. This credulity was not limited to the uneducated masses. The throne itself shared it. Yuryaku, having expressed a desire to see the incarnated form of the *Kami* of Mimoro mountain, was shown a serpent 70 feet long. In the same year a group of snakes harassed a man who was reclaiming a marsh, so that he had to take arms against them and enter into a compact of limitations and of shrine building. Other records of maleficent deities in serpent shape were current, and monkeys and dragons inspired similar terror. Of this superstition there was born an evil custom, the sacrifice of human beings to appease the hostile spirits. The *Kami* of Chuson in Mimasaka province was believed to be a giant ape, and the *Kami* of Koya, a big reptile. The people of these two districts took it in turn to offer a girl at the shrines of these *Kami*, and in the province of

14. Jones, *Ages Ago*, p. 107.

Hida another colossal monkey was similarly appeased. There were further cases of extravagant superstition.¹⁵

The most striking aspect of this tale is that the hero does not vanquish the Kami by supernatural means, but with his dogs and his sword, exactly as he might overcome a human overlord. The monkeys of the Kami's retinue are no match for the dogs; the Kami itself is at the mercy of the hunter's sword. Again we see the supernatural being brought down to the level of the natural. Further, the Kami is not killed but released, so that presumably he is still living in the mountains, still powerful, but bound by his promise not to cause any more lives to be destroyed. Another striking aspect of the story is its psychological insight. The hero is "of so bold a disposition that nothing (holds) any terror for him"; consequently he can dare the Kami, "Here and now, if you are god enough, let's see you strike me dead!" And the Kami cannot. So, without the aid of any benevolent deities, and without magic or witchcraft, humanity embodied in a hero is able to subdue malevolent powers, and thereafter be well content.

In the next-to-last paragraph of the story there is a gratuitous Buddhistic intrusion into the story: "Then the man returned home and he and the girl lived long as husband and wife. The parents were no end pleased with their son-in-law. And the family had nothing at all to fear. What was more, the score from previous existences had apparently been paid off." The final statement is so discordant to the realism of the preceding statements that I would suggest it was probably interpolated by the recorder of the story.

It is interesting to note that, whether or not this tale was in oral tradition at the time of the writing of the *Konjaku Monogatari*, it has since gone so deeply into the repertoire of the people that Robert J. Adams selected it as one of the most popular and widespread of all Japanese folktales. It is, he says, "distributed throughout Japan, twenty-six versions having been recorded."¹⁶ How has it changed in 900 years? The hero has become a priest. The people do not know that their oppressor is a monkey. The chosen victim now lives in a mansion. The

15. Frank Brinkley, *A History of the Japanese People from the Earliest Times to the End of the Meiji Era* (New York, 1915), p. 128.

16. Robert J. Adams, Headnote in *Folktales of Japan*, ed. Keigo Seki (Chicago, 1963), p. 33.

tale mentions that the punishment for not making a sacrifice is a great, ravaging storm. The priest overhears the monkeys singing that they fear Shippei Taro. The song is sung. The priest finds that Shippei Taro is a dog, and between them they kill all the monkeys and a huge baboon.

Primary differences then are that the hunter becomes a priest, and the dog is not trained, but seems almost predestined to be the slayer of the monkeys. The dog is the only character in the story with a name, and the song raises his importance to the story. The man remains the protagonist, though; he no longer challenges the Kami to kill him, and so weakens the point of the story, but in all the theme remains essentially the same as in the *Konjaku*: man overcoming evil spirits by his own power. Fanny Hagin Mayer suggests that this is generally the case in such Japanese tales: "When a demon tries to match wits with a clever bonze, he usually loses out." But the important question for our considerations is whether or not this theme accurately reflects the religious culture of the people who tell the tale. I suggest that it does not; that in real life any person who attempted to defy the spirits out of simple fearlessness and boldness, and with no aid other than his own wits and force would be considered not quite sane, and would be shunned. It seems more likely that the tale is popular for the very reason that it does not reflect the culture; it serves the classic purpose of wish-fulfillment, bringing the supernatural, for the moment, down to the level, or below the level of humanity.

Mrs. Mayer mentions Buddhist religious themes in Japanese tales:

Kannon is thought of as a goddess, and her main attribute is compassion. She takes upon herself the sufferings of her people, rewards unselfish sacrifice.

Jizo: While there is great faith in *Kannon*, *Jizo* fills a greater variety of roles in Japan and a more intimate place in the folk tales. Stories about *Jizo* are often concerned with gambling, *Jizo* himself occasionally trying his hand at it. The image of *Jizo* also lends itself to all kinds of prankster tales.¹⁷

But neither *Kannon* nor *Jizo* appear in the collections of Jones and Seki. At any rate, one might ask whether the *Jizo*

17. Fanny Hagin Mayer, *Religious Elements in Japanese Folk Tales, Studies in Japanese Culture*, ed. Joseph Roggendorf (Tokyo, 1963), pp. 2-3.

of the tales is regarded in the same way as the deity in the temple. I should guess not; otherwise he would not be in the temple. I would guess that here again we have the tale in which the god appears serving a compensatory function rather than reflecting the culture. Likewise, Mrs. Mayer says that "of the multitude of Shinto deities, Inari (God of the rice field) and Yama-no-Kami (the mountain deity) occur most frequently in the folktale";¹⁸ but, again, they are not present in the collections of Jones and Seki. So either Mrs. Mayer is wrong in her statements, or she supplies us with one indication that the sampling given us by S. W. Jones and Keigo Seki do not, as a whole, give a good picture of the religious elements in Japanese tales. The latter is more probably the case.

Buddhism, of course, does play an important part in the life of the Japanese people, though radical changes were made in it as the Japanese fitted it into their own cultural framework. Beardsley comments that not only Buddhism but "whatever cults have been imported from abroad certainly have been reworked to suit the Japanese cultural context rather than remaining foreign bodies attached to Japanese life." He goes on to show how often people belong to two or three different religions at the same time, worshipping at Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples.¹⁹

Thus Mrs. Mayer can suggest with confidence that "the karma relationship, *en*, which refers to a tie depending upon a spiritual affinity in a previous life, also becomes a subject of tales."²⁰ This certainly occurs in the *Konjaku Monogatari*, perhaps in the majority of cases, but, as shown above, the tales in which it appears are usually religious *exempla*, or the element is thrown in gratuitously, with no real function in the tale.

Mrs. Mayer goes on to say that "there are folktales which cannot be classified as either of Buddhist or Shinto provenience but contain elements of both traditions."²¹ In the tales of the *Konjaku Monogatari* revealed to us by Jones, this mixing of and change in the two religions can be seen as the injection of Buddhist elements into stories otherwise not Buddhist at all, as

18. Mayer, *Religious Elements*, p. 5.

19. Richard K. Beardsley, "Religion and Philosophy," a chapter in *Twelve Doors to Japan*, eds. J. W. Hall and R. Beardsley (New York, 1965), pp. 310-349.

20. Mayer, *Religious Elements*, p. 7.

21. Mayer, *Religious Elements*, p. 8.

in the last-mentioned tale; or the characters may change, as in tale 5, wherein the hare, who in the Jatakas is Buddha himself, becomes only a hare.²²

From all the above discussion, it becomes evident that religion and folk belief do play a prominent part in Japanese tales. But the question remains, do the tales accurately mirror Japanese religion and beliefs as they exist in the culture?

Mrs. Mayer believes that they do. She asserts quite positively that the tales "contain elements of instruction and points of view which reflect the beliefs and practices of the common people."²³ She ends her analysis with the conclusion:

Whatever the conclusions scholars of the history or philosophy of religion may arrive at upon studying the folk tales, even the most casual reader cannot fail to catch a revealing glance of the soul of the common people. Closeness to nature, humor, and compassion seem to be characteristic of religious elements as revealed in the folk tales and, surely, something of these outlooks has remained with the Japanese even in the more complicated present.

But the "casual reader" who reads Jones or Seki does not find himself able to ascribe these characteristics to the religious elements in the tales—they exist in the tales, yes, but not in the religious elements of the tales. A test of how well the Jones sampling of the *Konjaku Monogatari* mirrors the religious culture of the Japanese may be made by assembling the religious motifs from the tales and trying to construct a model of Japanese religion from them. Exempla, being as they are doctrinal, are omitted for the purposes of the illustration, and only the tales from the Japan section are analysed.²⁴

Tale 25: Dead woman's body does not decompose. — Glow and creaking sounds in dead woman's house. — Malign ghost haunts husband. — Diviner removes haunt. — Fear on entering house of the dead. — Cure: Get on corpse's back and ride it like a horse, pull hard on its hair, and never let go. Recite a formula. — Corpse awakes at midnight. — Man rides corpse through the countryside. — Corpse subsides at cockcrow.

Tale 27: Boy prays before murder: "In what I have this night planned out of filial duty, let not my heart fail me." Thinks: "Retribution upon my father's enemy is something permitted by heaven." The governor confirms it: "Is not retribution against a father's enemy sanctioned by heaven?" and "It was a pious

22. E. B. Cowell, ed., *The Jataka*, III, 34-37, no. 316; Jones, *Ages Ago*, pp. 15-17.

23. Mayer, *Religious Elements*, p. 1.

24. Mayer, *Religious Elements*, p. 16.

act. To punish at will a man so closely guarded by his retainers truly appears to have been a dispensation of heaven." The ending also agrees: "That the others expressed assent is the tale that has been handed down."

Tale 29: Monkey god and snake god. — Festival, and virgin sacrifice; the girl ceremonially dieted for a year. — Keep the straw ropes drawn.

Tale 30: Thinking that Buddha and the gods had taken dog form to save her.

Tale 31: Water spirit as a little old man. Vanishes at edge of pond. — Man catches water spirit. — Spirit dissolves into water.

Tale 32: Ghost woman sends man on errand. — Man breaks witch tabu and dies.

Tale 37: Spirit that guards the skeleton of boy's father. — Spirit rewards filial devotion. — Reward: whatever is to the body's advantage, he will dream.

From this list we may construct a model:

The Japanese remember a time when they sacrificed to monkey gods. They believe in malignant spirits, of corpses that do not decompose and that gallop about the countryside at night. Diviners may find a solution, though. Also, Buddha and the gods might take the form of an animal to save a person in trouble. There are ghost women. If a ghost or demon menaces one, there are no benevolent deities to help; one may conquer them by wits and strength, or may die from breaking a tabu imposed by them. The water spirit is a harmless little old man. Filial devotion is estimable; so much so that it is permitted to kill your father's enemies.

Of course there is much that does reflect the culture here; what the tales do not tell us is to what extent. What is not shown? There is nothing here of the important calendar festivals of New Year, planting, and harvesting, nor of the gods associated with them. There is nothing of the important household gods, of the gods of field, mountain, or sea. There is very little at all of the religious life of the people, the birth, marriage and death ceremonies, the beliefs as are depicted for us so vividly in such works as Yanagita's *Japanese Manners and Customs in the Meiji Era*,²⁵ or in the studies summarized in the Review of Review section of *Asian Folklore Studies*.

25. Kunio Yanagita, *Japanese Manners and Customs in the Meiji Era*, trans. C. S. Terry (Tokyo, 1957), 183-198, 255, 278, 291-316.

Nevertheless, Richard Dorson seems to be in essential agreement with Mrs. Mayer. While not going so far as to say that even the "casual reader" can catch the "soul of the people" in the tales, he does venture that "In the Japanese tales... the sense of fiction and fantasy is much less pronounced (than in the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*). As the legends are close to rituals and beliefs still prevalent in the villages and even the cities, so are the fictions close to the legends. Within the *mukashi-banashi* are embedded the codes and creeds that Japanese folk have lived by since the dawn of their history."²⁶

The fictions *are* close to the legends, and the legends may well be close to the beliefs, but my point is that one cannot tell how close until one learns the culture, including beliefs and rituals, from a source outside the tales. If this is the case, then the tales are at least distorting mirrors, magnifying the casual belief, reducing the crucial ones or leaving them out altogether. And this observation brings us full circle to the contention with which this paper began: that a tale text is in itself no guide to a culture; that, indeed, the text itself cannot be well understood without previous familiarity with the culture, and without knowledge of how the tale was told and how the audience responded. This is not to say that the study of a text is valueless; the analyses above show that there is an informational gain to be had; it is rather a plea for more complete study of the tale in its context, to the end that the information may be better understood; that it may be seen in its true proportion.

26. Dorson, *Folktales*, pp. xiii-xiv.