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Reality in Japanese Folktales

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In his book "Märchen und Wirklichkeit" (Wiesbaden 1956) Lutz Röhrich examined the folktales with regard to their content of believed reality, in other words, he wanted to find an answer to the question: how much of the fairy tales was or still is the object of religious belief. Among other things he found that the aitiological or explanatory tales form the broadest basis which connects the tales of the Western and westernized world with the world of the primitive peoples. In them a lasting phenomenon of nature is taken as the result of a certain single event that happened long ago to explain the present condition. Concerning the degree of religious reality which they contain, Röhrich puts the tales of the civilized West in contrast to those of the primitives and only in passing, for lack of more spade work done among them and translations available, referring to the old and great South and East Asian civilizations. Only with regard to India is the author in a more favorable position. Deriving his information on the narratives of the Hindu from the book of Hertel "Indische Märchen" (Düsseldorf, 1954), Röhrich is of the opinion that for the Hindu there is no clearly defined boundary line between history and fairy tales.¹

* This paper was read in a session of the Asian Folklore Conference held June 21–25, 1966, at Indiana University, Bloomington, Ind., U.S.A.

1. "Für die Hindu verschwimmen Geschichte und Märchen, Wirklichkeit und Märchen völlig ineinander. Alle Erzählungen ihrer grossen Literaturen gelten ihnen als gleich wahr oder zumindestens als gleich möglich." Quoted by Röhrich, l.c., p. 167, note 50.

The purpose of the present paper is to survey the situation of the Japanese folktales as objects of religious beliefs and expressions of such. In the Western world rationalizing tendencies, out to destroy the world of gods, ghosts, spirits and devils, were already at work at the site of its cultural cradle in Greek antiquity. We can see how great a progress these tendencies had made in the fifth century B.C. if we look at the attitude towards the supernatural world in the tragedies from Aeschylus through Sophocles to Euripides within the one Periclean age of democratic Athens.² The inquisitive mind of the Greek philosophers and later Christianity with its rigid monotheism and other monotheistic religions dealt mortal blows to the fairy tale as reality.

The historic auspices under which the high civilizations of Asia entered modern times were different from those of the West and were not even the same for different peoples of the East. Here we are concerned with Japan. Were there any myth destroying forces at work? In the first official recording of myths from 712 (*Kojiki*) and 720 (*Nihon shoki*) we are told that there were myriads of gods. At about the same time Japan became to a great extent a cultural dependency of China where Confucianism was the State religion. Although Confucianism was a philosophy for this world, devised to create a humane society, it had no mythoclastic leanings. Mahayana Buddhism contributed generously in every country where it came to the already existing pantheons.

The national character with which Japan entered the cosmopolitan modern age was given its final pregation during the 250 years or so of the Tokugawa time which lasted from 1501-1867. This holds true also of the religious attitude. The centuries old hegemony of Buddhism was succeeded by that of Confucianism in its threefold forms, that is classic Confucianism and Confucianism of the school of Chu-hsi of the Sung and that of Wang Yang-ming of the Ming. This turn was of consequence in so far as elements of Confucian philosophy and ethics were used in building up a Shinto theology by the proponents of a Shinto revival movement. Among its leaders were Kamo

2. cf. D.W. Lucas: The Greek Tragic Poets, 2nd ed., New York, 1964.

Mabuchi, Motoori Norinaga and Hirata Atsutane. The latter was the most radical when he claimed, 1) Japan is the country which was created by the gods before all others; 2) Amaterasu, the Sun Goddess, is the greatest deity among the gods and goddesses of all religions of the world; 3) every Japanese national is of divine descent; 4) the Japanese race excels all others not only in degree of excellence, but as a metaphysically special being of its own, and, to quote Hirata: "The Emperor is the true son of Heaven and as such entitled to reign over the four seas and the ten thousand countries."³ The statesmen of the soon to follow Meiji Restauration based the State on a mythological foundation. This was done in the Constitution promulgated in 1889, through the school education and in as many other ways as could be elaborated in details. With the worship of the divine Emperor went together compulsory worship at numerous shrines of gods which were related to the Imperial lineage. In terms of industrialisation, commercialization, general education, and military might Japan became a world power. At the same time, the world of myth was kept intact and sacred as in no other century before and made the very cornerstone of the country's political structure.⁴ To this phenomenon there is hardly a parallel found in the world history of the 19th century.

From such historical premises we can only expect a favorable climate for the religious acceptance of much of the content of the traditional narratives.⁵ If we take all forms of narratives with a supernatural content together, we may safely say that in terms of numbers and popularity of published collections

3. cf. D.C. Holtom: *The National Faith of Japan. A Study in Modern Shintô*. London, 1938; p. 51.

4. cf. D.C. Holtom: *Modern Japan and Shintô Nationalism*. Revised ed., Chicago, 1947.

5. Literature on Japanese folktales:

Keigo Seki: *Types of Japanese Folktales* (470 types). *Asian Folklore Studies*, 25. 1966, pp. 1-220;

Fritz Rumpf: *Japanische Volksmärchen. Märchen der Weltliteratur*, Jena, 1938; Keigo Seki: *Folktales of Japan*, in: *Folktales of the World*, Chicago, 1963; Yanagita Kunio: *Japanese Folktales. A revised selection*. Transl. by Fanny Hagin Mayer, Tokyo, 1966; Fritz Bierbüsse: *Die Schneehütte. Volks-erzählungen aus Nord-Japan*. *Asian Folklore Studies*, Monograph No. 3, Tokyo, 1965.

the legends occupy the first place. In the Introduction to his book "Folk Legends of Japan" (Rutland, Vermont and Tokyo, 1962) Richard M. Dorson, quoting Yanagita Kunio, the Japanese pioneer in folklore research, wrote as the first sentence: "Japan possesses more legends than any other country in the world." To quote Dorson again: "...The legend is therefore a true story in the minds of the folk who retain it in their memory and pass it on to the next generation." Tales tied up with certain localities are told because people believe them. In line with the topic of this paper we have to answer the question: are there in Japan genuine Märchen at all, tales that are pure fiction? They exist. But since the greatest number of the narratives are legends with localness, we can expect that also among the tales without such localness are many which do not essentially differ from legends. They relate supernatural events which did or did not happen within the topographic limits of a given village community but just somewhere. If they are fiction, it is still possible that the agents in them are objects of belief and realities. Folktales are narrative art in the true sense of the word, however simple and incipient, and their world can be an expression of creed as are works of high art, let us say, as the murals by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel.

After some theoretical preliminaries we can now look closer into the treasury of Japanese folktales. Not that there are no secular tales in Japan. If we leave the legends out, it could be that the majority of tales is secular. Since the collection of tales which has so far yielded about 10,000, is still going on, as is their classification, we can not yet weigh at present the percentage of religious tales against that of secular tales.

First something on the aitiological tales of Japan. Lutz Röhrich writes and I quote in translation: "By far the greatest number of nature explanatory tales with us and with the primitives concern the world of animals." Seki Keigo informs us that among 10,674 collected Japanese tales there are 556, that is 5.21% of the total, which explain the origin of animals. Birds occupy the largest place and they are also popular art motives. In the aitiological tales dealing with animals the physical appearance and the habits of animals are explained, and the call of birds is interpreted. There is much aitiology

for entertainment, to be sure, but many tales are more. Some examples. The call of a bird, a kind of a cuckoo (*hototogisu*), is explained as follows: a younger brother gives some wild yam to his elder brother. The latter suspects that his younger brother has given him a bad part of yam and has eaten the good part himself. The elder brother stabs his younger brother in the stomach or the younger brother cuts his stomach open to show that only the bad parts of yam are in there. The remorseful elder brother turns into a cuckoo who cries as "*ototo-koishi*" which means "dear younger brother." This pattern of an explanation is found frequently: a man repenting his sin changes into an animal. The call or habit or a quality of that bird or animal reminds us of a former sinful behavior for which the man was turned into an animal. The doctrine of Karma comes to our mind. One type of tales refers expressly to reincarnation. In a former incarnation skylark was a gambler. He lost in a gambling game with the rat. After he pays his debt off, the rat insists that the skylark still owes him. So the skylark cannot stay on earth but cries in the sky.

It is mostly lack of obedience and filial piety towards parents which called for the punishment. Two other types deserve our attention. First, the Mole and the Frog. When there were seven suns, the mole shot six of them down because of the unbearable heat. In punishment therefore moles live in the ground. We find here a trace of a myth widely diffused in Southeast and East Asia.⁶ The other type of tales to which I wish to draw attention, explains the origin of fleas, lice, mosquitoes and other vermin: a demon (or stepmother) is killed and the fragments of the flesh of the corpse turn into fleas, lice and mosquitoes; mucus turns into frogs; blood into fleas; and ashes into flies. Here again we can see a mythological background.

Animal tales other than explanatory are entertaining by showing how animals outsmart each other and how they are grateful to man for help received. Their setting often shows

6. This myth was included in an article by Rudolf Rahmann: Quarrels and Enmities between the Sun and the Moon. A Contribution to the Mythologies of the Philippines, India and the Malay Peninsula. In: Folklore Studies, Vol. XIV, 1955.

a typical Japanese religious atmosphere, as when a badger changes into a Jizô statue on the roadside. There is however more than entertainment when we are told about *yama-uba*, that is female mountain-ghosts, or when demons do evil to travelers on mountain-passes. The belief that mountain-passes are infested by dangerous spirits and ghosts and demons which have to be placated by offerings is very old. The same is true of the belief in the King of the Dragon-palace at the bottom of the sea. Little shrines in honor of the Dragon-king are still to be found in every fishing village.

Here is an example how the world of demons enters folktales: The Younger Sister who is a Female Demon.⁷ The brother tells his parents that his younger sister is a female demon, but they do not believe him and drive him from home. The brother on his journey learns of his parents' calamity through a blur in his mirror and returns home. There is no one left in the house except his younger sister. She tells him to keep beating a drum while she is out. Two rats, who are the incarnations of his dead parents's spirits, appear and beat the drum for him while he escapes. The demon-sister runs after brother whose wife learns of her husband's danger from a blur in her mirror and sets her eagle and hawk (or tiger) free to save husband. The demon-sister is killed by those birds or by the tiger.

Now something on magic beliefs. The strong belief in the magic power of sentences from sutras becomes apparent in a tale of the acolyte of a Buddhist priest. The acolyte (*kozô*) is pursued by a demon or a *yama-uba* (lit. mountain-witch). He takes refuge in the temple. The master or *oshô* writes phrases from a sutra all over his body to protect him from the demon. The priest forgets to write on *kozô*'s ears, which therefore are bitten off.

A favorite theme of tales is the supernatural power of foxes to create an unbelievably confused situation. The belief in such foxes was still alive in modern times when big newspapers reported on cases in which foxes had played their tricks and the belief may sporadically still exist among the older

7. Keigo Seki, *Types of Japanese Folktales*, 1.c., p. 48, No. 84.

8. Keigo Seki, *Types of Japanese Folktales*, 1.c., p. 44, No. 77.

generation. The fox is a mountain-spirit and belongs to the whole complex of the belief in the mountain-god which again belongs to the oldest stock of Japanese religion and is still widely worshipped in our time.

An intriguing problem is the great amount of tales with supernatural marriage partners. Bridegrooms are the snake, the demon, the monkey, the dog, the horse; brides are the snake, the frog, the clam, the fish, the crane, the maid from the Dragon-palace. Man-animal marriages belong everywhere in the world to the oldest tale types. A human child is sometimes born and marital love exists, but the marriage is no lasting relationship. In Japan, however, we find tales which cannot be brought in parallel to any of Stith Thomson's Tale Types. First, we do not find in Japan tales in which such a supernatural or unnatural marriage partner is only an enchanted human being which can be disenchanting. The animal is and remains an animal. In Japan a marriage in which the bridegroom is a snake, a demon, a monkey, a dog or a horse is considered a misfortune from which deliverance is obtained either through magic or with the help of another animal by natural means. In cases of marriages in which the bride is a snake, a frog, a clam, a fish, a maid from the Dragon-palace, a crane, a fox, or a cat, the animal nature of the bride is for a time not recognized and the marriage is at first considered happy. The children therefrom are human children. Later the bride changes again into an animal or a supernatural maid, when her true nature is discovered by the other partner at the moment he disregards some restriction placed upon him by his bride.

The fact that in many versions of man-animal marriages a demon or a supernatural maid can be substituted for an animal marriage partner leads us in the right direction when we try to find the ideological soil on which such tales are growing. From India all over Asia we find in the *Weltanschauung* a man-animal relationship different from that in the Western world. Indian philosophy, philosophy taken here in a broad sense, takes all beings apparent in the cosmos as only transient phenomena without metaphysically fixed boundary lines. The Aristotelian categories of being (*esse* εἶναι) and of essence (*essentia* οὐσία) which are the very basis of Western thinking, are unknown in the Eastern world. Indian gods change to animals through in-

carnations. Of Vishnu for instance five *avataras* are known: a fish, a tortoise, a boar, a man-lion, a dwarf *avatara*. For South and East Asia we need not go along with Lutz Röhrich who finds that tales of man-animal mixing are archaic, and who explains them with an archaic symbiotic *Lebensgefühl* towards all forms of life. We find rather that in the East the specifically human being is here less absolute than it is in the Mediterranean culture and its derivatives.

The same relative openness of human nature we find also in numerous Japanese tales of supernatural birth. As an example, Uriko Hime, the Melon Maid. A girl born from a melon becomes a good weaver. Wedding preparations are made. Amano jaku, a Buddhist devil, kills Urikohime, or ties her to a persimmon tree. He puts on her dress and continues weaving instead of her, disguised as the maid, and even a wedding takes place. Urikohime is liberated, Amano jaku is chased away, and the real marriage follows. Or the tale of the Bamboo Sprout Boy who grants to the boy who has found him seven wishes and ascends to Heaven. The position of man in the cosmos shows great differences in different cultural areas. The Indian existentialism seems to have occupied much ground all over Asia and this probably not only through Mahayana Buddhism.

In connection with these reflections on Indian philosophy a word should be said about magic and the Buddhist priest. In Japanese tales the Buddhist priest is a superior being with special magic powers. In a tale a man marries a ghost woman. His child becomes a Buddhist priest. In another tale a child is carried off by an eagle and brought up on a tree in the temple compound. A Buddhist priest then takes care of the child which later becomes a priest himself. We can trace a direct line from the *guru* in Hinduism and the Buddhist priest in Japan and elsewhere. About the *guru* or 'teacher' I quote here from Dubois:⁹ "*Guru* as a rule rank first in society. They often receive tokens of respect, or rather adoration, that are not offered to the gods themselves. And this is not surprising when one remembers that every Hindu is fully persuaded that

9. Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies. Transl. and ed. by Henry Beauchamps, 2nd ed., Oxford, 1899, p. 124, ff.

under certain circumstances, the *guru* have authority even over the celestial powers.”

And now the last question: are folktales in Japan still believed at present? No opinion poll on this question has yet been conducted. If it had been, we would find that the old traditions are not yet all gone. Great individual differences in “credulity” would become manifest, many people without any connection with the old traditions, others still standing in them knee deep, others higher up, some even up to their neck. There will be myths as long as there is mankind on earth. In our shrinking world the new myths show a tendency to a worldwide diffusion. We need only think of the cargo cult. And how about the League of Nations, the United Nations, the socialist paradise? Are these myths or realities?