

The Fox Spirit: The Japanese Trickster?

It takes a fox to know a fox

-Ts'ung-jung lu, case 24

Introduction:

The trickster spirit plays a role in cultures that span the globe. These spirits have a variety of natures: impish, malevolent, or even good-spirited (according to their ways). In tales tricksters serve as a warning to adhere to social customs. In doing so they can reveal intrinsic elements of a culture that they appear in. Trickster spirits in Japan tend to take the form of a shape-shifting fox spirit. I argue that in Japanese folklore the *kitsune* (fox) is a trickster spirit. In examining two fox tales and a related fragment I look to categorize the fox as a trickster being. I will begin with an overview of the “trickster” motif in the context of other folklore traditions. In more detail, I will examine the similarities and differences between those traditions and the two Japanese tales. Do all trickster spirits share the same traits regardless of culture or are certain behaviors more common in different areas of the world?

Trickster Motif

What makes a trickster a trickster? It is a motif that has found life in cultures around the world from the Greek god Hermes, to Coyote in Native American tales (Hyde, 6). Each of these tricksters are bound to their respective cultures but share a variety of characteristics. They inhabit the area between worlds. The living and the dead, the mortal and the divine, the urban and wilderness, each of these are distinct

realms. These realms are closed and distinctly separated from one another, yet the trickster manages to dart between them. Whether it is because he is a god, or simply clever, he is able to cross between the two with little difficulty.

The trickster is often depicted as a being that bends the rules of reality for his own plans. This can result in disaster for the trickster and cost him dearly, or benefit the rest of reality. This sets up an interesting conundrum; the trickster can be the most powerful character in the story and yet the weakest. It is a being that tricks everyone, but in return is tricked. The Raven from Native American folklore often tricks and then in turn is tricked.

[Raven] came to a place where many people were encamped fishing... He entered a house and asked what they used for bait. They said, "Fat." Then he said, "Let me see you put enough on your hooks for bait," and noticed carefully how they baited and handled their hooks. The next time they went out, he walked off behind a point and went underwater to get this bait. Now they got bites and pulled up quickly, but there was nothing on their hooks.

Eventually the fishermen steal his beak and he has to pull off an elaborate ruse to get it back. (Hyde, 21).

The context in which he is able to travel gives color to his character. If the way between the realms is open then he works as a page, carrying messages

between the two. However, if the way is closed and guarded then he acts as a thief, surviving by his wits. In both cases he has the characteristics of each place and blurs the line between the two. He can play the part that the storyteller needs. He can serve as a warning against excess, a comic relief, the clever hero, or even a creator. This flexibility illuminates both the trickster and the society in which he operates.

The trickster enables culture to endure and grow. Prometheus brought fire to man and taught them to survive, the Coyote teaches the People everything, and the Raven is the thief of fire and daylight. These beings both harm and help people, whether inadvertently or deliberately. There is no set of characteristics all found in each case. In other words, it is difficult to pick a single trait that defines a trickster. Instead they are beings of paradox: amoral and moral, helpful and harmful. Paul Radin perhaps describes the being of the trickster the best,

“[The] Trickster is at one and the same time creator and destroyer, giver and negotiator, he who dupes others and who is always duped himself...He knows neither good nor evil yet he is responsible for both. He possesses no values, moral and social...yet through his actions all values come into being” (Hyde, 10).

The trickster needs a foil for balance. There must be an order to rebel against. Whether this is another character in the story, or an agreed upon mythos, the trickster cannot exist in a vacuum. There he becomes a simple thief or a wanderer. A trickster holds a special place on the edge of society: he creates a

boundary by existing and yet crosses that boundary with his actions. There is an intrinsic connection between the trickster and the world in which he resides. In order to trick others, there must be certain rules in place which he can take advantage of: without this context the trickster loses most of his meaning. If everyone is a trickster then none of them can be.

In an interesting note, the figure of the trickster only seems to exist in polytheistic religions. The grey zone in which the trickster normally resides is obliterated by the inherent dichotomy in monotheistic faiths. In this worldview there is no room for a grey area. There is a clear evil (a devil figure) and a clear good (God). As a response the inherent 'tricky' nature usually gets assigned to evil, turning him into a peddler for power at a cost. Here the trickster is seen exploiting the greed and lust of humanity to trick them into dooming themselves. Thus these traits will not be taken into account when comparing the fox spirit to other tricksters.

The Fox in Japan

In a general sense for a being to be classified as a trickster he must possess the following: living in-between worlds, a foil to work around and against, and finally to exist in accordance with his own set of rules. In the following two tales, the fox

spirit of Japan will be examined to see if it fits this description. Can a Kitsune reliably be called a trickster? Or is it another being altogether?

The fox is an animal that is both feared and respected by the Japanese populace. One hand they can act as the messengers of Inari, the god of prosperity, yet on the other they can act as vengeful demons. The context on how they are viewed changes throughout the different eras of Japan. The Kamamura period (1185-1333 AD) contains the first commonly told tale of the fox: *Tamamo no Mae* (The Fox and the Jewel) (Bathgate, 3-5). However, there are reports written from the ninth century and most likely this beliefs date back before even then. (xi, 20 and Smyers, 15). In the Muromachi and Momoyama periods (1333-1568 and 1568-1600) the Fox began to adapt a more prominent role is possession and stories of *Kistune-tsukai* began to appear more



Figure 1: Inari's Messngers

frequently. These Fox sorcerers set the stage for accusations of *Kitsune-mochi* or fox-owners in the Edo period. This shift from individual trickster spirits and solitary sorcerers to entire families allows a glimpse into the shifting nature of the fox spirit.

The belief in the trickster nature of the fox originated in China and had no problem being accepted by the animistic nature of the Japanese religion (Casal, 1). This animism was a form of shamanism that “was a powerful phenomena throughout all of Asia, including China, Korea, and Japan” (Behringer, 29). The records from this time period are spotty at best and fabrications at the worst. The fox began to develop its reputation as a mischievous trickster and a spirit of high intellect. These traits were then extrapolated to flesh out the character of foxes in tales. Kitsune can be malicious and even cruel. However, they abide by a distinct set of rules. When they have accepted the aid of a human they vow to repay that debt, even at the cost of physical or emotional anguish.

The fox resides along multiple boundaries, both in the tales and in Japan. The common word for fox in Japanese is *kitsune* (狐). However, there is a secondary word that sometimes refers to the fox: *yakan* (野干), breaking apart the individual kanjis they can loosely be translated as field and interference respectively. Already the word in Japanese reflects this concept of living on the boundary. The fox has a massive natural range of habitats, stretching across the entire northern hemisphere (Smyers, 87). It inhabits a “gray zone” between the forest and a field (Bathgate, 19). The literal translation implies that the early Japanese knew this and recognized that the fox tends to spread wherever people do.

The fox represented the wild part of nature that human beings could never control. They could clear out forests and work the land, but off in the distance the

fox would be there, sitting and watching. This sense of the domestic sphere versus the wild sphere would go on to influence the preconceptions of the fox. Any attempts to domesticate the fox like the common dog meet in failure because, "Foxes refuse to be domesticated. A fox, even raised from birth by humans, never relaxes and hates being touched" (Smyers, 97). The domesticated wolf (the dog) came to resemble the domestic sphere. In contrast the fox (and still does) represent this concept of the mystical and magical, a place where human beings could belong.

These fringe zones between urban and rural provide the perfect habit for foxes to propagate. The fox represents the nature unattainable by humans, yet the fox still possesses human-like qualities as discussed later. The fox does not fit in either sphere but works in both. It is the lord of the in-between for the mundane and the mystical. In this regard it certainly meets the bottom rung for being considered a trickster. In the following stories, the nature of the fox will be examined to see if they manage to qualify for the title of a Trickster.

The Two Tales

Foxes mirrored Japanese customs and traditions. The sense of loyalty, both in the traditional vertical direction but also in the horizontal direction was incorporated even among these spirits. Loyalty to higher stations and obligation to one's neighbors is present in Japanese society are represented by foxes.

Long, long ago, a man delivered a fox-cub from the hands of some boys, who had caught it and were going to kill it. The little fox joyfully scampered away. Shortly afterwards the man's only son fell seriously ill...only the liver of a live fox could cure the boy...late that night a stranger came to the house, bringing a fresh fox-liver for the boy... the boy of course recovered, but the parents still did not know who might have sent them the liver. Late one night the stranger appeared to the father and explained that in gratitude for the earlier delivery of their cub he and the mother had decided to kill it, so that its liver might save the kind-hearted man's son. The boy's parents in turn showed their gratitude by erecting a shrine to the *Fox-Inari* (Casal, 19).

This story highlights the sense of obligation that existed in Japanese society. Even more than this, the humanization and characterizing of even fox *bakemono* serve to act as an example to the Japanese people. Additional tales show how foxes avenge their own families, hold honor and tradition important and generally act like human beings in their natural habitat (Casal, 26,30). This serves a dual role: to show that even animal spirits understand civilization in their own domains and to establish fox spirits as more than malevolent demons. They are complex spirits.

In this tale the fox's nature that acknowledges its debts and seeks to pay them, even if that payment is a life. It is operating within the rules of their society. The fox operates within its boundaries but in this story they cannot be said to be a

'trickster' spirit. Instead they assume the role of a magical being that had occurred a debt that must be paid. The foxes assume a lawful neutral position. They do not help man out of kindness, but because they have to. They do their duty: nothing more, nothing less.

The shape shifting nature of the fox also represented the personalities of people themselves. By the Edo era, the fox could have been taken more as a symbol: a device used to reveal a man's inner character. This concept is best represented by the Japanese tale of the Lucky Teakettle (*bunbuku chagama*) from the Edo period.

Much like any folktale it is subject to change over different areas. However, the story itself is widespread throughout Japan and always involves a *bakemono* the most famous of these being the fox spirit. This story is representative and embodies of the idea of the fox and its different meanings in the Edo period.

One day a man came across a fox trapped in a trap, feeling sorry for it the man went over and freed the fox. Knowing it had an incurred a debt, the fox promises the man that he will repay his kindness by giving him prosperity. The fox would remain obligated to the man until he joined the prosperous elites (*chōja*) of the village. Delighted the man went home and the fox followed. The next day the man sat outside his house with the fox. As they saw a Buddhist monk approaching the fox turned into a teakettle. The Buddhist monk noticed the beautiful teakettle and bought it from the man. Later that night, when the monk

attempted to heat some water, the fox could no longer bear the heat of the fire and ran away howling with pain. The next day the fox returned to the kind man and again prepared itself to be bought and sold. At this moment a wealthy samurai is passing through the village. As he walked down the road the fox transformed itself into a prized warhorse. Stunned that such a horse could be found in this tiny village the samurai immediately offered to buy the stallion from the man. Delighted with all of his new wealth the man immediately agreed and the samurai led the horse back to his castle. The next morning the samurai attempted to ride the fox (still in the form of a horse) and the fox instantly collapsed underneath the weight of a man. The fox transformed back into its true form and scampered back to the man. The man by now had achieved great wealth through the selling of the fox and released it from its debt of obligation. Afterwards, the man sets aside part of his wealth to venerate the fox and the god *Inari*.¹

In the Edo there was a substantial rise (or perhaps better record keeping) in the number of reported families with connections to a fox spirit. It was here that the fox was first associated with the god of prosperity: *Inari*. *Inari* was an extremely popular god and was rapidly spread all across Edo Japan. Much like the fox spirit he was associated with many different groups and practices. The god can appear as either gender but commonly takes the masculine pronoun. Smyers noted in her

¹For a more in depth reading please view *The Fox's Craft* p. 101-103

studies that the varieties of *Inari* at this time seem endless” (Smyers, 22). The fox spirit acted as *Inari*’s messengers, forging the strong connection between the fox and wealth. *Inari* was repurposed as the, “nationally renowned god of financial success. It was also taken as the symbol and agent of a corrosive and corrupting profit-motive” (Bathgate, 118-119). *Inari* was and still is a powerful deity that is both loved and feared (Smyers, 8). The fox spirit gained both as a result of its closer ties to the deity.

This association with wealth seems to be the last mention of the fox. Here the spirit is associated with jealous neighbors eyeing the success of other people in the village. In an effort to explain their own shortcomings they sought out an explanation and settled on the shifting nature of the fox. This would explain why the samurai and the monk did not return to confront the man. Rather than an actual fox spirit, the fox represented the sneaky nature of the man himself. In effect he became a fox in his dealings with his fellow man. He became a trickster and used the ‘fox’ to represent this.

The foil in which he operates against is the sense of obligation present within Japanese culture. In effect the opponent the fox operates against is society. Thus constrained, it still manages to cross-boundaries and trick mortals.



Figure 2: The Inner Nature of a Man

Here it uses its wit and intellect to make one mortal wealthy at the expense of others. However, as again in the previous story, the fox acts in a very law-abiding manner. In this tale the fox becomes a paradox: fulfills his debt to the man but in doing so breaks his 'word' to the others. He embodies the trickster's traditional sense of contradiction.

Fragments of another story

The fox also appears as a servant to a powerful fox-sorcerer. *Kitsune-tsukai* is a type of man that began to commonly appear in the early 15th century (Bathgate, 138). They sought out and used fox-spirits in order to increase their own standing. A man wishing to become a *Kitsune-tsukai* would first attempt to go out and seek a pregnant fox-mother. He would then bring her food and other offerings in order to incur a debt of obligation, which then required the vixen to give away one of her cubs (140). These tales focused on men controlling the fox spirit for their own purposes, good or evil. The following is a summary of the tale of Abe no Seimei, a famous yōshi exorcist, diviner and sorcerer.

Abe no Seimei was approached one day by an old Buddhist monk asking for instruction. The monk was attended by what appeared to be two 10 year old boys, but Seimei immediately saw that they were actually fox familiars (*Shikijin*). The old man was actually an accomplished sorcerer here to test Seimei. Seimei made no notion that he that he knew

the truth and secretly cast a spell that caused the spirits to vanish. The old man was amazed and earnestly asked to be his student (141-142).

These men are feared because one man commands these wild and powerful spirits. He has usurped his position in the natural order of society, just like the shape-shifting nature of the fox itself. The man cloaks himself in deception and intrigue in order to gain an advantage over his neighbors. The common people are terrified to stand against this fox sorcerer because to offend him is to offend the fox. In addition to offend or wound the fox invites the wrath of other foxes on the entire village, not just themselves! (Casal, 26). Importantly the role of the fox is minimized in these tales to a supporting role. The men are clearly their masters and wield absolute control over them. Rather than fit the traditional trickster motif and being wild and free, they have become the servants of man. They would be turned over to a man in order to repay a debt (much like the two previous stories reinforce.)



A SCENE OF SORCERY.

These fox-sorcerers used their familiars as aids in their sorcery and as spies to gain advantages over their neighbors. People in the village felt a, “malevolence of its purported practitioners (hurting others for their own benefit), fraudulently promoting themselves by appearing to save the lives of the people they placed in harms way”(Bathgate, 138). In a sense the sorcerers became *bakemono* themselves. They attempted to appear in different forms to different people in order to pass themselves off as everyday people.

Analysis

The fox does not quite fit the Trickster motif. He certainly inhabits a boundary between nature and man. He is a beast of the forest and yet has the rules and obligations of a human. In effect, he enables a comparison between duty and power. The fox is much more of an example of how a man should act: smart, cunning, but always ready to pay his debts. If even an animal honors its debts then a man should as well. In terms of being a lord of the in-between the fox qualifies. In this regard he is the clear master that acknowledges and reciprocates aid. Tricksters tend to operate on the edges of society and the fox seems to be similar. Once he was finished the fox quickly disappears from the story without another word. He does not wish to be praised for doing what he has to do. Unlike other tricksters, foxes were sometimes not the masters of their own fate.

The sense of social obligation is much more prevalent in tales of Japanese fox spirits. While it appears elsewhere in the trickster stories, it is not nearly to the same degree as the fox. This gives foxes a different niche than other beings. They are lawful tricksters, a term that may seem contradictory but sums up the spirit well. They exhibit the same signs as traditional tricksters but pay even more attention to the 'rules' of the story. Foxes work within these rules and will use their wits and power to help those that they feel indebted to. Unlike other tricksters that seem to help more based off whim or accident, the fox is purposeful. These results are up to and seem to often result in the fox being bound to a man, whether by magic or social obligation. This seems out of character for a wild spirit like the trickster in other tales.

Conclusions

The fox is a paradox. It fulfills a role that is both similar and very different than the traditional trickster. Japanese society takes its sense of place and duty seriously and even the spirits represent this. Foxes are unlike other tricksters and will willingly serve under a man because of a debt. Other tricksters are not forced into servitude or avoid the trap. The fox is a lawful trickster. It operates within a stricter set of rules, but nevertheless, will bring all of its intellect and power to bear in whatever situation. They are more aware and concerned about how they appear to others and hold themselves to a higher standard than other tricksters.

An interesting pattern that I noticed was that the fox spirit seemed to rapidly change its purpose over time. In a future paper I would want to examine and see if perhaps foxes from a certain period better embody the sense of a traditional trickster and how the introduction of Aesop's fables might have influenced this change. In order to do so I would need to study or find someone who can read classical Japanese. It is important to note that there is a vast array of tales and stories that the fox appears in. However, my access to the tales is limited by the lack of translations into English.

From this research I have another interesting question: When does the fox stop being a fox and become a symbol for a man's personality? In the Edo tale I have put forth that the fox represents the man's nature, rather being taken as a literal fox as in the two other tales. In addition I would like to study whether monotheistic religions warped and changed how tricksters are viewed. Perhaps it was the influx of European ideas that changed the nature of the fox in Japanese tales.

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