The Trickster in Japanese Art

By Brenda G. Jordan

A story: Once upon a time, a priest at a temple called Morinji was about to hang a tea kettle over the fire when it suddenly sprouted a head, tail, and feet. The priest called in his novices to see the sight, and everyone stood aghast as the furry tea kettle scampered about the room. The monks attempted to catch it, but the kettle flew about the room, just out of reach. Finally, someone managed to snatch the little kettle and thrust it into a box. The kettle had turned into *tanuki*, or rather, a tanuki had turned into a kettle (Figure 1). In some versions of this tale, the monks decided that the captured kettle was too special to be used, so it was kept in the box. There, the tanuki was comfortable and sometimes transformed itself into a priest instead of a kettle.

Tanuki is one of Japan's two contributions to the archetypal Trickster, the other being *kitsune,* or the fox. Trickster is one of the world's oldest mythological figures, and examples abound in mythology and folklore worldwide. There is Hermes in Greece, the Coyote in North America, the hare Sungura from East Africa (Tanzania and Malawi, for example), and Brer Rabbit from the American South (probably a descendant himself of Sungura), to name only a few. Loki of Norse mythology is also sometimes regarded as a Trickster.[1]

Figure 1: *The Lucky Tea Kettle of Morin Temple* by Tsukioka Yoshitoshi (1839–1892), color woodblock print. Source: The Claremont Colleges Digital Library at http://tiny.cc/qa7lsw.

Tricksters the world over share a number of characteristics. They often play the role in mythology and folklore of one who turns things upside down and inside out. They have a fondness for sly jokes and malicious pranks that can result in harm to either themselves or others. They can both trick and be tricked. They are not always negative forces, however. Tricksters can be creators or destroyers, heroes or fools. Tricksters can also act as semi-divine cultural heroes, creating something positive from a potentially destructive situation by virtue of quick wit and intuition.[2] Another aspect of Tricksters is that they can be humorous, but the humor in Trickster stories is not necessarily meant to be merely entertaining. Laughter can have its own purpose; it can provide healing effects, serve to educate, even be regarded as sacred.[3]

But, the questions of why and how can make for stimulating classroom discussions. Why do cultures the world over include Tricksters in their mythology and folklore? What purpose might these figures have in humans' worldviews: our sense of what is the norm, our thinking about wrong or right, and our explanations of why things are the way they are in the world? You can bring Trickster into classroom discussion in a literature course, a history class, social studies, anthropology, psychology, folklore studies, religion, theater, or art/art history. This is because the Trickster appears in the mythology, folklore, literature, and arts of cultures throughout the world. Learning about Tricksters not only challenges students to think about human psychology but also engages them in learning about the cultural contexts in which Tricksters appear. This brings us to Japan and Japanese art.

The Trickster is only one example of Japan's incredibly rich world of the supernatural (or supernormal), a world that is revealed through both the arts and literature.[4] Images and stories of the supernatural have permeated Japanese culture for centuries and include the well-known twelfth-century handscrolls called the *Chōjū jimbutsu giga* (*Frolicking Animals and People Handscrolls*), the classic *Ugetsu monogatari*, 1776 (*Tales of Moonlight and Rain*) by Ueda Akinari, and twentieth-century anime such as *Heisei Tanuki Gassen Pom Poko* (1994). The supernatural, with its connections to magic, is a fascinating topic for students of all ages, as revealed by their interest in anime, video games such as *Ōkami* and books from the "Harry Potter" series to Studio Ghibli's *Spirited Away*.[5] Through the "hook" of the supernatural, you can draw students into learning about the history, religion, and culture of Japan in both the past and contemporary times. Students with some understanding of Shinto find that they enjoy *My Neighbor Totoro* even more. Those with some background in Heian period politics (794–1185 CE) and the real-life work of court diviners see much more to the film *Yin Yang Diviner* (*Onmyōji*) than they would have otherwise.

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Tanuki at Fukuyama, Hiroshima prefecture, Japan by 663highland. Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tanuki).

Unlike the vast majority of *bakemono* (ghosts and demons, apparitions) that have floated in and out of the Japanese consciousness over the centuries, Japanese Tricksters are based on real animals that inhabit the islands of Japan (Figure 2), much as the North American Tricksters Coyote, Raven, Iktomi the Spider, and others are personifications of animals. Tanuki (*Canis viverrinus, nyctereutes or procionides*) is a member of the dog family. This furry little animal with a long fuzzy tail has a mask like a raccoon and is erroneously called "raccoon" or "badger" in English. Both designations are incorrect and even misleading because neither the North American badger nor the raccoon are regarded as Tricksters in folklore. If an English term must be used, raccoon-dog seems to be acceptable, but I have had no problems with my students getting their tongues around tanuki [TAH-new-key].

Tanuki stories have been around for centuries, as early as the *Nihongi* (*Chronicles of Japan*, 720), where a *mujima* (a misnomer for tanuki) turns into a man and sings songs in the spring.[6] In this story and others, tanuki embody many of the characteristics found in the archetypical Trickster. They are shape shifters who delight in wonderful, crazy, even dangerous pranks. They have a predisposition toward humorous sexual antics, so incorporating them into a class may require modifying what is explained and/or shown to younger students. Both tanuki and the fox can be represented as cute and cuddly one moment and then morph from G-rated to R in the blink of an eye (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Pair of tanuki statues outside of a store. (Photograph copyright by the author.)

Tanuki, like many Japanese bakemono, are ambiguous in meaning. They are neither clearly good nor evil, frightening nor sweet, although they can be either or both by turns. Japanese folklore tells of tanuki who are dangerous and deadly, but popular culture has also treated tanuki as cute, funny, even charming. (Tanuki statues like those pictured here are found all over Japan, often at the entrances of stores, restaurants, and drinking establishments.) Perhaps ambiguity is part of their shape-shifting attributes? Or could it speak to an understanding of the supernatural as assuming different forms in different contexts? The out-of-the-ordinary or supernormal might be a deity in one situation or a demon in another.

This is better seen in the kitsune or Japanese fox. Japan has two species of fox, the Hokkaido fox (*Vulpes vulpes schrencki*) and the red fox (*Vulpes vulpes japonica*). They were found throughout most of Japan until recent decades and often lived close to human habitations.[7] They are mentioned in Japanese documents as far back as the late eighth century, and stories about foxes combine the myths and beliefs of China, Korea, and India, as well as indigenous tales of Japan.

Over the centuries, a variety of influences—esoteric Buddhism and the native associations of foxes with rice—led to foxes becoming the messengers and servants of Inari, the *kami* or Shinto spirit of rice. The Inari fox dates at least back to the thirteenth century and possibly even to the eleventh.[8] Statues of foxes are often seen at the entrances of Shinto shrines in Japan, even small rural shrines (Figure 4). Look for the Inari fox in a rainy scene from *My Neighbor Totoro* for one such example.

Figure 4: Fox figure at a small shrine, Kiyomizu-dera, Kyoto. (Photograph copyright by the author.)

However, the fox is also a Trickster with shape-shifting abilities and a predilection toward fooling humans, often in dangerous ways. Foxes transform to human form, sometimes in order to poke fun at human actions. There are numerous stories and pictures of foxes becoming nuns or monks, for example. They appear in supernatural roles in noh dramas and kabuki plays. Fox possession, although not the only form of possession found in premodern Japan, is one of the oldest found in Japanese writings and one of the most common.[9]

Foxes are thought to enjoy both the transformation to human form as well as the playacting that goes with it. Could this idea have arisen from observing foxes in the wild? Foxes are known for "doing funny things," in the words of Karen A. Smyers, such as chasing airplanes or bicycles, teasing hyenas, running, and sliding on ice.[10] Real foxes are both intelligent and playful. In folklore, these characteristics reveal themselves in magical pranks. However, like tanuki and Coyote, the pranks can end up with tragic results for either the fox or the humans involved. In fact, Trick-

Figure 5: "Fox Cry" from *One Hundred Aspects of the Moon* series by Tsukioka Yoshitoshi, color woodblock print. Source: Source: JapanesePrints-London website at http://tiny.cc/zhwbvw.

Figure 6: "Fox Fire" from *One Hundred Views of Edo* by Andō Hiroshige (1797–1858), color woodblock print. Source: http://tiny.cc/5hxlsw.

sters' supernatural powers do not always protect them from harm. They often have their jokes and pranks turned against them. A *kyōgen* play tells of an old fox that tired of being hunted (like many stories, there are various versions of this). He disguises himself as an elderly priest named Hakuzōsu, known for his love of foxes. The fox visits the nephew of this priest, who is a hunter, and tells him of the many virtues of foxes. He also mentions the punishments that come to men who take life. Satisfied that he had accomplished his mission, the "priest" leaves to return home. On the way, however, he begins to turn back to his true form and loses the capacity of foresight and reason. He sees a baited trap and cannot resist the bait. He is caught (Figure 5).

Unusual situations or strange happenings were often attributed to a fox's magical abilities. Foxes with more than one tail—as many as nine—were thought to be older, wiser, and more supernaturally powerful. *Kitsune no yomeiri* (fox wedding) refers to a day when the sun shines while it rains at the same time. *Kitsune bi* (fox fire) is a term used to describe foxes whose mouths or tails generate fire or lightning. Ancient Japanese associated mysterious lights at night, including unusual phenomena in the heavens, with foxes. The twelfth-century *Konjaku monogatari* (*Tales of Times Now Past*) records an early mention of luminous lights in Kyoto and associates them with foxes.[11]

In this sense, foxes can take on the attributes of what is called will-o'-the-wisp in the West (Figure 6). This is a light seen by travelers at night that is said to flicker over wet areas like bogs and swamps and recedes as one approaches it, drawing the human away from safety into danger. Kitsune bi could also mean the light made by foxes to draw men astray. Tanuki, by the way, also can act as will-o'-the-wisps by pounding on their large scrotums like a drum. The drumming sounds at night produce the same hypnotic effect as the glow of foxes in the darkness.

Tricksters are thought to provide the balance that keeps the world in harmony, checking order with disorder, bringing laughter to sadness, providing the opposite to make the whole.

Kitsune damashi (fox bewitchment) refers to foxes tricking people into seeing things that aren't there, such as processions or battles.[12] Another related theme of old tales is the transformation of the fox into a woman or Buddhist monk and back again. And then there is *kitsunetsuki* (fox possession), which often manifested itself in incoherent ramblings and strange behavior and called for a shaman or faith healer in earlier times. It came to be considered *kohyō* (a nervous disorder or mental illness) in modern times when shamans were thrust into the background in favor of Western medicine and practices.[13]

Why would foxes do these things to humans? One reason has to do with an attribute of Trickster—to make fun of humans, especially men, or to frighten or seduce them. But in the case of foxes, another motive is un-Trickster-like gratitude. For example, there is the story of a fox that was being chased by a group of hunters. A nobleman rescues the fox, hides it from the hunters, and then releases it. Sometime later, a beautiful woman appears at the man's door and offers to work for him. Eventually they fall in love and have a child together, a boy. However, as time goes on, the woman gradually becomes more wistful and sad and eventually leaves the family altogether. She has returned to her home in the wild—she is the fox who was rescued and came to the man in human form in order to show her gratitude by bearing him a son (Figure 7).

Figure 7: "The Fox-Woman Leaving Her Child" from *Thirty-six Ghosts and Demons* by Tsukioka Yoshitoshi, color woodblock print.

Foxes and tanuki still inspire the imagination of the Japanese. Studio Ghibli's 1994 anime *Heisei Tanuki Gassen Pom Poko* (called simply *Pom Poko*) is a contemporary example of the use of the supernatural in the telling of a story (Figure 8). The advantages of using a film like this in a classroom include the fact that anime is hugely popular with many US students and that film complements literature in bringing folklore alive in students' imaginations. *Pom Poko* has the added advantage of being multifaceted. Made for Japanese audiences, the film is rich with references to traditional folklore and supernatural beliefs. These serve as the vehicles for a tale of the struggle between man and nature in the contemporary world. Distributed by Disney and available both subtitled (recommended) and dubbed in English, the film can be a great teaching tool, provided the instructor previews the film to make sure it is appropriate for his/her students. Shorter selections from the film can be shown to any age group, including younger children.[14] Older students will benefit from some background preparation in Japanese culture, religion, and folklore.

The original story by director Isao Takahata tells of a group of tanuki whose home in the Tama Hills in western Tokyo is threatened by a large suburban development, the Tama New Town, a real place. The tanuki set out to resist the development and battle the human intruders, using their supernatural skills as well as practical strategies. However, unlike the classic Disney model, there are no easy answers or clear heroes in this story. The tanuki themselves are neither purely good nor evil but a mixture of both. The problems they face are not readily solved, and there is no storybook ending, as is often seen in American animation.

Because the story deals with issues of the environment and human needs versus those of the animals of the forest, there is much in the film to stimulate discussion in a classroom. Instructors can also find references to Buddhist practice and beliefs, legends, historical stories such as *The Tale of Heike*, images from the *Scroll of Frolicking Animals and People*, well-known Japanese manga, kabuki, and, of course, numerous supernatural figures from both historical and modern periods of Japanese history.[15] Even characters such as Kiki from *Kiki's Delivery Service* and Totoro from *My Neighbor Totoro* appear in the Hundred Ghosts and Demons parade scene.

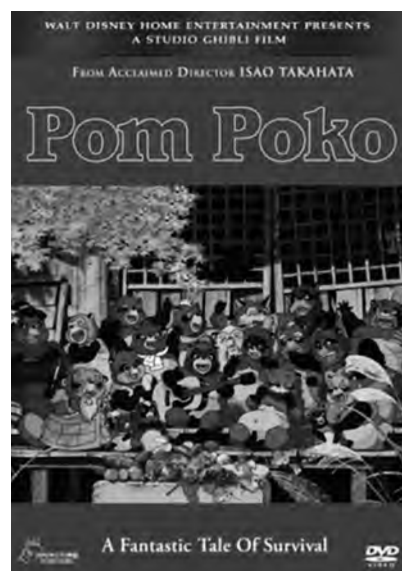

Figure 8: Pom Poko poster.

Pom Poko can be used in conjunction with literature and art to lead students into a discussion of why Tricksters exist in world folklore. Tricksters are thought to provide the balance that keeps the world in harmony, checking order with disorder, bringing laughter to sadness, providing the opposite to make the whole. Could it also be that Trickster keeps things in perspective as we humans

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Screen captures from *Pom Poko.*

Left: Tanuki expressing anger at the human destruction of their land.

Middle: Tanuki transformed into woodland "Buddha" shrines in order to protect the forest from building.

Right: Three grand master transformer tanuki arrive to help in the fight to protect their forest home.

recognize our own frailties through Trickster? What is normally socially unacceptable can be seen in a symbolic light or given a form that humans can recognize (or even enjoy) from a comfortable distance. When humans can see themselves in "foils" like the fox or Coyote, critique is easier to swallow because the criticism is one step removed from our reality; or, we can enjoy scenarios in stories that normally would be unacceptable in real life.

Trickster stories may also provide answers to the dark side of humanity, that which is unanswerable—violent acts that seem inhuman, strange events that elude explanation. Why do foxes often change into women or holy men, for example? Why are tanuki blamed for tricks and hauntings? What is this side to humans that results in senseless violence and runs completely counter to notions of how humans should treat one another? Tricksters—tanuki and kitsune included—may provide a way to acknowledge aspects of humanity that we find hard to understand or accept and give humans some means to address these aspects and deal with them or accept them as the case may be.

A final note about some teaching resources: Because most reliable publications on the Japanese supernatural are either in Japanese or consist of scholarly books in English, it is currently hard to find good, accurate materials for students. Books, exhibition catalogues, and museum websites that have images of *netsuke* (miniature sculptures) or color woodblock prints will often include tanuki and fox images.[16] Woodblock print designers who are known for their treatment of supernatural themes include Tsukioka Yoshitoshi (1839–1892), Kawanabe Kyōsai (1831–1889), Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1786–1864), Andō Hiroshige (1797–1858), and Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849). Folklore and stories are easier to find (see some recommended books on the following page). ■

NOTES

1. For a good overview of the North American Trickster, see the introduction to Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz, eds., *American Indian Trickster Tales* (New York: Penguin, 1998).
2. Brenda G. Jordan, "The Trickster in Japan: Tanuki and Kitsune," *Japanese Ghosts and Demons: Art of the Supernatural*, ed. Stephen Addiss (New York: George Braziller, 1985), 129.
3. See Suzanne Evertsen Lunquist, *The Trickster: A Transformation Archetype,* Distinguished Dissertations Series, 11 (San Francisco: Mellon Research University Press, 1991), 27–28.
4. Michael Dylan Foster makes the case for using the word "supernormal" to describe "the transcendence of the everyday," which would include anything that happens beyond the normal, that which is not standard and is mysterious. Michael Dylan Foster, *Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yōkai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 16.
5. I am grateful to Matthew Kizior for his suggestions on Tricksters in video games such as *Ōkami*.
6. Fumiko Y. Yamamoto, "Heisei Tanuki-Gassen: Pon Poko," *Post Script: Essays in Film and the Humanities* 18, no. 1 (1998): 59.

7. For a good overview of foxes in Japan, see chapter three in Karen A. Smyers, "Symbolizing Inari: the Fox," *The Fox and the Jewel: Shared and Private Meanings in Contemporary Japanese Inari Worship* (Honolulu: University of Hawai`i Press, 1999).
8. Smyers, 86.
9. Fox possession goes back as far as the *Nihon ryōiki*, a collections of tales from the ninth century. See Foster, 89.
10. Smyers, 87.
11. Kazuo Tokuda, "Yōkai gyōretsu kitsunebi (*Parade of Apparitions: Fox Fire*)" in *Hyakki yagyō no sekai* (*The World of One Hundred Ghosts and Demons*), exhibition catalogue (National Institutes for the Humanities, 2009), 62.
12. Smyers, 90.
13. Foster, 95–96, and Gerald Figel, *Civilization and Monsters: Spirits of Modernity in Meiji Japan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 97–99.
14. Note, too, that the subtitles and dubbing incorrectly refer to the tanuki as "raccoons." The translators failed to credit the significance of the tanuki in Japanese folklore when working on the English language versions.
15. The Miyazaki Hayao website at http://www.nausicaa.net/miyazaki/pompoko/faq.html provides information about various references in the film, as well as the Japanese children's songs that are used.
16. Netsuke are miniature sculptures that served as toggles on the silk cords that Japanese men used in the premodern era to string items such as pipes, purses, or writing instruments.

ADDITIONAL TEACHING RESOURCES

The list of resources below is not exhaustive but should provide a start. Students and teachers alike should be aware that websites are variable in their quality; two of the better ones are listed below.

BOOKS

Addiss, Stephen, ed. *Japanese Ghosts and Demons: The Art of the Supernatural* (New York: George Braziller, Inc.). First published in 1985, with later reprintings available in used copies.

Dorson, Richard M. *Folk Legends of Japan*. Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle, Co., 1962. This is available in later paperback editions.

Figal, Gerald. *Civilization and Monsters: Spirits of Modernity in Meiji Japan*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999.

Foster, Michael Dylan. *Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yōkai*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.

Mitford, A.B. *Tales of Old Japan: Folklore, Fairy Tales, Ghost Stories and Legends of the Samurai*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2005. First published in 1871.

Smyers, Karen A. *The Fox and the Jewel: Shared and Private Meanings in Contemporary Japanese Inari Worship*. Honolulu: University of Hawai`i Press, 1999.

Tjardes, Tamara. *One Hundred Aspects of the Moon: Japanese Woodblock Prints by Yoshitoshi*. Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 2003.

Tyller, Royall. *Japanese Tales*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1987.

WEBSITES

A fairly good Wikipedia site for kitsune: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kitsune.

The Hayao Miyazaki website for *Heisei Tanuki Gassen Pom Poko*: http://tiny.cc/2qamsw.

Wikipedia on *Pom Poko* is more accurate than many other sites: http://tiny.cc/6sx0uw.

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