

# THE CATALPA BOW

## A Study in Shamanistic Practices in Japan

CARMEN BLACKER

*Former lecturer in Japanese  
at the University of Cambridge, England*



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## Witch Animals

The witch animals of Japan are creatures believed to be capable of assuming a discarnate and invisible form, and in such guise of penetrating inside the human body and inflicting upon it a variety of painful torments.

Yanagita Kunio, the great authority on Japanese ethnology and folklore, distinguished two broad categories of witch animal: a snake, and a four-legged variety usually known as a fox or a dog. The snake, known as *tōbyō*, *tombogami* or simply *hebigami*, covers a relatively small area, being found only on the island of Shikoku and in the Chūgoku district of the main island. The distribution of the four-legged creature is far wider. As a fox, it is found all along the Japan Sea coast, in both the Kantō and the Kansai districts of the main island, and over most of Kyūshū. As a dog, *inugami*, it is found in much the same areas as the snake, that is to say Shikoku and the Chūgoku district. Under the name of *izuna*, it abounds over much of the Tōhoku district, Aomori and Iwate prefectures. And again, under the peculiar name of *gedō*, meaning a Buddhist heresy, it appears in the old province of Bingo in Hiroshima prefecture.

Even here our problems do not end, for the fox itself, *kitsune*, falls into a baffling number of sub-species. In Izumo, for example, it is known as *ninko*, man fox. In southern Kyūshū it is known as *yako*, field fox. In the Kantō regions it is known as *osaki*, and in Shizuoka, Nagano and Yamanashi it sports the name of *kuda*, pipe fox.<sup>1</sup>

Surely, it will be objected, these various names must indicate different species of animal. Apparently not so. When asked to describe what the creature actually looks like, they will tell you in all these districts, regardless of what name they give it, that it is long and thin with reddish-brown fur, short legs and sharp claws. Clearly we have the same creature appearing under a variety of names, none of which, incidentally, seems particularly appropriate. The creature described does not in the least resemble a fox or a

dog, but rather a small weasel or large shrew. Nor indeed does the name 'snake' seem very appropriate to the animal described. Yanagita's informants in Bitchū told him that it was short and fat, resembling a squat earthworm or small bonito.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, this peculiar separation of name from thing is one of the odd features of the belief.

The first question which comes to mind is, why should these creatures wish to enter the body of a human being, causing him pain and distress? Of what possible benefit could it be to a fox or a snake to take up its abode in so alien a species?

Two clearly distinct answers present themselves.

First, the creature may enter the body of the sufferer through its own volition. Its motive may be *urami*, malice. It possesses its victim in revenge for some slight; killing one of its cubs, for example, or startling it out of an afternoon nap are reasons frequently alleged. Another motive may be greed or desire. The creature wants something which it cannot obtain in its ordinary shape. It may want a meal of red rice or fried bean curd, delicacies irresistible to foxes, but which they are unlikely to come across in their usual form. Or it may want a little shrine set up to it and worship paid to it every day, and can make this wish known only through a human mouth. I have spent several mornings listening to exorcisms of possessed patients in Buddhist temples of the Nichiren sect, and have been astonished at the way in which time and again the same motives are alleged by one possessing creature after another.

What concerns us here, however, is not so much the incidence of voluntary possession as the cases in which the animal attacks its victim because it is compelled to do so by certain baleful persons known as fox-employers, *kitsune-tsukai*, or fox-owners, *kitsune-mochi*.

These people are believed to have fox familiars at their beck and call. They feed them every day, and in return for their commons the foxes are compelled to exercise their supernatural powers in the service of their masters. They thus correspond with what in the west is known as either a witch or a sorcerer.<sup>3</sup>

These sinister figures fall at once into two distinct groups.

First we find the solitary sorcerer, a single lone figure who 'employs' a fox or a dog in order to gain power or wealth, or in order to harm those whom he dislikes. As we shall see, he often turns out to be a degenerate priest or exorcist. Second and more commonly met with today are families who are believed to be the hereditary owners of foxes, and to transmit this evil power from generation to generation in the female line.

These two kinds of witch figure are not found together in the same district. In the regions where the belief in hereditary fox-owning families is still strong, the solitary witch is not to be discovered. His territory lies chiefly in the north-eastern districts of the main island, where the fear of fox-owning families so far as we know has never existed. We must therefore give these two types of witch separate treatment.

The solitary 'employer of foxes', *kitsune-tsukai*, is a figure which invites immediate comparison with our own witches and their cat or toad familiars. In the Japan of today, however, he is rarely met with, though stories of such people were reported as late as the 1920s. Here is an example recorded in the journal *Minzoku to Rekishi* of 1922 by a Buddhist priest of the Suwa district.

A woman came to him, he writes, complaining that every night she was assailed by deathly feelings of suffocation and waves of inexplicable bodily heat. Suspecting a case of possession, the priest sat her down in front of his household shrine and caused her to recite several powerful prayers. At once her babbling speech and the convulsive shaking of her clasped hands proclaimed her to be unmistakably in the power of a fox. The priest at once began the *mondō* or dialogue which is one of the standard methods of exorcism.

'Who are you?' he asked, 'and why are you molesting this woman?'

'I have nothing against her myself', replied the fox, 'but I am compelled by a certain person to torment her and if possible to kill her.'

'Who is this person?' demanded the priest.

'He is an ascetic', replied the fox. 'Another woman paid him three yen to send me on this errand. I am sorry about

it, but I have to obey orders if I am to receive my daily food.'

The possessed woman, it soon transpired, was the mistress of a certain man, whose legal wife had naturally become jealous. She had paid the ascetic to use his power over the fox to have the woman killed.

'How did you fall into the power of this man?' the priest asked.

'I used to live under a rock on the mountainside', the fox answered. 'One day the ascetic found me and offered me some delicious fried bean curd if I would go on errands for him. I refused. I wanted nothing to do with the man. But alas, one of my cubs ate the bean curd. From that day I found myself in his power, forced to obey his commands in return for my daily food.'

The priest, after threatening the fox with a portrait of the Emperor Meiji, which reduced it to an abject state of shame and terror, eventually cajoled it into leaving the woman's body by promises of a place in the retinue of the deity Inari. The fox professed itself delighted with the arrangement, promising thereafter to protect the poor woman rather than molest her.<sup>4</sup>

This story, recorded of course as circumstantially true, is instructive in many ways. The description of how the ascetic first acquired power over the fox, finding it in its lair, tempting it with food, is the standard account which has been repeated over and over again for several centuries. Compare it, for example, with what in the works of the Tokugawa period is called the *Izuna-hō* or Izuna rite, the magical means whereby power may be gained over fox familiars. The late seventeenth century work *Honchō Shokkan* contains a much-quoted account. Magicians have recently appeared in Japan, it runs, who employ foxes by means of the Izuna rite. For this rite you must first find a pregnant vixen in her lair. You feed her and tame her, taking particular care of her at the time when her cubs are born. When the cubs are grown up, the vixen will bring one of them to you and ask you to give it a name. Once you have done this you will find that you only have to call the young fox by name for it to come to you in invisible form. Then

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you can ask it any questions you like, on any matter however secret, and always it will be able to find out the answer for you. Other people cannot see the fox in its invisible form, so when you show them that you know of these hidden things they will all think that you possess divine power.<sup>5</sup>

This peculiar rite, described in almost identical terms in several Tokugawa works, seems to be a degraded vestige of something which in early medieval times was a religious rite of heretical but not very evil character. The Izuna rite, as de Visser has shown us, was at this period another name for the Dagini or Daten rite, much performed by warriors, noblemen or priests anxious for power or wealth. It was by dint of performing the Dagini rite, the *Gempei Seisuiiki* tells us, that Taira Kiyomori rose from obscurity to be virtual dictator of the land. It was by causing a priest to perform the Dagini rite for fourteen days that the Kampaku Tadazane gained his heart's desire. It was through performing the Dagini rite for twenty-one days that the Zen priest Myōkitsu Jisha gained everything he ever wished for. References throughout medieval literature are legion to the successful performance of this rite by perfectly respectable people.<sup>6</sup>

But always the Dagini rite, although it appears to have been a ritual of the pattern usually found in esoteric Buddhism, was in some way associated with a fox. The figure of Dagini might appear as a fox; or the *shirushi*, or sign as to whether the rite had proved efficacious, was given by a fox. The seventeenth-century account of the *Izuna-hō* is clearly a degraded version of this medieval ritual.<sup>7</sup>

In modern times this solitary sorcerer seems to have been usually a debased religious figure: a *yamabushi* or mountain ascetic, a *kitōshi* or exorcist who has allowed the desire for money to corrupt him. In the manner described by our Suwa priest, he may employ the fox, in return for a fee, to prosecute other people's hatreds and grudges. Or on the face of it he may be a respectable exorcist, making an honest living by *curing* people of fox, snake or ghost possession, as well as by finding lost things and giving advice on marriages and business transactions. But underneath, it is he all the time who has set the fox to molest its victim, in

order that he should be paid, all unwittingly, to remove the nuisance.

Since the war, however, little seems to have been heard of such evil men. Far more common are the cases in which the foxes or snakes are commanded by the people known as *tsukimono-suji*, hereditary witch families.

In a few districts of rural Japan, most notoriously along the coast of the Japan Sea, certain families are still subject to a peculiar form of ostracism. It is alleged that for generations they have kept foxes, snakes or dogs in their houses, and that thanks to the malign powers of these creatures they have not only become extremely rich, but also are able to revenge themselves on those whom they dislike by setting the creatures to possess them. The stigma of fox-owning is regarded first as a kind of contagion; you can 'catch' the contamination, for example, by living in a house occupied by a former fox-owner, or by buying his land after he has gone bankrupt.<sup>8</sup> But it is also a hereditary pollution, transmitted, it is interesting to note, largely in the female line.

If you wish to avoid the stigma, therefore, you must eschew all business dealings with fox-owning families. You must not visit their houses, you must not borrow money from them or buy land from them. You must avoid giving them offence. But above all you must see that neither you nor your kith and kin marry any of their girls. To receive into your family a bride who is even remotely associated with the fox-owning stigma is to risk acquiring the stigma in full measure yourself. In some places it was believed that the foxes, even to the number of seventy-five, accompanied the girl when she went to her bridegroom's house. Henceforth that house, and all the ramifications and sub-branches of the family, would be contaminated. Thus it used to be said that when a marriage was arranged in these districts the first question to be asked about the bride's family, even before making sure that it was free from tuberculosis, insanity and shortsight, was whether or not the slightest suspicion of fox-owning attached to it. If such was found to be the case, negotiations were broken off at once.

The creatures, whether foxes, dogs or snakes, are believed to be kept in the houses of their masters and to receive



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daily rations of food. In return for their board and lodging they hold themselves ready to obey the behests of their masters, using their powers of invisibility and possession to molest those whom he happens to dislike. Not only will they inflict on their victims all the approved symptoms of possession—pain, hysteria, madness—but they will also quietly remove the valuables of their victims to the houses of their masters. Hence the fox- or snake-owners are believed to be one and all extremely rich. In the case of the fox and the dog, the number kept in their master's house varies considerably. Sometimes ten, I was told, sometimes twenty, sometimes as many as a hundred have been counted. But a common number is seventy-five, though the reasons for preferring it are far from clear.

In the case of the snake, only one at a time seems to be the rule, and that is kept in a pot in the kitchen, fed on the same food as the family gets, with a tot of saké occasionally thrown in. If a snake-owner in Sanuki happens to quarrel with anyone, Yanagita informs us, he is believed to say to the snake, 'All these years I have been feeding you, so it is time you did me a good turn in exchange. Go at once to so-and-so's house and make things as unpleasant for him as you can.' The snake then sallies forth and possesses one or more members of the marked family. In this part of Shikoku the principal symptom of snake possession is a sudden and unbearable pain in the joints, similar to acute rheumatism.<sup>9</sup>

A couple of centuries ago these unfortunate families were subjected to a fairly ruthless persecution. Banishment from the fief and extirpation of the family line within the fief were not uncommon measures during the feudal period. Motoori Norinaga mentions a case in 1747 in which the *daimyō* of the Hirose fief ordered the extirpation of a family accused of fox-owning.<sup>10</sup> Their house was burnt down and the entire family banished from the fief. Only rarely, however, were the unhappy victims condemned to death, and never, so far as I can discover, death by burning.

During the past century, however, it is rare to hear of violence of any kind directed against the accused. Cold and implacable ostracism is rather the rule.

As a result of surveys done in the early 1950s, Professor Ishizuka has designated four districts in Japan where he considers the fox-owning superstition to persist particularly obstinately, and where in consequence the families branded as 'black' are particularly numerous. The first two are in Shimane prefecture, where the prevalent animal is the fox. They are the district of Izumo and the island of Oki. In the last two, a district in southern Oita prefecture in Kyūshū and another in Kōchi, Shikoku, the stigma was not for fox- but for dog-owning. Both these last districts showed peculiarities of distribution. Out of eleven *buraku* or villages investigated in the Kyūshū area, three proved to consist entirely of dog-owning families; but next door to one of them was a village with no dog-owning families at all. Again, out of ten *buraku* investigated in the Shikoku district, one was composed entirely, save for a single household, of dog-owning families; yet next door was a village with no dog-owning families at all. The obvious inference was of course that the ostracised families had sensibly congregated in their own villages and intermarried among themselves, with their own schools and social groups.<sup>11</sup>

Let us look at one or two examples of the misery perpetrated by these obstinate beliefs. As late as the 1950s several cases were reported in the newspapers whereby *jinken*, human rights, were claimed to have been infringed by the belief in hereditary fox-owners. In 1952 the Shimane edition of the *Mainichi Shimbun* reported that a young couple had committed a double suicide because the young man's parents had forbidden him to marry a girl on the grounds that the fox-owning stigma attached to her family.<sup>12</sup>

In 1951 a case of malicious slander came before the Bureau of Justice in Matsue. A month-old baby in a family called Mita suddenly fell ill and died. The child's father declared that its death had been caused by demoniacal dogs, sent to bite it from the dog-owning family of one Abe. The rumour spread, with the result that Abe was soon ostracised by the neighbourhood. His daughter's engagement was broken off, and all the workmen in his building company left so that the business came to grief. Investigation proved that the Abe family had recently come into money, was

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unpopular in the district, and had quarrelled with Mita over a plot of land. When Mita's baby died, an exorcist called Myōkō told him that the cause of death was a demoniacal dog from the Abe household.<sup>13</sup>

Which brings us to the problem: how did these unfortunate families originally receive so extraordinary a stigma? Outwardly they are no different from their neighbours. What has earned them their reputation for evil witchcraft?

As the Mita-Abe story illustrates in all too melancholy a way, many have fallen into this unhappy state of social ostracism through little more than untested slander: an accusation made by an exorcist in a state of trance, perhaps, or even by the patient herself. In 1922 a case was reported from Bungo province of a girl who rushed out one night and fell unconscious outside a house belonging to a man named Genjū. Her parents pursued her, and on no other evidence concluded that she was possessed by a dog sent by Genjū. Reviling Genjū in the strongest terms, they beat the girl violently on the back for a quarter of an hour, after which she recovered. After this incident Genjū and his family suffered great misery from slander and ostracism. His sister, who had been happily and prosperously married, was divorced on account of the scandal. At length, in desperation, he brought an action for libel against the girl's parents and was awarded suitable damages.<sup>14</sup>

To our question, what have these families done to be thus singled out as witches, the answer one is likely to receive in the district is a simple one: because they do in fact keep foxes in their houses. In the winter of 1963 I visited a temple called Taikyūji, not far from Tottori, which since the Meiji period had been a renowned centre for the exorcism of fox-possessed patients. The priest was an elderly man who had served in the Russo-Japanese War, and he was certainly well-educated. But he had been the incumbent of the temple for twenty years and had exorcised a great many fox-possessed people. It is easy to tell, he told me, who are the fox-owning families, because you can see the foxes sitting on the eaves of their roofs. Time and again during his evening stroll he had seen them playing outside the houses of the marked families, or sitting in a row on the

caves, shading their eyes with their paws. Often they would rush up to him, snarling and snapping at his robe. Nor was he the only one who could see them. Everyone in the village could do so.

Again, a Mr Ikuta, a schoolmaster in Tottori whom I met in 1963, told me that he had spent a great deal of time lecturing in various villages in the area, exhorting them to abandon the evil superstition of fox-owning. But he had made little headway. After his lecture he was usually challenged by one of the villagers: how could an outsider know anything whatever of the matter? The whole village knew which families were the fox-owning ones because they could see the foxes outside the houses.

Detached investigation has, however, yielded one or two more likely solutions to our problem. Mr Hayami Yasutaka in his interesting book published in 1953, *Tsukimono-mochi meishin no rekishiteki kōsatsu*, describes how he himself was brought up in a family with the reputation for fox-owning in a village near Matsue. Having suffered mockery and inconveniences of various kinds during his childhood, he eventually, after the war, carried out a number of investigations in the Izumo district which formed the nucleus of a thesis on the fox-owning superstition. His principal conclusions were as follows:

1. That as late as 1952 10 per cent of the families in the Izumo district bore the stigma of fox-owning.
2. That the belief arose during the middle Tokugawa period, at the end of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth centuries, at a time when the money economy was beginning to penetrate into the countryside, bringing in its train a new class of *nouveaux riches* landlords.
3. That the fox-owning families originated in these *nouveaux riches* landlords, through accusations of fox-owning first brought through the jealous slander of the older inhabitants of the village, ousted and impoverished by the newcomers.
4. And that the superstition was inflamed and exacerbated by Shingon priests, *yamabushi*, exorcists and suchlike people who would be likely to make money from the discovery of such witchcraft and the exorcism of its effects.<sup>15</sup>

These conclusions agree by and large with those of

Ishizuka's surveys of the fox-owning districts. His investigations pointed to the fox-owning families being the *nouveaux riches* of about a century ago. They were neither the oldest families, that is to say the descendants of the founders of the village, nor the most recent settlers. They were the middle layer. Ishizuka too attributes the origin of the accusation of witchcraft to the jealousy of the impoverished older settlers.<sup>16</sup>

These explanations, however, account for no more than the grounds for hostility; they in no way explain its nature. They do not tell us why so extraordinary an accusation should be levelled against the intruders. You may hate and dislike someone, and a new, hardfisted, intruding landlord is an understandable object of dislike. But you will not necessarily accuse him of having acquired his wealth and power through the medium of witch animals. There must have existed in the district, deeply rooted in its beliefs, some prior conviction that fox witchcraft was possible and dangerous. We must therefore try to look even further back to see in what possible context this fear originated.

Several Japanese ethnologists, including Yanagita Kunio, have attributed its origin at least in part to the *ku* magic of China. Let us look into this.

The practice of *ku* magic is apparently of great antiquity. The character *ku* appears on the oracle bones (1500 B.C.) and gives its name to one of the hexagrams of the *I Ching*. But what exactly the word meant does not become really clear before the sixth century A.D. Here, in a work called *Tsao shih chu-ping yüan-hou tsung-lun*, we find the first clear descriptions of how the *ku* magic is performed and the poison manufactured.

You take a pot and put inside it a variety of venomous creatures, snakes, toads, lizards, centipedes. You then let them devour each other until only one is left. This survivor is the *ku*. 'It can change its appearance and bewitch people', the work continues, 'and when put into food and drink it causes disease and disaster.'<sup>17</sup>

This *ku* creature, be it snake, toad, centipede or caterpillar, can be used by its master both for enriching himself and for killing his enemies, very much as we have seen the fox

or snake to do in Japan. But its mode of activity seems altogether different. It does not possess its victim so much as poison him. The *ku* creature is introduced into the food and drink of the sorcerer's enemies, causing death in a variety of horrible ways. Sometimes they simply die in terrible pain spitting blood. Sometimes the fish and meat they have just eaten come alive again in the stomach, and they not only die but their spirit becomes a slave in the house of the sorcerer. The *Sou shen chi*, a fourth-century collection of supernatural tales, has a story of a monk who went to dinner with a family who made *ku*. All the other guests died spitting blood, but the monk took the precaution of reciting a spell before beginning his meal, and saw two black centipedes a foot long crawl away from the dish. He ate his dinner and survived unharmed.<sup>18</sup>

A favourite form of *ku* creature from the Sung period onwards is the *chin tsan* or golden caterpillar. But here the procedure is rather different. You do not invite your enemies to dinner and put the golden caterpillar in their food. You leave it on the roadside wrapped up in a parcel with pieces of gold and old flowered satin. A stranger will then pick up these rich and glittering things, to find himself cursed with the caterpillar. In a manner not clearly explained the caterpillar will slowly kill its victim, at the same time removing all his valuables to the house of the sorcerer, who suddenly thus becomes extremely rich.

At the same time, once you have such a caterpillar at your command it is extremely difficult to get rid of it. You cannot burn it or drown it or hack it to pieces with a sword. The only sure defence, indeed, both against its attack and against the risks of ownership, seems to be moral virtue. Several Sung works tell stories to illustrate how scholars were protected by their moral virtue against *ku* magic. They pick up mysterious parcels on the roadside, only to be persistently haunted by frogs, snakes or caterpillars which cannot be killed. Eventually, to the dismay of their families, they eat the creature. But they do not die, as everyone expects. They live happily ever after, both rich and free from *ku* haunting.

The *Yi chien san chih*, for example, tells of a brave scholar

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in the district of Ch'ang-chou, so brave in fact that there was really nothing that he was afraid of. One day he was walking with some friends when he saw on the ground a parcel wrapped in silk. The friends were too afraid even to look at it, but the scholar laughed and said, 'I am a poor man, so why shouldn't I take it?' He opened the parcel then and there, to find inside several rolls of silk, three pieces of silver and a *ku* frog. Saying to the frog, 'I don't care what you do; it is the silk and the silver that I want', he took the things home. His family were horrified and wept bitterly, expecting a calamity to fall upon them at any moment. But the scholar told them not to worry; it was his business, not theirs.

That night he found two frogs in his bed, as big as year-old babies. He killed them both and ate them. His family were even more terrified, but he simply said he was lucky to get such good meat. He then got drunk, went to bed, and had an excellent night's sleep.

The next night he found ten frogs in his bed, though they were smaller than the previous ones. These also he cooked and ate. The next night there were thirty. Every night thereafter the frogs in his bed became more numerous, though they got smaller in size. At last the whole house was full of frogs and it was impossible to eat them all. Yet his courage never failed, and he hired a man to bury them outside the village. Finally, after a month, the thing stopped. The scholar laughed and said, 'If this is all that the *ku* calamity is, it does not amount to much.' Nothing more happened and everyone was filled with admiration for his bravery.<sup>19</sup>

Now on the face of it there seems to be little in common between these Chinese practices and the hereditary animal witchcraft found in Japan. Let us review the facts.

First, the *ku* creature is nearly always cited as a reptile, insect or batrachian. It is, in short, a creature of the scaly variety indicated by the radical classifier 142. The pot, after all, is a receptacle suitable only for such creatures. The only exception to this rule that I can discover is the story in the *Sou shen chi* which describes a man called Chao Shou who had dog *ku*, and how guests to his house were

attacked by large yellow dogs.<sup>20</sup> And this from the description would seem more likely to be a case of hydrophobia than one of *ku*.

Secondly, there is no mention of the *ku* creature having powers of possession. It seems either to be administered as a poison in food, or to haunt its victim, as did the frogs in the scholar's bed. This is very different from the activity of the Japanese *tsukimono*, which enters into the minds as well as the bodies of its victims.

Thirdly, I can find only one mention of the *ku* animal being the hereditary property of a family. This is in the *Sui shu ti li chih*, the geographical section of the Sui dynasty history, where it is written that *ku* is handed down from generation to generation in a family, and is given to a daughter as a dowry when she marries.<sup>21</sup> But for the rest, there is no indication that possession of a *ku* creature or the ability to manufacture *ku* is something which runs in certain families, least of all that it is handed down in the female line.

On the other hand, several curious similarities do occur between the *ku* magic and the Japanese belief in snake witchcraft. In the first place, as Yanagita Kunio assures us, the snake is believed to be kept in a pot in the owner's kitchen. To possess one is by no means an unmixed blessing and many families are anxious to get rid of theirs. The only way in which this can be accomplished without bringing misfortune on oneself is to get a total stranger to kill it unwittingly.

A man once came to a certain village in Sanuki province on a building job. He lodged in a house in the village and every day went to work on the building site. One day he came back to find all the family out. He saw a kettle of water boiling on the stove, and thought that a cup of tea would be nice after his day's work. On the floor he saw a jar with a lid, and thinking that it contained tea he took the lid off. Inside he saw a snake coiled up like a lamprey. He poured some of the boiling water on it and replaced the lid. When the family returned he told them what he had done, and one and all rejoiced at their deliverance by a stranger from the curse which had plagued them for so long.<sup>22</sup>

But for its ending, this story is remarkably similar to one in the *Sou shen chi*. A family called Liao had manufactured



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*ku* for a long time, and had become rich thereby. One of the sons married, but the bride was not told about the *ku*. One day everyone went out, leaving the bride alone in the house. She noticed a large pot, and on lifting the lid saw inside a big snake. She poured boiling water into the pot and killed the snake. When the family returned and heard what she had done they were all terrified. And soon after, sure enough, they all died of plague.<sup>23</sup>

Stories so similar must certainly have a common origin. The origin of the Chinese story, as also of the story of the yellow dog *ku*, is the fourth-century work *Sou shen chi*. This book we know to have found its way to Japan at least by the Tokugawa period, and its stories in a curious manner to have become absorbed in the oral tradition of Japan. Is it not more likely that the parallels are due to the dissemination of this book and others like it in Japan, rather than to common origin between the magical practices themselves? Knowledge of *ku* magic imported through books, moreover, is surely not enough to account for this widespread and tenacious belief in hereditary animal witchcraft.

Another suggested explanation is that the belief in fox witchcraft is a degraded survival of a former household or village deity in animal form.

There is abundant evidence that both the fox and the snake used to be, and in some places still are, regarded as benevolent protective deities of a family or village group. It is perhaps perilous to use the word 'totem' in view of the work of Lévi-Strauss, who tells us that the term no longer has any real meaning. Nevertheless, it still seems to me to be a useful one by which to designate an animal which lives in a special and mutually beneficial relationship with a particular family: an animal which, in return for food and the spiritual nourishment imparted by worship, will exercise tutelary protection over the family and reserve for them the benefits of its powers of clairvoyance and healing.

Examples still survive today of foxes enshrined in private houses, usually under the nomenclature of Inari and his messenger, which in return for the usual offerings and recitations will give useful supernatural information. In

return for such 'worship', he will pronounce on the whereabouts of lost things and missing persons, on the prospects for the rice harvest or the fishing catches, on the cause of sickness or the advisability of marriage. Such information often used to be delivered in the form of a *takusen* or oracular utterance through a medium. So also is the snake found usually conflated with the deity Ryūjin, invoked as a benevolent family or village oracle in return for worship offered at a special little shrine.

Even in the districts along the coast of the Japan Sea where the fox-owning belief is still strong, there still survive indications of the fox as a benevolent protector. Ishizuka found several interesting cases of families with the fox-owning reputation but who were not hated or feared because they were so assiduous in their daily worship at the animal's shrine. In other words, we are back with the familiar Japanese belief that a spiritual being, whether numen, ghost or animal, will remain benevolent so long as it is treated right. Once neglect the nourishing rituals and the being will change its nature completely, becoming a source of curses rather than of blessings.<sup>24</sup>

But how did these originally benevolent and useful divinities become degraded into witch animals? The answer can only be conjecture. But perhaps we see here yet another example of the familiar psychology of the witch fear. It comes as an explanation of otherwise incomprehensible strokes of fate. Why should my baby die and not hers? Why should my back ache or my wife go mad? And again, why should *they* suddenly become rich and successful? The origin lies in the overwhelming necessity for finding an explanation of disaster, disparity, sickness, which will lay the blame on someone else and exonerate you. They surely could not have become so rich by their wits alone; they must have had help of some kind, non-human help. The fox they used to worship at once springs to mind, and accounts also very conveniently for the pains in my back and the sudden death of my baby.

Though the totem explanation accounts fairly satisfactorily for the hereditary character of Japanese witch animals, it does not explain why the great majority of them

should be passed down in the female line.<sup>25</sup> The present hereditary family system known as *ie* is an overwhelmingly masculine institution; the bride is received and absorbed, but brings virtually nothing from her own family which will affect or modify her husband's. To look back to some distant period of antiquity when power may have been transmitted in the female line would be carrying speculation too far. This aspect of the problem still awaits solution.

A final problem is the hallucinatory one. The priest of Taikyūji was quite certain that he had seen the foxes outside the houses of the condemned families, not once but many times. He is only typical of large numbers of people in the district whose proof that foxes are kept in those houses is that they have actually seen them there. It would be easy of course to dismiss the whole problem as one of collective wishful vision. They see the creatures, as one rationally minded Japanese told me, because they wish to see them; much as those involved in African witch cults will swear that they have seen the witches with their phosphorescent teeth flying on their malign errands. But I cannot refrain from drawing at least a tentative comparison with those families in this country which appear to possess a spectral attendant animal. These creatures usually appear as birds or dogs, though radiant boys are not unknown, but as a rule they do not manifest themselves unless a member of the family is about to die. The black dog of the Herefordshire Baskervilles and the birds of the Bishop of Salisbury are merely two among many instances of animal apparitions seen at such critical junctures.<sup>26</sup> If we are not inclined to dismiss these at once as 'mere' hallucinations, we may at least accept them as food for further speculation about survivals of former, closer relationships between a family and an overshadowing animal.

It thus seems reasonable to conclude that the practices we have discussed under the name of Japanese animal witchcraft are probably, in both their principal forms, survivals of former cult practices not in themselves evil. The Izuna or Dagini rite was a *gehō* or heretical ritual, but not necessarily an evil one. Neither was the worship of the fox or snake as a household guardian; the creatures were

possessed of useful supernatural powers and, like a friendly watchdog or efficient mouser, would behave in general benevolently if kindly treated. That they should have evolved into uncanny, often atrocious instruments of evil is due to a shift of emphasis. The same set of symbols, which originally benefited one family, is now seen as primarily harmful to others. Their gain has become my loss.