The Badger in Japanese Folklore

By

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Introduction

Down through the ages, the badger has been a popular figure in Japanese folklore. In various periods and in different locales, the animal endowed with transcendental powers has been referred to as *tanuki, mujina,* or *mami.*[1] Of these three terms, *tanuki* is the one most widely used.

Originally mentioned in Chinese lore, the first reference to the badger in Japanese literature is recorded in an eighth century document, "Laws Concerning Robbers" ("*Zokutô Ritsu*"), where possible transgressors are warned against "smoking foxes and badgers out of graves" because of their special bewitching powers.[2]

In this same period, first accounts of the badger's ability to transform itself into other shapes appear. A passage from a chronicle *Shoku Nihongi* reads:

> "In the second month of the thirty-fifth year of the Empress Suiko there was in Michinoku province a badger who changed itself into a man and sung."[3]

By the eighteenth century, the badger or *tanuki* was a firmly entrenched figure in the folklore tradition. A racoon-faced creature in its natural form, it could assume numerous shapes. Sometimes it appeared as a one-eyed hag; at other times, it transformed itself into a beautiful young woman. Another favorite shape it could take was that of a black-garbed Buddhist priest (as such, it was known as the *tanuki-bôzu*). However, it was not confined to human shapes. The *tanuki* could also fly

1. M. W. De Visser, "The Fox and the Badger in Japanese Folklore," in *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan*, vol. XXXVI (1908), p. 1.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

as a dazzling comet or change itself into a fence post, stone or tree.[4]

Possessing extraordinary powers, the badger could predict deaths and see into the future, as well as know of a man's former existences.[5]

One of its peculiarities was its ability to inflate its belly and to drum on it making the following sounds: "*Taketen-teketen-teketen/Dokodon-dokodon-dokodon.*" It often accompanied itself by singing "*Pom-poko-pom, pom-poko-sho.*" On moonlight nights badgers were known to amuse themselves by playing on their belly-drums (referred to as *hara tsuzumi*) and luring men who fell under the spell of the music, into ditches and swamps.[6]

Still another curiosity was the phallic significance attached to this animal. In many tales, the badger was described as inflating its scrotum so that it could cover "eight mats" (referred to as "*hachi-jô-shiki kin-tama*"), a measure referring to the size of a room.[7]

Badger's Roles

The roles played by the badger in folklore fall basically into three categories: that of vengeful transformer, grateful friend and roguish prankster.

As the vengeful transformer, the badger comes seeking revenge for some wrong committed against it—such as someone destroying its den, or killing its relative, or persecuting the badger itself. In such cases, the badger can be extremely tenacious and ferocious.

One such account from the eighteenth century describes the badger as transforming itself into an old hag and haunting a big oak in a certain neighborhood. According to this tale, it would throw a child it was suckling at any passerby. Finally a *samurai* warrior succeeds in cutting it and making it bleed. Later, the badger avenges this act by preventing the warrior from jumping a fence during battle. As a result, he is killed by his pursuer.[8]

By far the best known tale in this category is "The Crackling Mountain" ("*Kachi Kachi Yama*") of which there are at least eighty-eight known versions. In this story, the badger is strung up by a hunter as punishment for eating food intended for the man's pet hare. Using wily

4. *Ibid.*, p. 156.
5. U. A. Casal, "The Goblin Fox and Badger and Other Witch Animals of Japan," in *Asian Folklore Studies*, vol. XVIII (1959), p. 55.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
8. De Visser, *op. cit.*, pp. 78–79.

persuasion, the evil badger manages to convince the hunter's wife that she should release it. When she frees it, the animal immediately kills her and cooks her in a stew. Assuming her shape, it tricks the hunter into eating the gruesome meal. Later the badger taunts the hunter by revealing the horrible truth to him. Ultimately, however, the hare pays the badger back in good measure when he sets it on fire and destroys its clay boat.[9]

The *tanuki* as a grateful and benevolent animal also appears in a few stories.

One such account comes from Kashihara where a man who befriends a family of badgers is repaid for his kindness. As the story goes, robbers steal into the man's house one night where they threaten the frightened members of his family. Several huge wrestlers appear from nowhere and and chase off the thieves. Later on, a badger comes to the man in a dream to explain that the wrestlers were actually *tanuki*.[10]

An old monk treats a badger with kindness in "The Badger's Money" and the latter displays its gratitude by working hard to present honestly-earned gold to the priest as a holy offering.[11]

In "Danzaburo," a money-lending badger tries to repay a physician for curing its illness. The good doctor refuses the gold, but later accepts a precious sword given by the well-meaning animal.[12]

A favorite in children's collections is "The Dancing Tea Kettle" ("*Bunbuku-Chagama*"). Rescued from captivity by a tinker, the badger decides to take the shape of a magical tea kettle to help the man. (In some versions it is sold to the good-hearted tinker by frightened priests of the Morin Temple.)[13] With its head, legs and bushy tail protruding, it performs acrobatic stunts; and the fame of the strange-looking kettle spreads. People flock to pay and see the show. In this way, the tinker grows wealthy. The kettle is ultimately returned to a temple and kept as a treasure there.[14]

Most of the badger tales, however, depict the animal as a rogue and a trickster whose practical jokes range from harmless to tragic.

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9. Keigo Seki, *Folktales of Japan* (Chicago, 1963), pp. 6–14.
10. Casal, *op. cit.*, pp. 53–54.
11. A. B. Mitford Redesdale, *Tale of Old Japan* (London, 1871), pp. 110–116.
12. De Visser, *op. cit.*, p. 85.
13. F. Holland Davis, *Myths and Legends of Japan* (London, 1912), pp. 261–263.
14. Helen McAlpine and William McAlpine, *Japanese Tales and Legends* (New York, 1958), pp. 202–210.

"Seventy-five Badgers" is a tale which represents the cruelty of some of the *tanuki's* acts. An old woman is lured into a village by a band of reckless badgers and is killed by one of them. When her grieving husband goes to a shrine seeking aid, he is told to get "Todarabo, Dog of Tsukidana." With the help of the dog, he disposes of the tricksters.[15]

At the other end of the prankster tale spectrum, is the robust and earthy joker. In a story from Sakashita, a man is duped into thinking he is spying on a badger who has transformed itself into a *samisen* player. When the man is about to reveal the identity of the musician to onlookers, he suddenly discovers that he is actually staring at the buttocks of a horse.[16]

Haunting houses and other sites is a favorite pastime of the *tanuki.* A thirteenth century account mentions a captain of the guards staying overnight at a chapel visited by a monster. He waits for the spirit, stabs it, and awakens the next morning to find a dead badger in its place.[17]

From an eighteenth century collection of ghost tales, *Kwaidan Toshiotoko* comes still another story of an Yedo physician who makes a night call to a home where all the people turn out to have long faces and single eyes in the middle of their foreheads. These creatures prove to be badgers in disguise and the house itself turns out to be an illusion created by these pranksters.[18]

Still another story centers on a badger who haunts a certain slope in Yedo. All innocent wayfarers who walk the area at night are said to encounter people without any faces.[19]

Sometimes these trickster tales reflect a strong Buddhistic influence. An example of this is "Common Sense" in which a devout priest is deceived into believing that he is able to see *Fugen Bosatsu* (a *Bodhisattva*). A wise and skeptical hunter shoots an arrow into the saintly vision and thus reveals it to be nothing more than a large badger.[20]

In other instances, the tanuki's bag of tricks involves throwing objects. Two thirteenth century accounts record such events. A warrior named Shoda Yoshinari who is guarding a Kyoto palace is bombarded with potsherds until he finally captures the culprit: an old, hairless

15. Richard M. Dorson, *Folk Legends of Japan* (Tokyo, 1962), p. 137.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 135–136.
17. De Visser, *op. cit.*, pp. 45–46.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 69–70.
19. Lafcadio Hearn, *Kwaidan; Stories and Studies of Strange Things* (Tokyo, 1971), pp. 77–80.
20. Iafcadio Hearn, *Kotto* (New York, 1902), pp. 21–26.

badger.[21] In the other story, a constant rain of pebbles on a minister's house is also discovered to be the work of badgers.[22]

The animal's large scrotum figures into such tales as "The Badger's Trick" ("*Tanuki no Hachi-joo-jiki*"). In this story, a traveling mat-maker loses his way in the mountains and stops at a lonely hut. While warming himself there, he starts to pull some loose threads from the mat and finally stabs the mat with a knife. The house crumbles and the man discovers that he has been hosted by a badger who created an illusion of the house, using its scrotum to fashion the eight-mat floor.[23]

In many cases, the badger proves less crafty than it thinks it is and winds up sadly, even fatally, outwitted.

"The Quail and the Badger" ("*Baké Kurabé*") shows the animal as a foolish dupe. Urged by the quail into watching a nobleman's procession, it changes into a wooden roadside stake and gets a knock on the head intended for the quail. Angered at the bird, it grabs the quail in its mouth but is tricked into releasing it by talking.[24]

In another nineteenth century tale, a badger attempts to fool a pair of young lovers. When the man backs out of a double suicide pact, unbeknownst to his sweetheart, the badger takes his form. It meets the girl and they hang themselves—only the girl proves to be heavier than the badger and it winds up strangling while the girl survives.[25]

A badger even in its changed form can be detected by a clever protagonist. Sometimes it may be luminous. In downpours its garments are supposed to remain dry.[26]

Young prince Kazutoyo and his retainer discover a beautiful woman standing in the rain in "The Prince and the Badger." The retainer is bewitched by her charms, but the quick-thinking prince kills her. Later he explains that he knew she was a badger by the strange dryness of her clothes and her attraction to the fish they were carrying (the badger is supposed to be inordinately fond of fish, parched beans and *saké* or rice wine).[27]

Summary

The badger in Japanese folklore is a complex creature possessing

21. De Visser, *op. cit.*, pp. 45–46.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
23. Hiroko Ikeda, "A Type and Motif Index of Japanese Folk Literature," in *FF Communications*, no. 209 (1971), p. 86.
24. Seki, *op. cit.*, pp. 14–20.
25. De Visser, *op. cit.*, p. 93.
26. Casal, *op. cit.*, p. 52.
27. Redesdale, *op. cit.*, pp. 117–122.

special powers and capable of assuming a hundred shapes. It chants Buddhist sutras and makes merry with its belly-drum. It tricks unwary peasants travelers and devout priests and metes out revenge in its own cruel ways. Sometimes the duped, more often the irrepressible trickster, the badger weaves a unique magic in the oral tradition of Japan.