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The Metamorphosis of the Kappa

Transformation of Folklore to Folklorism in Japan

Abstract

The *kappa* is a mischievous water goblin of Japanese folklore. This article presents an overview of some of the characteristics of the *kappa*, including the dish-like cavity on its head, its penchant for eating cucumbers, its aversion to gourds and to iron, and its habit of trying to pull horses, cattle, and humans into the water. Some of the major critical literature regarding the *kappa* is discussed, including work by Yanagita Kunio, Orikuchi Shinobu, Ishida Eiichirō, and structural anthropologist Cornelis Ouwehand. The concept of folklorism (*folklorismus*) is briefly defined and applied to the *kappa* belief. Through folklorism, artists, writers, cartoonists, and commercial interests have transformed the *kappa* from a malicious and unpleasant water deity into a harmless and lovable mascot.

Key words: *kappa*—folklorism (*folklorismus*)—water deity—lower mythology

THE *NIHON SHOKI* 日本書紀, one of the earliest extant written documents in Japanese history, records that in the year 379 a *mizuchi* (water snake) living in the Kahashima River in the Province of Kibi was harassing people: “Now when travelers were passing that place on their journey, they were surely affected by its poison, so that many died.” Finally the district warden,

a man of fierce temper and of great bodily strength, stood over the pool of the river fork and flung into the water three whole calabashes, saying: “Thou art continually belching up poison and therewithal plaguing travellers. I will kill thee, thou water snake. If thou canst sink these calabashes, then will I take myself away, but if thou canst not sink them, then will I cut up thy body.” (ASTON 1972, 298–99; MARUYAMA 1966, 245–46)

The *mizuchi*, indeed unable to sink the gourds, was slain by the district warden and the river was made safe.

But this *mizuchi*,¹ perhaps the first documented appearance of the water spirit that would become known popularly in Japan as the *kappa* 河童, did not disappear. On 24 February 1995, for example, the evening edition of the *Yomiuri Shinbun* newspaper records the appearance of a *kappa* in the Imagawa district of the city of Yukuhashi in Fukuoka Prefecture. There, rather than harassing people, the *kappa* serves as a friendly symbol of the district: he is a cute, smiling, comical figure welcoming people to the Imagawa Kappa Railroad Station and the Imagawa Kappa Post Office (*YOMIURI SHINBUN* 1995; see figure 1).

The difference between these two manifestations of the *kappa* is startling. But the latter image is quite recent, and it is hardly necessary to go all the way back to the *Nihon shoki* to find descriptions of vicious and mischievous *kappa*. Indeed, most collected versions of the *kappa* belief from the Edo (c.1600–1867) or Meiji (1868–1912) periods reveal a grotesque and poten-

tially deadly creature, one with some very odd and unpleasant habits. It was not until relatively recent times that this *kappa* of folklore underwent a metamorphosis that brought it back to life as a cute, harmless creature, the *kappa* of folklorism. An examination of the dynamics of this shift from folklore to folklorism reveals a great deal about how a folk interprets changes in the creatures of its imagination, as well as about the interplay of folklore, literature, art, and commercial interests; it also serves both to demonstrate and question the nature and function of folklorism.



FIGURE 1. The “Imagawa Post Office” insignia.

THE *KAPPA* IN FOLKLORE

Before exploring the folkloristic transformation of the *kappa*, it is important first to understand what a *kappa* is, or *was*. Although the *kappa* has existed for many centuries, the image that is perhaps most commonly associated with the creature comes from material gathered by folklorists and amateur collectors in the early twentieth century. This image is complex. The *kappa* is probably the best-known creature of the Japanese folk imagination; its manifestations cut across genre lines, appearing in folk religion, beliefs, legends, folktales, and folk metaphors. It is a creature associated with water—usually slow-moving freshwater rivers and pools, but occasionally salt water (e.g., ORIKUCHI 1955, 290). It is known throughout the Japanese archipelago, from Hokkaidō in the north to the Okinawan Islands in the south.

The wide distribution of the *kappa* is reflected in its many regional types as well as in the numerous dialectal variations of its name. Although the word *kappa*, originally from the Kantō region, meaning child (童) of the river (河), has come to be generally associated with the creature, there are more than eighty regional variations (ŌNO 1994, 14), including: *kawappa*, *gawappa*, *kawako*, *kōgo*, *kawatarō*, *mizushi*, *mizuchi*, *enkō*, *kawaso*, *suitengu*, *komahiki*, and *dangame*. ISHIKAWA has classified and mapped out the lineages of the *kappa* names in accordance with their possible derivations (1985, 41–64). Some of the names reflect the creature’s physical resemblance to a child (e.g., *kawappa*, *kawako*); others its resemblance to a monkey (e.g., *enkō*), a soft-shelled turtle (e.g., *dangame*), or an otter (e.g., *kawaso*); still

other names are indicative of some of the *kappa*'s traits (e.g., *komahiki* [horse puller]).

The *kappa* is small, about the size of a three-to-four-year-old child, although in some versions it can be as large as a ten-year-old. According to some reports the entire body is covered with hair, while in other data it is covered with scales. The *kappa* smells fishy, and in color is often blue-yellow, with a blue-black face, but there are countless variations of these elements. Almost always the *kappa* has a carapace on its back, and its face is sharp with a beak-like mouth. Although these characteristics might lead some to believe that the *kappa* has its origins in the *suppon* (JOYA 1961, 444), other animals have certainly played a similar role in influencing its shape. Particularly striking is the tie between the monkey (*nihonzaru*, a macaque) and the *kappa*, an association that has been investigated by several scholars (among them Yanagita, Ishida, and Ouwehand). It is clear, therefore, that although the *kappa* image certainly bears a resemblance to several existing animal forms, it is not exclusively derived from any one of them.

The versions and variants of the *kappa* are numerous, so that the descriptions here must be accepted as no more than a synthesis of some of the more commonly described traits. One characteristic that appears again and again, however, is the dish-like cavity on top of the *kappa*'s head. This dish, or *sara* 皿, contains a liquid usually described simply as water, although the exact composition of the fluid is not always specified. But, whether it is water or some other liquid, it represents the life force of the *kappa*; if it dries up or spills, the *kappa* loses its power, and—in some accounts—dies. Many legends about the *kappa* refer to this *sara* and the potency of the liquid it contains.

One legend from Okayama Prefecture, for example, involves not only the *sara*, but also another common trait of the *kappa*: its penchant for the sport of *sumō*. In this version of the legend, some children are playing by the water when a child with whom they are unacquainted appears and challenges them to *sumō*. Observing this child closely, they realize it is actually a *kappa*, and that there is water in the *sara* on its head. Accordingly, they shake their own heads; the *kappa* imitates them, spilling the water. Bereft of all strength, it is forced to leave (ISHIKAWA 1985, 175).

This love of the sport of *sumō* can be found throughout much *kappa* lore (see e.g., ISHIKAWA 1985, 163–76; IIDA 1993, 153–60). One common method for defeating the *kappa* when challenged to *sumō*, or any other confrontation, is simply to bow politely. The *kappa*, though mischievous, is essentially a polite creature who defers to human ritual; it will bow in response, spilling its water, and thus losing its power.

One of the better known of the *kappa*'s traits is its love of *kyūri* 胡瓜, or



FIGURE 2. A modern artist's rendition of a *kappa* based on folkloric data.
(Source: MIZUKI 1994, 159)

which the *kappa* is partial include *nasu* 茄子 (Japanese eggplant), *soba* 蕎麦 (buckwheat noodles), *nattō* 納豆 (fermented soybeans), and *kabocha* 南瓜 (pumpkin) (TAKEDA 1988, 12).

Although the *kappa* is attracted to some foods of the *uri* 瓜, or melon, grouping—such as *kyūri* and *kabocha*—it is clear that it has an aversion to *hyōtan* 瓢箪 (gourds), which are also of the melon group. The *Nihon shōki* passage cited above shows that the power of *hyōtan* to confound the *kappa* was understood early on. In one of the folktales involving *kappa*, the so-called *kappa muko*, or “*kappa* bridegroom tale” (Ikeda-AaTh 312B; see IKEDA 1971, 74–75), the same motif appears. A farmer, whose fields have dried up because of drought, offers his daughter to anybody who can irrigate them. A *kappa* succeeds in this task and receives the reluctant bride. The daughter, however, challenges the *kappa* to sink some gourds in the river. The *kappa* soon exhausts itself trying to complete this impossible task, and abandons the marriage.

There seems, in fact, to be a profound oppositional relationship between the cucumber, with its 98% water content (NORRMAN and HAARBERG 1980, 20), and the dry, hollow *hyōtan*. In shape and in moisture content the cucumber clearly represents a fertility symbol,³ while the *hyōtan*, with its hollow, water-resistant characteristics, may be seen as a threat to this same moisture fertility. A related interpretation might posit on the other hand that both melon forms represent fertility but that the *kyūri* is a symbol of the male aspect while the *hyōtan*, with its womb-like nature (and the fact that *hyōtan* often contain seeds), represents the female aspect. Just as the *kappa* loses its potency upon spilling the water in its *sara*, so the *hyōtan*, as a dry vessel that can contain and carry away liquid, may also represent to the *kappa* a potential loss of moisture and potency. The same sort of wet-dry

cucumbers. Many of the festivals associated with *kappa* include offerings of cucumbers (e.g., TAKEDA 1988, 12; ORIKUCHI 1955, 299–300). Here again, the complexity of the *kappa* belief is apparent: as Takeda points out, there are some regions where it is believed that eating a cucumber and then swimming will lead to certain attack by a *kappa*, while in other areas it is a way to ensure protection against attack (TAKEDA 1988, 11–12).² Other foods to

dichotomy as outlined by DUNDES (1980) for Indo-European and Semitic cultures may be operating here. Of course, any analysis of the *kappa*'s relationship to the *kyūri* and the *hyōtan* is necessarily complicated by the specific religious and historic contexts.

Other *kappa* aversions include sesame, ginger (TAKEDA 1988, 12), saliva and iron (ŌNO 1994, 42). This dislike of iron is a characteristic of almost all water spirits (ISHIDA 1950, 33–34). The motif, however, is not limited to water spirits; it has long been recognized as a trait common to many creatures of lower mythology. As Tylor points out, “The Oriental jinn are in such deadly terror of iron, that its very name is a charm against them; and so in European folk-lore iron drives away fairies and elves, and destroys their power” (TYLOR 1958, vol. 1, 140).⁴

In most accounts, the *kappa*'s hands and feet—as might be expected for a water spirit—are webbed. The *kappa*'s arms, however, have some interesting and unexpected characteristics. According to the *Wakan sansai zue* 和漢三才図会, an encyclopedia-like text originally published in the early 1700s, the *kawatarō* (*kappa*) has arms that can slide smoothly through from side to side (TERAJIMA 1987, 159; figure 3). This is because the right and left arms of the *kappa* are connected; as Yanagita explains, “it is as if the arm is elastic because it goes through from right to left” (YANAGITA 1964, 108).⁵ Significant also is the fact that in many of the legends associated with the *kappa*, the arm is easily yanked off. Both of these factors are explained in a sort of *kappa* origin legend that has many versions. In simplified form it is the story of a carpenter who, needing extra help, makes a number of straw dolls. He breathes life into them and they assist him in his work. But when construction is completed, he disposes of the dolls in the river where they are transformed into *kappa*.⁶ The easily detachable, interconnected arm is attributed, therefore, to the straw arm being made from one sheaf of straw or bamboo stuck through the body of the doll from right to left (ORIKUCHI 1955, 298; ŌNO 1994, 30).

This brings us finally to some of the more mischievous traits of the *kappa*. Not only does the *kappa* have a penchant for pulling both children and adults into the water, but it often does this in order to steal the liver, a feat it achieves by reaching its arm up through the victim's anus to snatch the desired organ.⁷ This propensity is not limited to a desire for human body parts; indeed the most comprehensive scholarly research done on *kappa* has concerned its habit of pulling into the water both horses and cows (YANAGITA 1964; ISHIDA 1950).

Before the *kappa* can reach a human's liver, however, it must also take an organ called the *shirikodama* 尻子玉. According to a standard Japanese dictionary, a *shirikodama* is “a ball once thought to be at the mouth of the

anus” (KINDAICHI 1989, 564). The result of having a *shirikodama* taken by a *kappa*—inevitably—is death. Physiologically, however, this organ does not exist. One explanation for the belief then is that the bodies of drowning victims have an “open anus” as if something has been removed (ISHIKAWA 1985, 120). It has been noted, however, that this loosening of the sphincter muscles in death is not limited to drowning victims (ŌNO 1994, 51), so the belief still remains rather mysterious. A folk explanation brings us back to the story of the carpenter and his straw dolls/*kappa*. Some versions report that upon throwing the dolls into the river, the carpenter cried, “Eat people’s anuses!” (though it is not clear *why* he yelled this). Other explanations of the *shirikodama* and liver-taking tendencies of the *kappa* relate that these are offerings brought to a snake-shaped dragon deity (ANDŌ and SEINO 1993, 41); this explanation explicitly links the *kappa* legend to various folk religious beliefs in Japan and other parts of Asia. Linguistically, a homonymic relationship between the word *tama* 玉, meaning ball or jewel, and *tama* 魂, meaning spirit or soul, has also been suggested (Ōno 1994, 52). The character *tama* 霊, also meaning spirit or soul, represents another possible correlation. Thus, the jewel or ball contains the soul or spirit; its removal means death for the human and extended life and potency for the *kappa*.⁸

The *kappa* belief, therefore, may embody deeply rooted anal and scatological associations. Anal-erotic links indeed seem evident in the stories that describe the victim of a *shirikodama* attack smiling somewhat ecstatically at the instant of violation (see e.g., ŌNO 1994, 52; ANDŌ and SEINO 1993, 41–42). The *kappa*’s obsession with the *shiri* 尻 (buttocks, hips) is made apparent in legends that describe the *kappa* hiding in the toilet, waiting to stroke or fondle a female victim’s *shiri*. Although this particular habit of the *kappa* is not considered a murderous one, it portrays the *kappa* as a mischievous and sexually threatening creature; ŌNO somewhat facetiously labels the *kappa* a “pioneer of sexual harassment” (1994, 52). Orikuchi points out that, in the past, toilets were often situated above rivers; more important, however, is his suggestion that if we go back to an early legend of a *kappa*



FIGURE 3. Kavatarō from the *Wakan sansai zue*.

transforming itself into a red lacquered arrow and entering the “shy place” of a woman, we can see that the *kappa*’s objective in hiding in the toilet is not necessarily to take the *shirikodama* (ORIKUCHI 1955, 292–93). Indeed, stories of *kappa* raping women are common. YANAGITA, for example, reports:

In a household beside the river in Matsuzaki village women have become pregnant with *kappas*’ children for up to two generations. When they are born, these children are hacked to pieces, put into small wine casts, and buried in the ground. They are grotesque. (1975, 41)

The relationship of the *kappa* to the folk is one of great complexity and paradox. Clearly, the *kappa* is recognized as a threatening and mischievous creature with lethal tendencies, in many ways a metaphor for the violent potential of the natural world. But there is also a sense of both foolishness and honesty associated with it; these aspects hint at the dual nature of the *kappa* as a trickster figure with negative and destructive qualities, and also as a water/agriculture deity with positive regenerative qualities. Thus for example, the *kappa* is notorious for attempting to lure horses and cows to a watery death; but the key word here is *attempting*. In most versions of this legend, the *kappa* fails; its plan backfires and it (or just its arm) is pulled by the startled horse all the way to the stable. The *kappa*’s success rate in fondling women’s *shiri* in the toilet may be slightly higher, but often on its second attempt its arm is grabbed and yanked from the body. And when its mischief goes awry, when it is weakened from losing water from its *sara* or incapacitated (emasculated) by a yanked-off arm, the honest and benevolent side of the *kappa*’s nature surfaces. In order to be set free or receive back its arm (the arm can often be reattached within a certain number of days), the *kappa* will take an oath. It will pledge, for instance, to stop harassing people in the area, or to assist with work in the fields, or to teach its captor secret bonesetting techniques and formulas for making medicine and salves. It should be noted that this last trait—the *kappa*’s familiarity with bonesetting and other medical procedures—is one of the most widespread of the beliefs associated with the *kappa* (see e.g., ISHIKAWA 1985, 217–30).

Not only does the *kappa* abide honestly by its pledge, but it will often also bring periodic offerings of fresh fish to its former captor. One legend from Ōita Prefecture, for example, tells of a mischievous *kappa* captured and tied to a pillar. It convinces the grandmother of the household to set it free, and from that time on it places a large fish on top of the kettle on the first day of every new year. Then, one year, a child leaves an iron knife out near the kettle, and the *kappa* stops coming (CHIBA 1988, 28–29). As Chiba elaborates, these positive legends about the *kappa* are quite abundant, and a fish

offering from a *kappa* has come to represent a blessing of good fortune for the receiving household (CHIBA 1988, 28–32).

In many ways, therefore, the *kappa* seems to be derived from a *suijin* 水神 (water deity) and is intimately associated with fertility and the harvest. But often it does not simply reside in the water. As TAKEDA points out, “reports of the *kappa* coming and going between the mountains and the rivers twice a year are quite common” (1988, 13). In this bipartite conception, the *kappa* divides its time equally between the mountains and the river, spending autumn and winter as a *yama no kami* 山の神 (mountain deity) or a *yamawaro* and the spring and summer growing season as a *mizu no kami* 水の神 (water deity) or a *kawawaro* (*kappa*). These comings and goings often occur during vernal and autumnal equinoxes and are accompanied by various rituals to usher in or out the *kappa*, insure its happiness, and secure the success of the growing season. Again, the *kappa*’s image as an agricultural deity is complex and not always clear (see, e.g., TSUBOI 1988), but it is often considered to be a sort of “lower status spirit” (CHIBA 1988, 28) possessing many characteristics of a *kami* 神 (deity). That local *kappa* festivals still exist in some areas today implies that whatever the exact nature of the *kappa* status, *kappa*-deity belief was certainly at one time a strong component of Japanese folk religion in many regions.

KAPPA SCHOLARSHIP

Collections of folklore relating to the *kappa* are abundant.⁹ Scholarly interpretation of this lore generally highlights its profound ties with folk religion and characterizes the *kappa* as having traits of *kami* (deities), *yōkai* 妖怪 (monsters/apparitions), *seirei* 精霊 (spirits), and animals. The first major interpretive work on the *kappa* was done by Yanagita Kunio. In his *Santō mindan shū* 山島民談集, Yanagita focuses in particular on the *kappa*’s habit of pulling horses into the water, and on the relationship between horses and monkeys. In his *Yōkai dangi* 妖怪談義 he discusses the way in which monsters and spirits represent a sort of degradation of original *kami* beliefs.

Another influential early work is the short but provocative essay, “*Kappa no hanashi*” 河童の話 by Orikuchi Shinobu. Orikuchi covers many aspects of the *kappa* belief, relating, for example, the *kappa*’s *sara* to the *wangashibuchi* 椀貸し淵 (bowl-lending pools) legend found in many parts of the country.¹⁰ Orikuchi also focuses on the *kappa*/horse and monkey/horse relationships, a direction taken up more fully in ISHIDA Eiichirō’s *Kappa komabikikō* 河童駒引考, the only major discussion of the *kappa* to be translated into English (1950). Ishida uses the *kappa* as a starting point for a comparative exploration of the complex network of relationships between water deities, horses, cows, and monkeys; he finds similar ideas and links throughout

Europe and Asia.

The relationships between the monkey and the *kappa*, and between the monkey and the horse, are indeed provocative. The monkey has been characterized in various legends as the natural enemy of the *kappa*. On the other hand, as Yanagita and Ishida document, the monkey is a protector of the horse. Monkey performances, and monkeys themselves, have traditionally been associated with stables, and in many of the legends concerning the defeat of a *kappa*, the pledge making takes place in a horse's stable, where the *kappa* is at its weakest.¹¹

Dutch structural anthropologist Cornelis OUWEHAND develops these ideas on the monkey-horse-*kappa* relationship one step further, setting up a structural model of the relationship between *kappa* and monkey (with the horse in the middle, finding itself literally pulled in both directions), between *kawawaro* and *yamawaro*, between river and mountain. His interpretation portrays the *kappa* as a trickster figure, with a negative nature in or around the water, and a positive nature on land (1964, 203–20).

Many of the more influential shorter essays on *kappa* have been collected by ŌSHIMA Tatehiko in his 1988 book entitled, simply, *Kappa*. Included, for example, are Takeda's work on water deity belief in relation to the river/mountain incarnations of the *kappa* creature; Chiba's discussion of the *kappa*'s assistance in agricultural work; Tsuboi's research on the *kappa* and various agricultural beliefs; and Okuno's analysis of *kappa/yamawaro* beliefs as developing at the point of contact between mountains and flatlands. In another important book, *Shinpan kappa no sekai* 新版河童の世界 ISHIKAWA Jun'ichirō (1985) has brought together and summarized much of the data and analysis concerning the *kappa* to create a valuable scholarly resource.

Anthropologist and folklorist KOMATSU Kazuhiko claims that the scholarly discussion of *kappa* has thus far treated *kappa* (and other *yōkai*) simply by considering them in relation to kami (1985, 226–27). Komatsu encourages a new approach; in *Ijinron—minzokushakai no shinsei* 異人論 民俗社会の心性 he discusses the nature of the outsider in Japanese society from a folkloric viewpoint, and interprets the *yōkai* in a similar light. He draws a connection (246–58) between the image of the *kappa* and the *kawa no tami* 川の民, *kawaramono* 河原者, *hinin* 非人 (the outcaste or outcast people on the periphery of mainstream society). Komatsu's point is that it is critical to take into account other considerations, such as the social mechanisms through which folklore may be used to separate one group of people from another.

Indeed, research on the *kappa* is far from exhausted, as evidenced by the recent publication of *Kappa no nihonshi* 河童の日本史 (NAKAMURA 1996), a substantial discussion of various aspects of the *kappa* legend through history.

Clearly the continuing research on the *kappa* will seek to understand the creature not only as representing a kami figure, but, as an example of a complex historical and psychological construction of attitudes and beliefs regarding religion and society; like all folklore, it provides a window through which to view the folk who created it.

FOLKLORE AND FOLKLORISM

As previously noted, the *kappa* image discussed thus far, and the conception most often interpreted by scholars, may be considered the common folkloric conception of the creature, representing ideas that circulated from the Edo period into the early part of the present century. By the 1960s, however, to even a casual observer of the *kappa* phenomenon it was clear that “though the belief in its existence and murderous intent is traditional, at present probably no city dweller believes it” (JOYA 1961, 443). With the rapid industrialization and urbanization of Japan over the last several decades, one might expect the *kappa* belief to have died out completely. And yet, a search of the *Asahi Shinbun* (newspaper) database reveals that between 1985 and 1995 some 600 articles appeared nationwide either directly or indirectly relating to *kappa*.¹² The *kappa*, then, is very much alive in modern Japan; but it is a *kappa* radically different from the grotesque and mischievous creature that typifies its conception in folklore. It has become a clean, cute creature, used as a symbol of tourism, of commerce, of clean water, and even as a symbol of village and national identity. A brief discussion of some of the influences that went into creating this new *kappa* reveals the role played by the mechanism of folklorism.

The term *folklorismus* (folklorism), introduced by Hans Moser in 1962, has come to be used by scholars to discuss what Regina BENDIX terms folklore “out of context, folklore which has been altered and even invented for specific purposes” (1988, 5). It is a term that requires the folklorist to step beyond the boundaries of the discipline of folklore per se, and look at the role of art, literature, mass media, and commercial influences. The question of exactly how to define folklorism is a difficult one and the subject of much debate. It clearly includes under its heading the idea of “fakelore,” explained by Richard DORSON as “the presentation of spurious and synthetic writings under the claim that they are genuine folklore” (1969, 60). Unfortunately, tracing “the spurious and synthetic” and sifting out the fake from the folk are tasks often made more difficult by a variety of influences; not the least of these has been the academic study of folklore itself, which has often brought an awareness to the folk group that its indigenous traditions may have commercial value.¹³

Indeed, Moser seems to have built into his own definition a recognition

that inevitably any particular item of folklore, when recognized as such, must eventually succumb to folklorism: “It is a term of great breadth which draws on two strands: the increased cultural leveling which leads to an interest in things ‘folk’ and the practice of satisfying, strengthening or awakening this interest” (Moser, in BENDIX 1988, 6). More recently, Gulnar KENDIRBAEVA has defined folklorism as simply “the professional artistic creation of folklore in all its forms: in science and in pedagogy, on the stage, at festivals and during holidays (including ceremonies), in the mass media, in recordings and advertisements, in tourism, in crafts, and in everyday life” (1994, 98).

For the purposes of this study, the definition of folklorism will be kept very broad but will focus on the idea of awareness: in other words, it is the *consciousness* of the value of an item of folklore that plays a critical role in the development of folklorism. This consciousness often does not originate with the folk group whose folklore item is directly in question, but may be introduced by a group one or more steps removed. It is this awareness of value, however, that leads to a manipulation of the folklore item. The product of this conscious manipulation, then, be it preservation, transformation, or revival, may be seen as an item of folklorism. It should be kept in mind also that this item of folklorism may, in the end, serve a function remarkably similar to the original function of the item of folklore. And indeed, although for the purpose of discussion, folklore and folklorism will be treated here as two separate conceptions, ultimately it is the confluence of the two notions—the sense that they represent a continuum—that is most significant.¹⁴

THE METAMORPHOSIS OF THE *KAPPA*

The *kappa*'s value as a commercial symbol was recognized as far back as the Edo period, and it clearly derives from the legendary traits of the creature. A legend from the Hakata area of Kyūshū provides a typical example. It tells of a *kappa* trying to molest the wife of a doctor when she uses the toilet. The second time this happens the wife manages to cut off the *kappa*'s arm. In exchange for the arm's return, the *kappa* teaches the doctor the secret technology of bonesetting. The story concludes by pointing out that this household profited as practitioners of bonesetting for many generations (ŌNO 1994, 70–71). It is certainly possible to interpret this legend as a fabrication consciously building upon the *kappa* belief system in order to legitimize the claim to secret powers on the part of a particular medical household. As such, it would qualify as folklorism.

For the purposes of the present study, however, it is more fruitful to look at the *kappa* image in the twentieth century, when folklorism on a major, and often national, scale began to affect the *kappa* phenomenon, driving the

image far beyond its more “traditional” folklore conception. The process by which the *kappa* changed is exceedingly complex, and any investigation of it can only touch the surface. Following roughly an outline constructed by Wada Hiroshi, however, we can break it down into three major waves, or “*kappa* booms” (KAPPA RENPŌ KYŌWA KOKU 1991, 28). The first wave came after the publication in 1927 of Akutagawa Ryūnosuke’s short novel, *Kappa*. The work, important as a social satire in a Swiftian vein, takes the human narrator to a land of *kappa*. In his depiction of the *kappa* characters, Akutagawa clearly draws on his own intimate knowledge of *kappa* folklore,¹⁵ but also embellishes it freely with imagination and wit. Akutagawa was already recognized as an important writer at the time; the sensation created by his suicide soon after the appearance of *Kappa*, combined with the fact that his portrayal of the creature was “so personal that one might suspect Akutagawa of seeing his own image in it” (YU 1972, 86), led to great interest in the novel and great interest in *kappa*. Already then, Akutagawa’s personal image of the *kappa* was receiving broader general attention than any single manifestation in folklore; with this one novel, the identity of the *kappa* was indelibly altered.

For Akutagawa, the *kappa* served as a vehicle to express his feelings about the human condition. This same use also comes through in the work of artist Ogawa Usen (1868–1938). Although Usen himself saw *kappa* as “symbols of freedom in the realm of nature” (OGAWA 1993, 20), many of his scenes depict *kappa* performing human activities; this has prompted observations such as SAITŌ’s rather dramatic revelation on contemplating Usen’s work: “Ahh, the roots of the *kappa* are human” (1994, 10). In the light of folklorism, this use of the *kappa* as a metaphor for human beings is important because it is a conscious employment of a popular image for specific purposes, and also because it creates a function for the *kappa* that was not an explicit part of its folklore conception. In fact, as KOMATSU points out, the *kappa* represented the realm of that which was *outside* the human sphere (1985, 240–45); in folklorism, the *kappa* is a metaphoric human—the significance of its actions lies in its *similarities* to humans, not in its *differences*. It might be said that the *kappa* of folklore, with its water deity origins, served to help explain the mysterious world outside the human realm. The folklorism *kappa*, on the other hand, has been used to explain and more clearly visualize this human realm.

The second wave of enthusiasm for the *kappa* came in the 1950s and 1960s when the children who grew up with the images developed by Akutagawa and Usen began to create their own versions. Not surprisingly, these new images followed in the folklorism tradition of explicitly using the *kappa* as a metaphor for humans. Particularly influential is the *mangaka*

(cartoonist) Shimizu Kon 清水 崑 (1912–1974), whose comic *Kappa tengoku* (*Kappa Heaven*) began nationwide circulation through the *Asahi Weekly* 週聞朝日 in 1953. His portrayal of a “salaryman-style” *kappa* had wide impact “in planting a new image of *kappa* in the minds of the people” (KAPPA RENPŌ KYŌWA KOKU 1992, 26). Coming slightly later is another cartoonist, Kojima Kō 小島 功 (1928–). Kojima’s naked female *kappas*, with their pink nipples and thick eyelashes, are indistinguishable from humans but for their colorfully patterned carapaces and the delicate blue *sara* perched atop their heads (figure 4). Indeed, one of the features of the folklorism image of the *kappa*—perhaps starting with Akutagawa—is the advent of the female *kappa*. Although not completely unheard of in folklore (e.g., ORIKUCHI 1955, 289–90), the female *kappa* seems to have represented an anomaly. Kojima’s sexy female *kappas*, therefore, indicate an inversion of the *kappa* belief: the sexually threatening but physically repulsive male of folklore has been transformed into the sexually alluring and physically attractive female of folklorism.

The ubiquitousness of these new *kappa* images served to distance the creature from the original legends and tales concerning it. In the popular urban imagination the *kappa* had become a friendly and familiar creature of cartoons and statuettes. By 1960s a “*kappa* craze” in the Tokyo area had been noted: “Crude and cheap *kappa* amulets and caricatures of many kinds can be found everywhere. Many products, including books, go under the *kappa* trademarks, and shops call themselves ‘*Kappa*’ something or other” (CASAL 1964, 190). The amulets and trademarks described by Casal were probably based less on the grotesque creature of folklore than on the caricatures of the *mangaka* and other artists. Although *kappa* festivals and other remnants of the water deity belief could still be found in the countryside, this conception of the *kappa* seems to have become separated from that of the new urban/folklorism manifestation. Indeed, the bifurcation of the folklore and folklorism image becomes explicit in the generic use of the word “*kappa*” for the folklorism identity of the creature in contrast with the dialect variations of the name found in the rural versions.

In a very general sense, therefore, the folklorism of the *kappa* up until this point might be interpreted as an awareness of the value of the folklore item on the part not of the folk group to whom it was indigenous (that is, the rural population to whom *kappa* belief was a natural and accepted part of life), but on the part of groups slightly removed from this rural setting. The writers and artists of the intellectual elite took it for artistic purposes; the writers, *mangaka*, and others of a more popular vein reworked this image for its entertainment and commercial value; finally, this altered form was reintroduced into the context from which it had originally come.

Indeed, by the mid-1970s the folklorism version of the *kappa*—in the guise of cartoon characters and other lighthearted manifestations—had penetrated the countryside, and “the activities of groups of *kappa* lovers throughout Japan began to prosper” (KAPPA RENPŌ KYŌWA KOKU 1992, 28). The rise of these groups represents the third wave of *kappa* enthusiasm and in many ways is characterized by a renewed interest in the regional nature of the *kappa* belief; significantly, however, this interest focused on the creation of new localized versions of the folklorism image rather than on the traditional local version. The *kappa* groups often adopted a particular *kappa* image (generally designed by a *mangaka*) in the name of *mura okoshi* (village revitalization). The *kappa*, with its roots in the natural environ-

ment and its long history of agricultural involvement, became the perfect symbol for the promotion of the countryside as a domestic tourist destination for the urban dweller seeking “nostalgic confirmation of the cultural landscape” (GRABURN 1983, 63).

Indeed, it has been pointed out that the lost innocence of the rural village came to be “recollected in the sentimental staging of planting rituals and folk song performances that have themselves become tourist attractions” (EHRENTAUT 1993, 271). The use of *kappa* for this purpose fits squarely into Moser’s own delineation of folklorism: “Through various tactics, the audience is offered an impressive mixture of genuine and falsified materials from folk culture, particularly in cultural enclaves where life still seems to breathe originality, strength and colour” (Moser cited in BENDIX 1988, 6). It is important, however, that the *kappa* used as a nostalgic symbol is not the grotesque and malicious creature of folklore, but rather the *kawaii* (cute) folklorism image created by the *mangaka* and others. The *kappa* may have served as the original impetus for these characters, but it is only its most benign characteristics—the *sara*, the carapace, the beaked mouth—that remain. The cleansing and domestication of the *kappa* parallels changes in



FIGURE 4. An example of one of Kojima Kō’s sexy female *kappa*. (Source: KAPPA RENPŌ KYŌWA KOKU 1991, 7)

the Japanese countryside itself, a countryside that has become more accessible, cleansed, in a sense, of the traditional discomforts of a rural environment. The cute *kappa* comes to be identified with a nostalgic image of the past, a time when, ironically, the *kappa* was not considered cute at all.

The dynamics of this usage of the *kappa* can be seen by looking at a specific local example. In a 1995 newspaper article (*Yomiuri Shinbun*), the postmaster of the Imagawa district of Yukuhashi City, Fukuoka Prefecture, explains that while looking at the quiet Imagawa River and thinking about village *okoshi*, “it occurred to me that we could do it through *kappa*. We called for creative myths and pictures of *kappa* from people in the area, and we had a contest...” Thus, although the inspiration for the *kappa* theme may have been the indigenous habitat, the motives of village revitalization represent a consciousness of the *kappa*’s power as a popular character; indeed, the idea of a contest of *individuals creating* their own myths clearly demonstrates the mechanism of folklorism at work.

The popularity of the *kappa* theme prompted the village to name a new railway station after the *kappa* (significantly, it is the generic word “*kappa*” rather than a local variant that has come to be used even at the village level). And more recently the postmaster has created for sale a *kappa* writing brush made from a reed. In a pamphlet distributed with the brush, he describes its inspiration: “If a *kappa* were to write a letter, I wondered what kind of brush would he use? With this playing in my imagination, I walked around the river area and the reeds caught my eye” (IMAGAWA KAPPA YŪBINKYOKU 1992). No attempt is made to associate the use of either writing brushes or reeds directly with a legend or a traditional belief; the postmaster himself claims credit for the invention. In so doing, there is no hint of dissemblance as in Dorson’s definition of fakelore, no attempt to present the *kappa* writing brush in the guise of “genuine folklore.” Indeed, the folklorism image of the *kappa* has come of age and developed its own charisma, its own value; as a theme for writers, artists, and commercial interests, the links that bind it to its folkloric roots are very flexible indeed.

In Imagawa, the post office itself has also changed its name to Imagawa Kappa Yūbinkyoku (Imagawa *Kappa* Post Office), and here one functional significance of the folklorism image is clear: the post office and the railroad station, two connecting points with the world outside the village, are named after the *kappa*. The *kappa*, then, has become a nationally recognized symbol of the countryside, of the past, an attractive emblem of the image villages would like to project to the outside world. As such, it should also be noted that the *kappa* may not be used exclusively for purposes of tourism; rather, it can also be seen in terms of the discourse on *furusato zukuri*, the creating of a hometown space. It is part of the creation and assertion of a local identity.

In this light it is not surprising that many of the organizations of *kappa* lovers call their groups *kappamura*, or *kappa* villages. ANDŌ and SEINO map out 50 such *kappamura* throughout Japan (1993, 210–11). Members of these *kappamura* vary widely, but include business people of all sorts, media interests, merchants, artists, writers, *mangaka*, collectors of “*kappa* goods,” and serious researchers and folklorists. The popularity of these local organizations led to the inception in 1988 of the Kappa Renpō Kyōwa Koku 河童連邦共和国 (Federal Republic of *Kappa* [FRK]). In its “letter of introduction,” a statement introducing its purpose and origins, the FRK explains: “Throughout all parts of the country, those who like *kappa* were making independent *kappa* countries or villages.” Relying for publicity “a great deal on television, radio, newspapers, etc.—the mass communications world,” a “*kappa* summit” was called to bring together these independent groups. This reliance on the mass media is clearly a part of the folklorism nature of the organization, as are the stated objectives: “On the basis of charity, courage, and humor, to build a bright and enjoyable environment, to arrange through *kappa* the mutual friendship of citizens...” (KAPPA RENPŌ KYŌWA KOKU 1992, 146).

In its nostalgic reconfiguration the *kappa* has come to represent a shared rural past. As such, it might be taken as a specifically Japanese character that serves as a symbol for Japan itself and for the Japanese people in contrast to people from other countries, in contrast that is, to people who have not shared this common rural past.¹⁶ This is often made explicit in the commercial use of the *kappa* image. Advertisements for a DC Credit Card, for example, feature a cute cartoon *kappa* hanging off the Eiffel Tower (KAPPA RENPŌ KYŌWA KOKU 1992, 94; figure 5). The *kappa* is inviting the trendy and sophisticated Japanese traveller to venture abroad, yet never leave his or her Japanese roots behind.

The pull of the *kappa*, however, is not completely divorced from its origins as a water deity. The FRK, realizing both the attraction of the *kappa* character and its symbolic associations with the environment, has started to use the *kappa* as a mascot for a water cleanup campaign under the slogan: “Water is

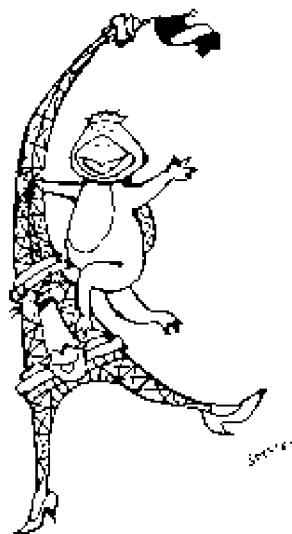


FIGURE 5. Advertisement for DC Card.

life; *kappa* is heart.” FRK explains: “We want to restore the water environment so that grasses once more will grow around the rivers of cities, and so that it will be all right to play there” (KAPPA RENPŌ KYŌWA KOKU 1992, 147; figure 6). In the folklore tradition, the *kappa* was a serious danger to children playing near the water. The use of the folklorism version of a *kappa* as a symbol for safe water therefore creates an ironic inversion of the original meaning. The campaign calls for clean rivers

so that *kappa* will come back: in modern Japan the *kappa* no longer represents a danger to the humans—it is the humans who represent a danger to the *kappa*.

But, both on a national and a regional scale, the *kappa* has become primarily a commercial icon. In a sense it has retained its powers of fertility, but transferred them from agriculture to the realm of commerce. In the merchandising of so-called *kappa* goods (e.g., pencil cases, stationery, lunch boxes) the creature is portrayed in a similar light to other *kawaii*, or cute, characters such as “Hello Kitty” and the frog “Kero Kero Keroppi.” The difference, of course, lies in the fact that the *kappa* is not originally an invention of the marketing world, but a creature from folklore with profound connections to folk religion and belief. In a sense, then, the folklorism *kappa* is a reinvention, a domesticated version modified through years of test marketing in literature, art, and popular culture. It is a straw doll into which a wide variety of meanings can be infused, for a wide variety of purposes. Indicative of this attitude are the comments made by FRK executive Yasumi Kanetarō that, just as America has Mickey Mouse, he would be pleased if Japan adopted *kappa* as a “pet mark” or mascot character (YASUMI et al. 1992, 93).

Roughly tracing the *kappa*’s journey through the twentieth century, we can see the forces that reinvented the *kappa* as an emblem—a deity—of commerce and tourism. First, the art and literature world, conscious of the *kappa*’s symbolic power in representing both human society as well as nature, adopted and remolded the *kappa* image. This brought it into a national context and tended to create a rather generic form of *kappa*, not dictated by local boundaries or regional customs. Next it was adopted by the *mangaka*, through whom it entered the world of popular culture on a major scale. At this point, the *kappa* as an icon of popular culture became fair game for commercial use on both national and regional levels. It became a paci-



FIGURE 6. A Federal Republic of Kappa logo. The slogan reads “Water is life; Kappa is heart.”

fied, harmless *kappa*, no longer “belching up poison,” no longer an odoriferous, malignant creature eating human livers and raping women. Rather, the *kappa* of the late twentieth century has been captured and tamed; the wildness and dangers of nature have been exorcised and it has become a cute, docile pet more acceptable in an urbanized industrial society.

But had the *kappa* not been snatched up by the mechanism of folklorism, it most likely would have died—or survived only as a museum relic in collections of folklore. Ironically, then, folklorism has kept the *kappa* image alive; it is a radically different image from the malicious water goblin of the past, but Japan itself is also radically different. The image of the *kappa*, whether we label it folklore or folklorism, has never been static; rather, it responds to the dynamic concerns of the people who are continuously reinventing it. Indeed, in the case of the *kappa*, one of the most important functions of the creature has been rediscovered in a very different context. As a water deity the *kappa* would, if treated right, ensure the economic survival of the community through agricultural success. In its revived form, in villages throughout Japan, the *kappa* still serves to irrigate and fertilize the land: not with water, but with tourism, local pride, and commercial success. As in the past, if treated right, the *kappa* will ensure economic survival.

NOTES

1. The direct correlation of the *kappa* with *mizuchi* is, of course, impossible to verify, but *mizuchi* seems to be generally accepted as a regional variant and cognate with, for example, *misushi* and *mitsujishi* in Ishikawa Prefecture, *medochi* in Iwate and Aomori Prefectures (CASAL 1964, 161), and even the Ainu term *mintsuchi* (ORIKUCHI 1955, 299). For details on *mizuchi*, see IIDA 1993 (104–10). For an overview and maps of dialectal variations for *kappa*, see ISHIKAWA 1985 (41–64).

2. The link between the *kappa* and the cucumber has found its way into modern Japan with the word for a type of sushi made with cucumbers: *kappa maki*. The history of the *kyūri* 胡瓜 (literally, a foreign 胡 melon 瓜) may have contributed to the way in which the folk came to view it and to the beliefs concerning it. Orikuchi, for example, notes that there are festivals in various regions in which a face is drawn on a cucumber and then the cucumber is sent down the river. The rationale behind this seems to be that if a frightening face is drawn on a foreign melon, then it can be used as a *katashiro* 形代 (an image used in certain festivals and religious ceremonies) representative of a foreign deity who has come and brought evil from outside the village; by sending this down the river, the village can symbolically rid itself of the evil. “From this idea the cucumber came to assume a mediating role in summer purifying festivals. Perhaps this gradually came to be thought of as a sort of *kuyō* 供養 ([religious] mass) for the water deity. The idea that *kappa* have an affinity for cucumbers followed from this” (ORIKUCHI 1955, 301). For more information on the *kappa*-cucumber dynamic, see IIDA (1993, 169–73) and ISHIKAWA (1985, 231–41). See also NAKAMURA (1996, 104–13), who has pointed out that the *kappa*’s love of cucumbers may be a much more recent phenomenon than originally believed.

3. NORRMAN and HAARBERG (1980) discuss thoroughly the semiotic value of melons as they appear primarily in Western literature. The authors do not, however, pursue the issue of the meaning of hollow gourds. For a discussion of the phenomenon of gourds worldwide, including some gourd-related folklore, see HEISER (1979). For more details on the *hyōtan* as it relates to the *kappa*, see IIDA (1993, 212–20).

4. In versions of the “*kappa muko*” tale, a snake replaces a *kappa* and is killed by an iron needle; IKEDA comments simply: “Iron is believed to have a poisoning effect on snakes” (1971, 75). Regardless of theories that the iron aversion represents a fear of innovation by people from pre-Iron Age times (TYLOR 1958, vol. 1, 140), the wide distribution and variety of its manifestations make it clear that, like the gourd aversion in *kappa*, fear of iron has deep-rooted and complex connotations.

5. An interesting parallel to this motif can be found in the lore of the gibbon in China. VAN GULIK notes several references to the “strange old fantasy that the arms of the gibbon are inter-connected at the upper ends, and that the animal thus is able to lengthen one arm by pulling the other in.... This false impression must have been caused by the truly incredible speed with which the gibbon reaches out with one arm while keeping the other close to its body” (1967, 93).

6. See ISHIKAWA (1985, 78–82) for different versions.

7. For examples of this behavior, see ISHIKAWA (1985, 129–31). It is apparent that the significance of the liver not only has “to do with courage and manliness” (CASAL 1964, 171) but is also part of a large constellation of beliefs and is linked to the life force, fertility, and potency. Liver-related beliefs appear, for example, in folktales such as “Child’s Liver Cures Blindness” (Ikeda-AaTh 516D; see IKEDA 1971), and “Monkey Who Left His Liver at Home” (Ikeda-AaTh 91; see IKEDA 1971). The latter portrays the daughter of the dragon king requiring a monkey’s liver to cure her illness, and it has been noted that “the desire for a monkey’s liver is often said to be a craving of pregnancy” (SEKI 1963, 26). A version of the tale is found in the *Konjaku monogatari*, variants are found in India, and, although it has also appeared in Europe, it is more common in Asia (SEKI 1963, 26).

8. See ISHIKAWA (1985, 120–29) for versions of *shirikodama* belief.

9. For an extensive compilation by region of many of the legends associated with the *kappa*, see the seventeen-volume NIIJON DENSETSU TAIKEI 日本伝説大系.

10. Ikeda outlines this legend as follows: “There is a legend concerning graves, deep pools of water, or mounds where villagers used to go and ask for the loan of sets of trays, dishes and bowls for big dinners on festive occasions. On the previous day a villager would go to a cave and state, or leave a written message, that he needs so many sets of trays or dinner services. When he returns the following morning the requested items are waiting for him” (IKEDA-AaTh 730; See IKEDA 1971).

11. It is significant, for example, that the famous *sanbikizaru* 三匹猿 (three monkeys) carving of Nikkō is located on a horse stable. For more on monkey performances and their importance, see OIYUKI-TIERNEY (1987). For a discussion of the *sanbikizaru* or “The Three Wise Monkeys” motif, see TAYLOR (1957), MIEDER (1987), and SMITH (1993).

12. Ikeda Akihiko of the *Asahi Shinbun*, Kitakyūshū City office, was kind enough to provide these statistics.

13. MOERAN (1984), for example, details the effects of the *mingei* 民芸, or folk craft movement, on a small Kyūshū pottery community. Although he does not discuss folklorism as such, his observations of how the *mingei* movement brought awareness of the pottery’s value to the local craftsmen and served to shape the development of the craft itself are helpful in understanding the gray area between folklore and folklorism. The very title of Moeran’s book may be seen as encapsulating one of the essential issues at hand in the study of folklorism:

Lost Innocence.

14. Taken to its logical extreme, the concept of folklorism might even be applied to the two foundational works of Japanese history and mythology: the *Kojiki* 古事記 (Record of Ancient Things) and the *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀 (Chronicles of Japan) of 712 and 720 respectively. EBERSOLE has noted this conscious manipulation: “The myths are textually employed to legitimate certain clan genealogies, hereditary roles, titles, land holdings, complex economic arrangements, and rituals” (1989, 11). Clearly this is an example of the sort of conscious use of folklore, perhaps even invention, with which the definition of folklorism is concerned. (For a discussion of political manipulation of early Japanese texts, see EBERSOLE 1989; for a critique of Ebersole, see METEVELIS 1991). Where, if at all, should the boundaries be drawn between folklore and folklorism? Do the two conceptions merge through time? Perhaps today’s folklore is the folklorism of yesterday, and today’s folklorism is the folklore of tomorrow.

15. The narrator even mentions Yanagita Kunio and his *Santō mindan shū* (AKUTAGAWA 1996, 34).

16. The *kappa* does not seem to have been used for explicitly nationalistic purposes, or the sort of folklorism KENDIRBAEVA refers to as “folklorism ‘from above’” (1994, 99). For a discussion of the modern manipulation of folklore for nationalistic intentions in Japan, see, for example, ANTONI 1991.

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