猿 (sarū): Japanese monkey

Monkeys are often seen in Japan’s mountainous countryside, they are of the Macaca fuscata specie. With their red face and buttock, they seem like cute creatures, but it is recommended to the new visitor to avoid staring at their eyes as it is a challenging sign triggering aggressiveness.

In many legends and myths, monkeys descend from the mountains: a wild area usually considered as a crossroad between the world of humans and the world of kami (deities), as divine messengers. As Emiko Ohnuki-Terney¹ states, monkeys occupy a unique role in Japanese tradition, because for their similarities to human beings they press hard at the border line, constantly threatening human identity and forcing contemplation of such question as “Who are we?” and “How do we differ from animals?” Only in Japan can we consider natural that ethologists attend to a religious memorial ceremony for dead monkeys (at a dedicated temple in Osaka that performs such services every year), for the enshrined souls of some 20 000 monkey.

It all started with Monkeys and eroticism...

One of the most famous myths in Japan is the one of Ame-no-Uzume (天 borç女命) dancing on an overturned tub to lure out the sun goddess Amaterasu (天照大神), divine ancestor of the imperial family, who had pitched the world in the dark. What is less known, is the link between that myth and a monkey.

This is how it all started, according to the “Age of the Gods” section of the Kojiki (compiled in AD.712) and the Nihongi (compiled in AD. 720)...

In the famous Rock Cave incident, Susanoo (須佐之男), brother of the sun goddess Amaterasu, has deeply offended his sister so she retreats into the cave at Mt. Kagu, plunging the earth into endless darkness. As the myriad of kami gather in front of the cave to find a way to calm the sun goddess, playing sacred music in front of a fire, Ame-no-Uzume comes forward and starts a frenetic dance, pounding out the rhythm with her feet and becomes possessed by divine inspiration as she recited words loudly while tearing off her clothes and exposing her breasts and genitalia, a comical behaviour that provokes exclamations of the assembled kami. The sun Goddess, hearing the din outside opens the rock door slightly. She is then lured outside by her reflection in a mirror that Ame-no-Uzume had hanged on a branch in front of the cave, the land becomes lighted again and the kami seal the cave so she could not retreat back.

In another episode, Ame-no-Uzume will have another chance of showing her lustful talents. One day, the sun Goddess Amaterasu decides to send her grandson Ninigi (瓊々杵) leading a delegation of five kami to govern earth. This is when Sarutahiko (猿田彦) appears at the “eight crossroads of Heaven”, halfway between kami world and human domain. The etymology of his name includes “monkey field” (猿田–saruta) and “Prince” (彦-hiko). Sarutahiko is described as having a red face and bottom, a nose seven spans long (a phallic symbol). Moreover, his eyes glow red like a mirror and light shines from his mouth and from his bottom, which makes him another solar deity. He stood on the road so that Ninigi and his delegation could not pass. The playful goddess Ame-no-Uzume volunteered again to show her negotiator talents... She bared her breasts and, pushing down her skirt way below her navel, she walked toward Sarutahiko with a mocking laugh. Sarutahiko was shocked by her licentiousness and explained that he was only waiting to serve as a guide for Ninigi. After that the two kami together guided Ninigi as he proceeded on his descent to earth, and as a reward Ninigi granted Ame-no-Uzume the title of Sarume no Kimi (猿女の, female monkey’s clan), based on Sarutahiko’s name (afterward, she will always be called Saru-me-no-mikoto (猿女の尊), the Venerable Monkey Female). Later on, Sarutahiko will get his hand trapped inside a large clam while fishing at Azaka (present day Matsuzaka-shi) after returning to his homeland at the upper reaches of the Isuzu River in Ise, and he will drown.
It is said that the dance of Ame-no-Uzume inspired the lascivious dance performed by the maidens of the Sarume Clan for the sake of their deity Sarutahiko. The Sarume clan maidens will later be officially designated by the imperial court to perform the same dance for worshiping Amaterasu, the mythical ancestor of the imperial family (some scholars explain this transfer by the fact that Amaterasu was originally a male deity\(^2\)), and that ceremony is considered to be the prototype of later *sarugaku* (猿楽 theatre).

*Sarugaku* theatre was popular in Japan during the 11th to 14th centuries. It can be traced back to the *sangaku* imported from China during the Nara period (710-784), with acrobats, magicians, and shamans performing burlesque and festive acts and dances, with some religious purpose as in the dances of the Sarume clan, and some satyrs of the dominant rulers of society. From the mid-Heian period (784-1192) the pronunciation of *sangaku* was corrupted to *sarugaku*, and gradually the characters 猿楽 (monkey music) came to be used. It is not clear why the ideogram for “monkey” (*saru*) was used but it could be because monkey tricks were included in the *sangaku* theatre\(^3\) or to refer to the Sarume clan. After losing its imperial protection in 782, some actors sought the protection of temples and shrines, and others became shomoji (聲聞師), itinerant priest/diviner/actors with a low social rank. Over the next centuries *sarugaku* became more and more codified, with a system of actors guild that will finally generate Noh (能 originally called *sarugaku no Noh*) giving Japan theatre its *lettres de noblesse*. At the other end, shomoji actors gave birth to another well known tradition: *manzai* 漫才. *Manzai*, nowadays a comic stand-up for two actors, was during the Muromachi period (1392-1603) a performance of two shomoji at samurai stables at the beginning of the New Year, similar to the earlier diviner's performance of monkey trainers, because of the believed healing power of monkeys\(^4\).

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\(^3\) Tatsusaburō Hayashiya, Kabuki izen (Before Kabuki), Tokyo 1979, Ed. Iwanami Shoten, pp. 17_18.
\(^4\) Ohnuki-Terney, p. 110.
where the most famous three wise monkeys are (more about them later). As a consequence of his role of protector of horses, warriors during feudal times as well as peasants who were also armed during that period of perpetual wars between regional lords (daimyo) covered their quivers with monkey hides, as a way of transferring the protective power of the monkey to their horse. The other consequence which lasted until recently was the *ema* (絵馬) votive paintings of horses offered to shrines, sometimes pulled or ridden by monkeys. Also, sacred dance were performed in front of stables with itinerant monkey trainers for the purpose of protecting horses and it is believed that it is the origin of monkey training (*猿曳き saru hiki*), that used to be a popular sight in Japan. Doing acrobatics tours and dancing at the tune of a shamisen or a drum (*taiko*) was a part of many religious festivals. “The dance performance by the monkey, the messenger from the Mountain Deity to human, symbolized the Mountain Deity’s visit to the people in order to bless them with health and prosperity”.

**The three monkeys and other monkey legends.**

Before coming to Japan, you probably have heard of three wise monkeys, or the *sanzaru* (三猿 “three monkeys”), their names being a wordplay between *saru* (vocalized in *zaru*) meaning “monkey”, and – *zaru*, an ancient negative verb ending meaning “not possible”. Therefore *sanzaru* breaks down in *mizaru, kikazaru, iwazaru* (見ざる, 聞かざる, 言わざる), “can't see, can’t hear, can’t speak”. Although it has been translated in “See no evil, hear no evil, and speak no evil” introducing some English evil, the French translation, “*Les trois singes de la sagesse*” prefers to allow monkeys some wisdom! (Archer Taylor in “Audi,Vide,Tace and the Three Monkeys”, Fabulas 1 (1957), finds an early occidental version in the medieval proverb : ‘Audi, vide, tace, si vis vivere in pace’: Hear, see, but be silent if you wish to live in peace). The most famous wise monkeys in Japan are a wood carving in Nikko’s Tôshôgu shrine, one of eight sculpted panels depicting the whole life of a monkey, mounted on the exterior of the sacred stable of the mausoleum of Tokugawa Ieyasu (徳川家康), the founder of the Tokugawa Shogunate. They are attributed to the famous sculptor and carpenter Hidari Jingoro (左甚五郎).

But the three monkey theme is quite common in Japanese sculpture, and not always running by three. In our gathering of antiques objects, we often find monkeys associated with other animals and vegetals, and it is the curiosity for the symbolism of these associations that drove us to this study. Associations are quite varied, due to the fact that monkeys in the wild have eclectic tastes for whatever they can find, including fruits like chestnuts, peaches, persimmon, but also sea food like fishes, shells and skids that they catch at low tide. In turn, their extensive diet gave birth to numerous legends giving the monkey human qualities, sometimes portraying him as a wise folk, like in the legend of the “Kurage honenashi” (クラゲの骨なし) in which the monkey saves his own life by outsmarting the jellyfish who tried to still his liver, or sometimes as a cruel and malevolent trickster,

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5 Ohnuki-Terney, p. 101.
like in the legend of the “Saru Kani Kasen” (猿蟹合戦) in which the monkey trick a crab about a kaki (柿, persimmon) fruit and appears as a villain.

The first legend is funny, it goes like this, as collected by Swiss author U. A. Casal in 1956: “The wife of the Dragon-king fell seriously ill, and her physician—the octopus, symbol of life because of its spiraling eight tentacles—prescribed the liver of a live monkey as the only possible cure. The kurage, or jellyfish, was sent to entice a monkey to come to the dragon-palace, and with honeyed words he succeeded. In those days, the kurage had a hard shell and four legs, not so different from the turtle’s. On his back the monkey was transported to the Castle-under-the-Ocean, where he was requested to wait a while. Doing so, he overheard the attendants rejoicing with the kurage that a live monkey-liver would soon be available. Although badly frightened, the monkey did not lose his wits, and when the (somewhat stupid) kurage came to ask whether he had a liver, “Yes.” He rejoined, “only I don’t always carry it with me, and as it happens I left it in a tree to dry, as it had become all wet. But I’ll be glad to get it for you”. So back they went and the monkey got off his perch and jumped onto the nearest tree, deriding the kurage for his stupidity.” The kurage could walk on land but not climb a tree, so in the end he had to plunge back into the brine, to go and report his very sad blunder. Incensed, the Dragon-king had him mercilessly beaten; and that is why his “bones” were crushed to smithereens, and his eyes and mouth so pounded that he cannot use them any more. Ever since the jellyfish can but float about at the mercy of the waves, the most insipid and useless of all the Dragon-king’s subjects”

The second legend gives the Monkey a much less flattering image. “The monkey once found a persimmon seed, and the crab a rice-dumpling, and the monkey craftily persuaded the crab to exchange the treasures. So the monkey ate well, but the crab went hungry, in order that he could plant the seed. Carefully tending the growing stem, after eight years he had a fine fruit bearing tree. Now, the unfortunate thing is that the crab cannot climb into the branches of a tree to pluck the fruits. So the crab requests the monkey to do it, promising a share, and the monkey goes up. Nasty as he is, however, he eats the ripe persimmons himself, and pelts the crab on the ground with the hard, green ones, which break his shell. The crab slowly recovers (or dies, and his son takes up the revenge) and to punish the monkey combines

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with a mortar, a wasp, and a chestnut, to whom he recounts the bad treatment suffered. He then sends an invitation for tea to the monkey, who comes, and finding his host absent for the moment, makes himself comfortable and lifts the tea-kettle from the fore to pour a cup. In the instant, the chestnut ensconced in the brazier, explodes and sends the hot ashes into the monkey’s face. Badly hurt, and hardly able to see, he runs to the water to cool it, when the wasp stings his eyes, blinding him completely. As he tries to run home, the mortar, who had perched himself on a ledge, jumps down and crushes him to death”.

There are many other legends in which monkey and crab quarrel about a rice cake, some in which the crab completely dominate an innocent monkey and has the bad role.

Another favourite subject in Japanese art is the association of monkey and a peach. The story seems to refer to the Chinese myth of Sun Hou-tze, the Chinese ape born of a stone egg fertilized by the wind, who was so good at magic tricks that he duped the gods and once stole and ate a few peaches from the garden of Heaven, giving him immortality. In Japan the peach often refers to the feminine sex as the morpheme momo could either mean peach (桃) or thighs (腿). In the legend of Momotarô, it is always the most decent meaning that is retained, translated as the “Peach First-born”, but it can also mean “the Thigh-born”. As U. A. Casal notice, “the birth from a thigh, or from the hip, or the ribs, is also known elsewhere; it is (...) a super naturalization of the common way of being brought into the world, comparable to the birth from a virgin mother (...) because of a taboo”.

So much for the associations of monkeys and peaches, considered as the “fruit of life” in Chinese tradition, comparable to the apple in other traditions...

Often seen also is the theme of the monkey or sometimes a group of monkey trying to catch the moon reflection. The delusion is called Enkosokugetsu (猿猴捉月), and is based on a Buddhist scripture. In the seventh chapter of the Tripitaka, Buddha tells the story of 500 monkeys seeing the moon disk reflected inside a deep well. Under their leaders order, they make a chain holding hands to tails, while the first monkey holds to a branch. But as the branch brakes under the heavy weight, all the monkeys fall into the well and perish. The foolish attempt is a parabola for the naïveté of the humanity taking the appearances for the real, its futility at settings unachievable or misguided goals, and furthermore the vanity of life.

7 Id.
8 Id.
We have seen earlier that the octopus-physician of the Dragon-king wife had prescribed a monkey’s liver as a cure. There is another cephalopod association with the monkey in the “Saru Masamune” (猿正宗) story. It is the tale of castle in Kyushu sending a sword to his daimyo living in Edo. On his way the courier see a monkey being dragged underwater by an octopus and try to saves him. He therefore uses his own knife and then the sword he is delivering to try to cut the tentacles but it is only when the monkeys gives him a better sword than he can finally defeat the octopus, who flees back into the sea. Arrived at Edo, the courier gives his lord the sword he was offered by the monkeys and it happen to be a sword made by the famous smith Gorō Nyūdō Masamune (1264–1343), known as the greatest swordsmith in Japan. The grateful daimyo will then name the sword “Saru Masamune”.

In Japan, symbols or meanings are also often associated with verbal or phonetic sympathy. Saru, beside meaning monkey (猿), is also a verb (避る) meaning “to depart” or to go away. So representation of monkeys can be effective in magically driving away evil. But also, the word should not be mentioned during a wedding ceremony, as it could make the bride to soon run away!

And last, many Japanese sayings of wisdom are associated with the monkey, here is the most common: “Ken’en no naka” (犬猿の仲, lit. "dog and monkey relationship") meaning a bad relationship. “Saru no shiri warai” (猿の尻笑い, "monkey laughing at someone’s buttocks") meaning laughing at someone's weakness while disregarding one's own, like “the pot calling the kettle black”. “Saru mo ki kara ochiru” (猿も木から落ちる,"even monkeys fall from trees") meaning anyone can make a mistake. “saru mo odaterya ki ni noboru” (猿もおだてりャ木に登る,"it is natural that a monkeys can climb a tree") meaning ones should not take pride for an easy task. “saru shibai” (猿芝居,"monkeys show") meaning playing a cheap trick on someone.

And finally a famous Basho poem:

初しぐれ猿も小蓑をほしげ也 (hatsushigure saru mo komino o hoshige nari)
First rain of winter, even the monkeys would want a little straw raincoat.