

Kurume History Walks

No.29 Folktales of Kappa, Water Spirits in Kurume Kurumeshi no Kappa 久留米市の河童

Kappa (河童 river-child) is an amphibious supernatural monster and water spirit in Japanese folklore. In Kurume, the Suiten-gu Shrine, venerated as a guardian shrine for water traffic, is regarded as a center of kappa folktales along the Chikugo River.

The book "Chikushino Folktales (published in 1923)", includes tales from some areas of Kurume such as "Kappa's instruction in bone setting", "Kappa's Hand, cut by a farmer", "Kappa Hole".

The Kitano Tenman-gu Shrine houses "Kappa's hand", 12 centimeters long with four fingers and nails of 1 centimeter. There are two handed-down stories:

1. In 901, Sugawara Michizane* was sent into exile from the capital to Dazaifu. When he went down the Chikugo River, he landed on Kitano Town to escape from pursuers. Sanzenbo (literally three thousand men), the supreme leader of the kappa clan in the Chikugo, tried to save Michizane. But the pursuer cut down its hand. Michizane buried it reverently and then continued to travel.
2. When Michizane was entering the river with his horse at Kitano, a kappa grabbed its leg and attempted to draw it. He got surprised and cut the kappa's hand down.

* Sugawara Michizane (845-903), an outstanding scholar, poet, and politician, displayed his remarkable talents from a young age. His political career developed quickly within the imperial court. But, because of the political maneuvering of his rival, Michizane was sent into exile from the capital city of Kyoto to the far-off government office of Dazaifu and died a few years later.

Because of his great learning, he is today associated with the Tenjin, a Shinto Deity, and is enshrined in all Tenman-gu Shrine throughout Japan.



Kitano Tenman-gu Shrine

Kappa from overseas

In the Kumamoto Prefecture, on the south of Kurume, there are also kappa folktales, of which some seemingly include the real historical events.

At Yatsushiro City, on a bank of a stream tributary to the Kuma River, there is a stone monument with an inscription regarding kappa:

- Kappas came to live in this river from China in the 5th-6th century.
- The material stones, called Gurappa Stones, of the monument were taken from an old bridge.
- A lore says that a naughty kappa was caught by locals, and it swore that it would never get into mischief again until these stones would abrade and disappear. It also asked to hold a festival once a year. Locals granted it and decided to hold the "Oreorederaita River Festival" on every May 18th.

And there is another tale of the 16th -17th century, introduced in two books published in the early and middle 19th century: "Wakunsho 倭訓栞" and "Honcho Zokugen Shi 本朝俗諺志".

A kappa leader called Kyusenbo (literally nine thousand men) and his clan settled in the Kuma. On a summer day, a kappa drew a servant page in the river and killed him, who was receiving a lot of affection from Kato Kiyomasa, the lord of Kumamoto Domain. Kiyomasa got furious and ordered to exterminate all kappas. It was said that kappa would become feeble when it got hot water or met a monkey. Then, Kiyomasa had his retainers poison the river, heat it with thousands of baking stones, and gather monkeys throughout his territory. In the end, Kyusenbo's clan made an apology and promised not to inflict any injury on Kiyomasa's people.

Besides, Hino Ashihei (1907-1960), a novelist, introduced Kyusenbo and kappa's roots in his book "Kappa Kaigi 河童会議 (1958)". He wrote that a horde of kappa departed from Persia, crossed the Himalaya Mountains and the Taklamakan Desert, passed through Mongolia and China, and sailed from Korea to Yatsushiro, Kumamoto.

By the way, around the 2nd-3rd century, Chinese immigrants landed in Kyushu. Assuming that they, foreigners who differently behaved and spoke, were considered as kappa, some historical facts can be explained.



Chikugo River

For example, the name of the festival "Oreorederaita" could be translated in Chinese to "Wú rén wú rén de lái duō 吳人吳人的來多" which means that a lot of people from Kure* came.

**Wu* (吳) was a Chinese kingdom of the 3rd century. But Japanese people seem to have continued calling China as 吳 (*Kure* in Japanese) even in 8th century according to the book "Chronicle of Japan (finished in 720)".

Aragoro Daimyojin, a Deity worshiped in Ninagawa, Kurume

Some old materials from our city support the folktales of Yatsushiro. They tell that a water god appeared in Kurume in the mid-6th century, which was the same period when a kappa came to settle in Yatsushiro.

The book "Histories of Shinto Shrines in Kurume Domain 久留米藩社方開基 (1670)" described that a dragon deity appeared in Ninagawa, Kurume in the late 560s, and was enshrined as Aragoro Daimyojin. That was in Aratama-gu Shrine, which is today's Katabuchi-jinja Shrine. Aragoro Daimyojin is said to be an Aratama (savage spirit) which causes the flood of the Chikugo.

"The Chronicles of Japan" mentioned in chapters of 283 CE, 306, 310, and 470 that Chinese weavers* came to Japan from the continent. A considerable number of foreigners should have also come nearby. They had brought techniques of weaving, fishing and sailing, and had influenced local worship of Water God and Sea God. In this context, Aragoro Daimyojin could be a deity who came from overseas. After the extermination by Kiyomasa, the kappa clan was said to have moved to the Chikugo River. Our lords seem to have had the positive attitude toward accepting kappa – foreign gods.

*They were called Kuribe (呉部) or Kureme (呉女 female). Then, there is a theory that the city-name Kurume came from it.



Wooden Statue of Katabuchi Shrine

Aragoro Daimyojin God worshiped in Amagoze-sha Shrine

The Amagoze-sha Shrine is the predecessor of the Kurume Suiten-gu Shrine. An old document mentioned that Amagoze Daimyojin God was the Water God of the Chikugo River. Its statue had been placed with that of Aragoro God and Anbo God (?) on both sides, although they don't exist any longer.

The Kose River and Kappa

Several shrines, in which enshrine Kappa, are dotted along the Kose River (巨瀬) in the western part of Kurume. Then, it posits some historical hypotheses that some people in power named Kose governed this area.



Kose River

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