

## = Kitsune =

Kitsune ( ? , ??? , IPA : [ kitsu ? ne ] ) is the Japanese word for fox . Foxes are a common subject of Japanese folklore ; in English , kitsune refers to them in this context . Stories depict them as intelligent beings and as possessing magical abilities that increase with their age and wisdom . According to Y?kai folklore , all foxes have the ability to shape shift into men or women . While some folktales speak of kitsune employing this ability to trick others ? as foxes in folklore often do ? other stories portray them as faithful guardians , friends , lovers , and wives .

Foxes and human beings lived close together in ancient Japan ; this companionship gave rise to legends about the creatures . Kitsune have become closely associated with Inari , a Shinto kami or spirit , and serve as its messengers . This role has reinforced the fox 's supernatural significance . The more tails a kitsune has ? they may have as many as nine ? the older , wiser , and more powerful it is . Because of their potential power and influence , some people make offerings to them as to a deity .

Conversely foxes were often seen as " witch animals " , especially during the superstitious Edo period ( 1603 ? 1867 ) , and were goblins who could not be trusted ( similar to some badgers and cats ) .

## = = Origins = =

Japanese fox myths had its origins in Chinese mythology . Chinese folk tales tell of fox spirits called h?li j?ng ( Chinese : ??? ) that may have up to nine tails ( Ky?bi no Kitsune in Japanese ) . Many of the earliest surviving stories are recorded in the Konjaku Monogatarish? , an 11th @-@ century collection of Chinese , Indian , and Japanese narratives . The nine @-@ tailed foxes came to be adapted as a motif from Chinese mythology to Japanese mythology .

Smyers ( 1999 ) notes that the idea of the fox as seductress and the connection of the fox myths to Buddhism were introduced into Japanese folklore through similar Chinese stories , but she maintains that some fox stories contain elements unique to Japan .

## = = = Etymology = = =

The full etymology is unknown . The oldest known usage of the word is in the 794 text Shin 'yaku Kegonky? Ongi Shiki . Other old sources include Nihon Ry?iki ( 810 ? 824 ) and Wamy? Ruijush? ( c . 934 ) . These oldest sources are written in Man 'y?gana which clearly identifies the historical spelling as ki1tune . Following several diachronic phonological changes , this becomes kitsune .

Many etymological suggestions have been made , though there is no general agreement :

My?goki ( 1268 ) suggests that it is so called because it is " always ( tsune ) yellow ( ki ) " .

Early Kamakura period Mizukagami indicates that it means " came ( ki ) [ perfective aspect particle tsu ] to bedroom ( ne ) " due to a legend that a kitsune would change into one 's wife and bear children .

Arai Hakuseki in T?ga ( 1717 ) suggests that ki means " stench " , tsu is a possessive particle , and ne is related to inu , the word for " dog " .

Tanikawa Kotosuga in Wakun no Shiori ( 1777 ? 1887 ) suggests that ki means " yellow " , tsu is a possessive particle , and ne is related to neko , the word for cat .

?tsuki Fumihiko in Daigenkai ( 1932 ? 1935 ) proposes that the word comes from kitsu , which is onomatopoeia for the bark of a fox , and ne , which may be an affix or an honorific word meaning a servant of an Inari shrine .

Nozaki also suggests that the word kitsune was originally onomatopoeic . Kitsu represented a fox 's yelp and came to be the general word for fox . -Ne signifies an affectionate mood .

Kitsu is now archaic ; in modern Japanese , a fox 's cry is transcribed as kon kon or gon gon .

One of the oldest surviving kitsune tales provides a widely known folk etymology of the word kitsune . Unlike most tales of kitsune who become human and marry human males , this one does not end tragically :

Ono , an inhabitant of Mino ( says an ancient Japanese legend of A.D. 545 ) , spent the seasons longing for his ideal of female beauty . He met her one evening on a vast moor and married her . Simultaneously with the birth of their son , Ono 's dog was delivered of a pup which as it grew up became more and more hostile to the lady of the moors . She begged her husband to kill it , but he refused . At last one day the dog attacked her so furiously that she lost courage , resumed vulpine shape , leaped over a fence and fled .

" You may be a fox , " Ono called after her , " but you are the mother of my son and I love you . Come back when you please ; you will always be welcome . "

So every evening she stole back and slept in his arms .

Because the fox returns to her husband each night as a woman but leaves each morning as a fox , she is called Kitsune . In classical Japanese , kitsu @-@ ne means come and sleep , and ki @-@ tsune means always comes .

= = Characteristics = =

Kitsune are believed to possess superior intelligence , long life , and magical powers . They are a type of y?kai , or spiritual entity , and the word kitsune is often translated as fox spirit . However , this does not mean that kitsune are ghosts , nor that they are fundamentally different from regular foxes . Because the word spirit is used to reflect a state of knowledge or enlightenment , all long @-@ lived foxes gain supernatural abilities .

There are two common classifications of kitsune . The zenko ( ?? , literally good foxes ) are benevolent , celestial foxes associated with Inari ; they are sometimes simply called Inari foxes . On the other hand , the yako ( ?? , literally field foxes , also called nogitsune ) tend to be mischievous or even malicious . Local traditions add further types . For example , a ninko is an invisible fox spirit that human beings can only perceive when it possesses them .

Physically , kitsune are noted for having as many as nine tails . Generally , a greater number of tails indicates an older and more powerful fox ; in fact , some folktales say that a fox will only grow additional tails after it has lived 100 years . One , five , seven , and nine tails are the most common numbers in folk stories . When a kitsune gains its ninth tail , its fur becomes white or gold . These ky?bi no kitsune ( ???? , nine @-@ tailed foxes ) gain the abilities to see and hear anything happening anywhere in the world . Other tales credit them with infinite wisdom ( omniscience ) .

= = = Shapeshifting = = =

A kitsune may take on human form , an ability learned when it reaches a certain age ? usually 100 years , although some tales say 50 . As a common prerequisite for the transformation , the fox must place reeds , a broad leaf , or a skull over its head . Common forms assumed by kitsune include beautiful women , young girls , or elderly men . These shapes are not limited by the fox 's age or gender , and a kitsune can duplicate the appearance of a specific person . Foxes are particularly renowned for impersonating beautiful women . Common belief in medieval Japan was that any woman encountered alone , especially at dusk or night , could be a fox . Kitsune @-@ gao or fox @-@ faced refers to human females who have a narrow face with close @-@ set eyes , thin eyebrows , and high cheekbones . Traditionally , this facial structure is considered attractive , and some tales ascribe it to foxes in human form . Variants on the theme have the kitsune retain other foxlike traits , such as a coating of fine hair , a fox @-@ shaped shadow , or a reflection that shows its true form .

In some stories , kitsune have difficulty hiding their tails when they take human form ; looking for the tail , perhaps when the fox gets drunk or careless , is a common method of discerning the creature 's true nature . A particularly devout individual may in some cases even be able to see through a fox 's disguise merely by perceiving them . Kitsune may also be exposed while in human form by their fear and hatred of dogs , and some become so rattled by their presence that they revert to the form of a fox and flee .

One folk story illustrating these imperfections in the kitsune 's human shape concerns Koan , a

historical person credited with wisdom and magical powers of divination . According to the story , he was staying at the home of one of his devotees when he scalded his foot entering a bath because the water had been drawn too hot . Then , " in his pain , he ran out of the bathroom naked . When the people of the household saw him , they were astonished to see that Koan had fur covering much of his body , along with a fox 's tail . Then Koan transformed in front of them , becoming an elderly fox and running away . "

Other supernatural abilities commonly attributed to the kitsune include possession , mouths or tails that generate fire or lightning ( known as kitsunebi ) , willful manifestation in the dreams of others , flight , invisibility , and the creation of illusions so elaborate as to be almost indistinguishable from reality . Some tales speak of kitsune with even greater powers , able to bend time and space , drive people mad , or take fantastic shapes such as a tree of incredible height or a second moon in the sky . Other kitsune have characteristics reminiscent of vampires or succubi and feed on the life or spirit of human beings , generally through sexual contact .

= = = Kitsunetsuki = = =

Kitsunetsuki ( Japanese : 狐憑き , 狐憑 ) , also written kitsune @-@ tsuki , literally means " the state of being possessed by a fox " . The victim is usually a young woman , whom the fox enters beneath her fingernails or through her breasts . In some cases , the victims ' facial expressions are said to change in such a way that they resemble those of a fox . Japanese tradition holds that fox possession can cause illiterate victims to temporarily gain the ability to read . Though foxes in folklore can possess a person of their own will , kitsunetsuki is often attributed to the malign intents of hereditary fox employers , or tsukimono @-@ suji .

Folklorist Lafcadio Hearn describes the condition :

Strange is the madness of those into whom demon foxes enter . Sometimes they run naked shouting through the streets . Sometimes they lie down and froth at the mouth , and yelp as a fox yelps . And on some part of the body of the possessed a moving lump appears under the skin , which seems to have a life of its own . Prick it with a needle , and it glides instantly to another place . By no grasp can it be so tightly compressed by a strong hand that it will not slip from under the fingers . Possessed folk are also said to speak and write languages of which they were totally ignorant prior to possession . They eat only what foxes are believed to like ? tofu , aburag  , azukimeshi , etc . ? and they eat a great deal , alleging that not they , but the possessing foxes , are hungry .

He goes on to note that , once freed from the possession , the victim will never again be able to eat tofu , azukimeshi , or other foods favored by foxes :

Exorcism , often performed at an Inari shrine , may induce a fox to leave its host . In the past , when such gentle measures failed or a priest was not available , victims of kitsunetsuki were beaten or badly burned in hopes of forcing the fox to leave . Entire families were ostracized by their communities after a member of the family was thought to be possessed .

In Japan , kitsunetsuki was noted as a disease as early as the Heian period and remained a common diagnosis for mental illness until the early 20th century . Possession was the explanation for the abnormal behavior displayed by the afflicted individuals . In the late 19th century , Dr. Shunichi Shimamura noted that physical diseases that caused fever were often considered kitsunetsuki . The belief has lost favor , but stories of fox possession still occur , such as allegations that members of the Aum Shinrikyo cult had been possessed .

In medicine , kitsunetsuki is a culture @-@ bound syndrome unique to Japanese culture . Those who suffer from the condition believe they are possessed by a fox . Symptoms include cravings for rice or sweet adzuki beans , listlessness , restlessness , and aversion to eye contact . Kitsunetsuki is similar to but distinct from clinical lycanthropy .

= = = Hoshi no tama = = =

Depictions of kitsune or their possessed victims may feature round or onion @-@ shaped white

balls known as hoshi no tama ( ????? , star balls ) . Tales describe these as glowing with kitsunebi . Some stories identify them as magical jewels or pearls . When not in human form or possessing a human , a kitsune keeps the ball in its mouth or carries it on its tail . Jewels are a common symbol of Inari , and representations of sacred Inari foxes without them are rare .

One belief is that when a kitsune changes shape , its hoshi no tama holds a portion of its magical power . Another tradition is that the pearl represents the kitsune 's soul ; the kitsune will die if separated from it for long . Those who obtain the ball may be able to extract a promise from the kitsune to help them in exchange for its return . For example , a 12th @-@ century tale describes a man using a fox 's hoshi no tama to secure a favor :

" Confound you ! " snapped the fox . " Give me back my ball ! " The man ignored its pleas till finally it said tearfully , " All right , you 've got the ball , but you don 't know how to keep it . It won 't be any good to you . For me , it 's a terrible loss . I tell you , if you don 't give it back , I 'll be your enemy forever . If you do give it back though , I 'll stick to you like a protector god . "

The fox later saves his life by leading him past a band of armed robbers .

= = Portrayal = =

Embedded in Japanese folklore as they are , kitsune appear in numerous Japanese works . Noh , kyogen , bunraku , and kabuki plays derived from folk tales feature them , as do contemporary works such as anime , manga and video games . Japanese metal idol band Babymetal refer to the kitsune myth in their lyrics and include the use of fox masks , hand signs , and animation interludes during live shows . Western authors of fiction have also made use of the kitsune legends .

= = = Servants of Inari = = =

Kitsune are associated with Inari , the Shinto deity of rice . This association has reinforced the fox 's supernatural significance . Originally , kitsune were Inari 's messengers , but the line between the two is now blurred so that Inari ?kami may be depicted as a fox . Likewise , entire shrines are dedicated to kitsune , where devotees can leave offerings . Fox spirits are said to be particularly fond of a fried sliced tofu called aburage , which is accordingly found in the noodle @-@ based dishes kitsune udon and kitsune soba . Similarly , Inari @-@ zushi is a type of sushi named for Inari ?kami that consists of rice @-@ filled pouches of fried tofu . There is speculation among folklorists as to whether another Shinto fox deity existed in the past . Foxes have long been worshipped as kami .

Inari 's kitsune are white , a color of good omen . They possess the power to ward off evil , and they sometimes serve as guardian spirits . In addition to protecting Inari shrines , they are petitioned to intervene on behalf of the locals and particularly to aid against troublesome nogitsune , those spirit foxes who do not serve Inari . Black foxes and nine @-@ tailed foxes are likewise considered good omens .

According to beliefs derived from fusui ( feng shui ) , the fox 's power over evil is such that a mere statue of a fox can dispel the evil kimon , or energy , that flows from the northeast . Many Inari shrines , such as the famous Fushimi Inari shrine in Kyoto , feature such statues , sometimes large numbers of them .

Kitsune are connected to the Buddhist religion through the Dakiniten , goddesses conflated with Inari 's female aspect . Dakiniten is depicted as a female bodhisattva wielding a sword and riding a flying white fox .

= = = Tricksters = = =

Kitsune are often presented as tricksters , with motives that vary from mischief to malevolence . Stories tell of kitsune playing tricks on overly proud samurai , greedy merchants , and boastful commoners , while the crueller ones abuse poor tradesmen and farmers or devout Buddhist monks . Their victims are usually men ; women are possessed instead . For example , kitsune are thought to

employ their kitsunebi to lead travelers astray in the manner of a will o' the wisp . Another tactic is for the kitsune to confuse its target with illusions or visions . Other common goals of trickster kitsune include seduction , theft of food , humiliation of the prideful , or vengeance for a perceived slight .

A traditional game called kitsune @-@ ken ( fox @-@ fist ) references the kitsune 's powers over human beings . The game is similar to rock , paper , scissors , but the three hand positions signify a fox , a hunter , and a village headman . The headman beats the hunter , whom he outranks ; the hunter beats the fox , whom he shoots ; the fox beats the headman , whom he bewitches .

This ambiguous portrayal , coupled with their reputation for vengefulness , leads people to try to discover a troublesome fox 's motives . In one case , the 16th @-@ century leader Toyotomi Hideyoshi wrote a letter to the kami Inari :

To Inari Daimyojin ,

My lord , I have the honor to inform you that one of the foxes under your jurisdiction has bewitched one of my servants , causing her and others a great deal of trouble . I have to request that you make minute inquiries into the matter , and endeavor to find out the reason of your subject misbehaving in this way , and let me know the result .

If it turns out that the fox has no adequate reason to give for his behavior , you are to arrest and punish him at once . If you hesitate to take action in this matter I shall issue orders for the destruction of every fox in the land . Any other particulars that you may wish to be informed of in reference to what has occurred , you can learn from the high priest of Yoshida .

Kitsune keep their promises and strive to repay any favor . Occasionally a kitsune attaches itself to a person or household , where they can cause all sorts of mischief . In one story from the 12th century , only the homeowner 's threat to exterminate the foxes convinces them to behave . The kitsune patriarch appears in the man 's dreams :

My father lived here before me , sir , and by now I have many children and grandchildren . They get into a lot of mischief , I 'm afraid , and I 'm always after them to stop , but they never listen . And now , sir , you 're understandably fed up with us . I gather that you 're going to kill us all . But I just want you to know , sir , how sorry I am that this is our last night of life . Won 't you pardon us , one more time ? If we ever make trouble again , then of course you must act as you think best . But the young ones , sir ? I 'm sure they 'll understand when I explain to them why you 're so upset . We 'll do everything we can to protect you from now on , if only you 'll forgive us , and we 'll be sure to let you know when anything good is going to happen ! "

Other kitsune use their magic for the benefit of their companion or hosts as long as the human beings treat them with respect . As y?kai , however , kitsune do not share human morality , and a kitsune who has adopted a house in this manner may , for example , bring its host money or items that it has stolen from the neighbors . Accordingly , common households thought to harbor kitsune are treated with suspicion . Oddly , samurai families were often reputed to share similar arrangements with kitsune , but these foxes were considered zenko and the use of their magic a sign of prestige . Abandoned homes were common haunts for kitsune . One 12th @-@ century story tells of a minister moving into an old mansion only to discover a family of foxes living there . They first try to scare him away , then claim that the house " has been ours for many years , and ... we wish to register a vigorous protest . " The man refuses , and the foxes resign themselves to moving to an abandoned lot nearby .

Tales distinguish kitsune gifts from kitsune payments . If a kitsune offers a payment or reward that includes money or material wealth , part or all of the sum will consist of old paper , leaves , twigs , stones , or similar valueless items under a magical illusion . True kitsune gifts are usually intangibles , such as protection , knowledge , or long life .

= = = Wives and lovers = = =

Kitsune are commonly portrayed as lovers , usually in stories involving a young human male and a kitsune who takes the form of a human woman . The kitsune may be a seductress , but these stories are more often romantic in nature . Typically , the young man unknowingly marries the fox , who proves a devoted wife . The man eventually discovers the fox 's true nature , and the fox @-@ wife

is forced to leave him . In some cases , the husband wakes as if from a dream , filthy , disoriented , and far from home . He must then return to confront his abandoned family in shame .

Many stories tell of fox @-@ wives bearing children . When such progeny are human , they possess special physical or supernatural qualities that often pass to their own children . The astrologer @-@ magician Abe no Seimei was reputed to have inherited such extraordinary powers .

Other stories tell of kitsune marrying one another . Rain falling from a clear sky ? a sunshower ? is called kitsune no yomeiri or the kitsune 's wedding , in reference to a folktale describing a wedding ceremony between the creatures being held during such conditions . The event is considered a good omen , but the kitsune will seek revenge on any uninvited guests , as is depicted in Akira Kurosawa 's film Dreams .

Stephen Turnbull , in " Nagashino 1575 " , relates the tale of the Takeda clan 's involvement with a fox @-@ woman . The warlord Takeda Shingen , in 1544 , defeated in battle a lesser local warlord named Suwa Yorishige and drove him to suicide after a " humiliating and spurious " peace conference , after which Shingen forced marriage on Suwa Yorishige 's beautiful 14 @-@ year @-@ old daughter Lady Koi ? Shingen 's own niece . Shingen , Turnbull writes , " was so obsessed with the girl that his superstitious followers became alarmed and believed her to be an incarnation of the white fox @-@ spirit of the Suwa Shrine , who had bewitched him in order to gain revenge . " When their son Takeda Katsuyori proved to be a disastrous leader and led the clan to their devastating defeat at the battle of Nagashino , Turnbull writes , " wise old heads nodded , remembering the unhappy circumstances of his birth and his magical mother " .