

CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND TO APPRECIATION

IN Japan, *Kitsuné* is considered to be the most interesting and popular animal in tradition. You will find the tradition of the fox existing everywhere you go in the country. And *Kitsuné* is loved and worshiped by the people.

All the principal authorities on ancient customs and ideas tell us that animal worship has prevailed in every part of the globe. And whatever may be the origin of this worship, a good authority on Hindu religion asserts that it is to be accounted for by the working of one or other of the motives of gratitude, fear, or awe, operating separately in the separate cases. Men, in not understanding the ways and powers of animals, considered them as higher than themselves and hence worshiped them and copied them in some of the habits.

In this connection, it is interesting to note how the American Indians, good hunters as they were, feared and worshiped the animals of woods and forests.

"The animal people lived," says an Indian legend, "before the days of the first grandfather, long, long ago, when the sun was new and no larger than a star, when the earth was young, and the tall firs of the

forest no larger than an arrow."

A beautiful legend, this.

Indeed it was the fox, the Silver Fox, that created the world, according to the legend of the Hat Creek Indians, who live in the Northwest of America.

The word *Kitsuné* comes from two Japanese syllables: *kitsu* and *né*. *Kitsu* is the sound made when a fox yelps, and *né* is a word signifying an affectionate feeling, a suitable name for such an interesting creature as a fox.

Foxes are rarely seen nowadays in Japan even in rural districts. In ancient times, however, they would roam about leisurely in any place, wagging their long pointed muzzles and dragging their long busy tails.

Late at night, in the stillness of a deserted village, the plaintive barking of a fox would be heard.

"Kitsu* is yelping. Kitsu is yelping again," a mother would tell her infant, giving the breast to him in bed.

In ancient times, according to the *Nihon Ryakki*, one of the oldest books of records, a great number of foxes lived even in the national capital, Kyoto: In the reign of the Emperor Kammu (737-806), *foxes barked at night in the Imperial Palace in December, 803*; and in the reign of the Emperor Saga (786-842), *foxes walked up the stairs of the Imperial Palace in September, 820*.

Yoshida Kenko, the famous writer-recluse of the middle part of the 14th century, writes in his *Tsure-zuregusa* as follows:

**Kitsuné* was called *Kitsu* in ancient times. Not an abbreviation here. (See the chapter Fox in Poetry.)

"In the palace at Horikawa, a servant was bitten in the leg by a fox while he was in bed fast asleep. A petty priest of the Ninnaji temple was passing one night in front of the main building of the temple when three foxes attacked him. He unsheathed his sword to defend himself and lunged at two foxes. One of them was killed, the other two scampered away. The priest was injured in several parts of his body. However fortunately he was not so seriously wounded."

You can see by the above statement made by Kenko that foxes were still rampant in the 14th century capital of the country.

In Japan, says the *Nihon Shoki*, the annals compiled in 720, *Kitsuné* was formerly held in respect as an animal of good omen. In 720 a black fox was presented from Iga Province to the Emperor Gemmyo (661-726), an empress-regnant, the founder of the capital of Nara.

However in the 10th and the 11th centuries when poetry was flourishing, *Kitsuné* was not treated with affection. The animal, then, was merely considered to be weird and uncanny. *Kitsuné*, in those days, was associated in literature in general with such a thing as an apparition or a wraith.

To understand the tales (including, of course, those of *Kitsuné*) told in the era during which *The Genji Monogatari* or *The Konjaku Monogatari* was written, we must know the social conditions. The foregoing stories were written in the epoch dominated, to all intents and purposes, by the military men. And it must also be remembered that the *religion* of these

military men was Power. Each of the war barons, who wanted to be the master of the capital by conquering his rival, had no leisure to resign himself to his fate. He simply strove against it, casting aside effeminate fatalism. He engaged in internecine feuds. He would break his promises. And only the brave could win the laurels of victory.

On the other hand, the masses in those days, who lived in the world of disturbances, must have found themselves exhausted physically and spiritually. They had previously suffered under the tyrannical government. And now they could not seek a place for peaceful living because of wars. Therefore they were obliged to take refuge in superstition, a natural course for them to take.

Superstition is a thing calculating and materialistic in any age, common to all. Superstition instantly captivates the masses by its momentary pleasure and immediate advantage. It always avails itself of the disadvantages of people. They lose their reason when blinded by superstition. Thus there were two different currents in those days—power-worship and the addiction to superstition, as seen in the military class and the lower people, phenomena totally contradicting each other in nature. The faith of the latter was under pressure by the former.

Now we must look back upon the later era—the Édo Era (1615-1847), during which such famous tales as *The Ugétsu Monogatari* and *The Hakken-den* were written. We find there a different aspect of life—totally

different from that of the above-mentioned age.

Tokugawa-Iyéyasu, who assumed the reins of government after Toyotomi-Hidéyoshi in the early part of the 17th century, was an extremely shrewd statesman-general. He believed not only in Power, but also in religion—as a policy, and he was afraid of his fate after death, like an ordinary man.

As for the populace in this era, they saw peace ensured by the establishment of the Tokugawa *shogun-ate*. However the class system, the *samurai* class and the lower classes still existed. It was still the world of *samurai*. In consequence, the populace could do nothing but resort to their faith for the relief of their sufferings. However after the insurrection of Shima-bara, a great revolt of Christians in Kyushu in 1637, a strict surveillance was exercised over religion—their only safety-valve. It was natural that they began to indulge merely in pleasure.

The *samurai* class, at the same time, sank into effeminacy by the neglect of military discipline; and began to follow the example of the people in general as they became used to peace. As a result, they became as superstitious as the populace.

Tsunayoshi, the 5th *Shogun* of the Tokugawas, for instance, believing blindly in the preaching of Priest Ryuko, established several big temples and issued an order to protect animals, especially dogs, because he was born in the Year of the *Dog* (The year falling on one of the twelve horary signs, *Dog*). Dogs, therefore, thrived, and the streets of Édo, as might well be imagined, were full of their feces, and they called Tsunayoshi the *Dog-Shogun*. He was a wise and

learned *shogun*. However superstition made him such a man.

The literature, and especially the stories told of foxes in those days, naturally reflect this tendency to superstition. When, for instance, a maniac or maniacs appeared on the street of Édo (present Tokyo) and cut women's hair and they could not apprehend the culprits, they attributed the offence to the act of *Kitsuné*, calling them *hair-cutting Kitsuné*.

The *hair-cutting Kitsuné* was the town-talk in the days of the great artist Utamaro (1753-1806). The outrageous act must have caused considerable alarm among the women at that time who prized their hair so much, as shown in several block-printed genre-pictures.

To the minds of the people, *Kitsuné* seemed to take delight: 1) in assuming the form of human beings; 2) in bewitching human beings and 3) by possessing human beings. The people of the Heian Era (781-1185) and the Édo Era (1615-1867) believed in these things and the superstition still survives in some rural districts of the country.

Kitsuné, it must be remembered, was real in the minds of these people. They lived with *Kitsuné*. They shared joy and sorrow with *Kitsuné*. They fell in love with *Kitsuné*—and *Kitsuné* was infatuated with men—and women, as you will read later in *The Konjaku Monogatari* and other tales. The writers of these books, of course, related stories about *Kitsuné* believing in *Kitsuné*, the animal of romance and mystery.

The author of this book, therefore, sincerely hopes that the reader will live with those people—believing in *Kitsuné* endowed with supernatural power. Then you can appreciate him fully and enjoy the tales found in this volume.