

CHAPTER 2

CONCERNING THE *INARI* SHRINE

THE *Inari* shrine, one of the most popular and prosperous shrines of Japan, is so closely related to *Kitsuné* tradition that the animal, with the Japanese people in general, is synonymous with the shrine.

The *Inari* shrine with its characteristic red *torii* (a symbolic entrance to the precincts of a shrine) and a pair of white fox images, the messengers of the deity, will be found everywhere in the country—in towns, in villages—and a miniature one, in private houses, *geisha* houses, on department store roof gardens and other places.

The *Inari* shrine was originally erected in 711 as their patron deity by the influential Hatas, the descendants of the Korean prince naturalized in the 4th century.

Because of the fact that the *Inari* shrine is greatly concerned with the tradition of the fox in Japan, I will speak here about the shrine in detail.

The shrine is dedicated to *Inari*, the God of Rice. The name *Inari* is derived from the word of *iné*, rice plant. *Inari* means literally the growing of rice plants. It means, in substance, rice crop. Rice, in Japan, is the symbol of agriculture—the symbol of life in ancient times. In the phenomenon of the sprouting

of rice plants—in the growth of rice plants, the young and fresh spirit of the *Inari* God was to be felt. Thus the name *Inari* was given by the founder of the shrine, the Hatas.

Speaking of *Inari* it is interesting to note, from the etymological point of view, that there are many Japanese archaic words with the suffix of *ri*. For example:

Ika-ri (anger), *oko-ri* (origin), *hika-ri* (light), *aka-ri* (source of light), *ino-ri* (prayer), *mamo-ri* (protection), *mino-ri* (crop) and others.

As it is clearly seen from the above instances, the Japanese suffix *ri* means something related closely to the divine work or power of God: *Ikari* (anger) is a word originally used in expressing a strong emotion aroused at seeing a gushing spring. Later, this word was used in expressing the intense feeling of God and men.

Okori (origin) means the power of Mother Nature. *Hikari* (light) and *akari* (source of light) have something to do with the mysterious power of God for which human beings are grateful. *Inori* (prayer), in any language, is the act of offering reverent petition, especially to God. And, in the case of *inari*, meaning *ine-nari* (rice crop), it signifies the fruit of the farmers' labor gained by the grace of God.

All the foregoing words with the suffix of *ri* are religious words. The name of *Inari*, therefore, was given by the Hatas to their tutelary god out of gratitude to the God of Rice.

Some people think that the white foxes, the guardians and messengers of the shrine, are identical with the deity of *Inari*. It is true that this is one of the characteristics of the faith. However this, it must be remembered, is only an aspect of the *Inari* faith. This can be proved by the fact that the god of foxes has never been deified in the *Inari* shrine as the object of worship, though there is a tributary shrine dedicated exclusively to the sacred white foxes in the precincts of the shrine at Fushimi, Kyoto, the site of the great *Inari* shrine.

In former years, the *Inari* shrine was supposed to have the senior grade of the first Court rank—*Sho-Ichii*. The fox gods, however, had no rank though they were enjoying general popularity. To illustrate this point, here is a poem by Issa, a *haiku* poet of the early 19th century, a humorous *haiku* composed by him on the occasion of the festival of *Hatsu-uma* held annually at the *Inari* shrines throughout the country in February:

*O spring season's gaieties!
The white foxes bark
In a festive mood
With no Court rank of mark.*

The white foxes of the *Inari* shrine are also called *myobu*. Here is the legend why they are so named:

In the reign of the Emperor Ichijyo (980-1011), there lived a charming Court lady with a rank of *myobu* (a Court rank conferred on ladies) whose name was Shin-no-Myobu. She was a devotee of *Inari* God. She

went to the shrine at Fushimi, Kyoto, to confine herself there for prayer for a period of seven days. After she had completed her term of worship, it is said, she won the heart of the *Mikado* and later became his consort. She attributed her good luck to the white foxes guarding the shrine and the name of *myobu* was given to them.

And here is a mythological story telling us how the white foxes became connected with the *Inari* shrine:

To the north of the capital, Kyoto, there lived a pair of very old white foxes in the neighborhood of Funaoka hill. The he-fox was a silver-white-furred animal and looked as if he were wearing a garment of bristling silver needles. He always kept his tail raised while walking. The she-fox had a deer's head with a fox's body. Their five cubs would follow them wherever they went. Each of these cubs had a different face.

During the Koin Era (810-823), the two white foxes, accompanied by the five cubs, made their way to the *Inari* shrine at Fushimi leaving their earth near Funaoka hill. When they reached the *Inari-yama* hill on which the shrine stood, they prostrated themselves in front of the shrine and said reverently:

"O Great God! We are naturally gifted with wisdom though we were born as animals. Now we sincerely wish to do our part for the peace and prosperity of the world. We regret, however, that we are not able to realize our purpose. O Great God! We pray from the bottom of our hearts that you would graciously allow us to become members of the household of this shrine so that we will be

able to realize our humble wish!"

Greatly impressed by the sincerity with which these words were spoken, the sacred altar of the shrine instantly shook as if by an earthquake. And the next moment, the foxes heard the solemn voice of the *Inari* God coming from behind the sacred bamboo screen:

"We are always endeavoring to find some means to bestow the divine favor of Buddha on all men by doing our best. Your desire, foxes, is really praiseworthy. We will allow you, all of you, to stay here to do your service in this shrine forever. We expect you to assist with sympathy the worshipers and the people in general with the faith. We order you, He-Fox, to serve at the Upper Temple. We give you the name of Osusuki. And you, She-Fox, shall serve at the Lower Temple. We give you the name of Akomachi."

Hereupon each of the foxes including the five cubs made ten oaths and began to comply with the wishes of all the people. (It is generally believed that if any person with the *Inari* faith actually sees the natural shape of a white fox, or even sees it in a dream, he is receiving a divine revelation of the God of Inari through the medium, the messengers of the deity.)

And here is a reliable record of how the white foxes of the shrine became closely connected with the *Inari* God:

Imperial Princess Toyuké, Goddess of Crops, to whom the *Inari* shrine is dedicated, was commonly called Goddess Mi-Kétsu. People wrote the word of Mi-Kétsu using a phonetic equivalent of *Mi-Kétsu*—

Three Foxes. Since then they believed that the deity was a fox-deity and also were under the impression that the *Inari* shrine was sacred to *Kitsuné*, a fact proving that the thought of ancestor-worship was combined with that of animal-worship.

Consequently they thought that when they had faith in the *Inari* God, the fox-messenger would make its appearance doing an act of charity and benevolence. (See the legend of Sanjyo Kokaji, the swordsmith, appearing in the chapter Fox in *Nō Plays*.) Thus the fox-faith nourished throughout the country.

It is a well-known fact that all religions had a messenger for the communication of God and men. In Christianity, for instance, we see the Holy Sheep or angels effecting the connection between the celestial world and the lower world, and we also see other messengers transmitting the Christian doctrine.

In the case of Buddhism, we see a sort of Buddha, Bodhi-sattva, next to Buddha in rank, and also *Jizo* (Ksitigarbha), a guardian deity of children. They are the messengers of Buddha endeavoring to bring about the redemption of all men. (See these messengers of Buddha appearing in the tales of *The Konjaku Monogatari*, to be introduced later.) And *Inari* God has the white foxes as his messengers. There are many messengers in the service of temples and shrines in Japan such as: Snakes, Pigeons, Crows, Deer, etc.

In this connection, it must be added that the foxes in the service of *Inari* God have nothing to do with the bewitchery or mischief of other foxes which are commonly called *nogitsuné*, or wild foxes. One of the

duties of the *Inari* shrine at Fushimi in Kyoto was to purge or chastise these *nogitsuné*. The direct descendants of the Hatas, founder of the shrine, had a secret method of driving away wild foxes possessing men.

There is a very interesting document treasured in the Onishi family, the descendants of the Hatas, a note sent to the shrine from Toyotomi-Hidéyoshi, the Tycoon (1536-1598), the first commoner in Japan to rise to the highest state office, and the unifier of the Japanese Empire.

The note was written by Hidéyoshi when the daughter of his adopted son, Ukita-Hidéiyé, was reported suffering from fox-possession. It runs as follows:

To the *Inari* God:

Ukita's daughter is now babbling, apparently possessed by a wild fox. I hope that the fox will be dispersed immediately. When no suitable measures be taken, a nation-wide fox-hunt will be ordered.

P.S.

The chief priest of the Yoshida shrine* also notified concerning this matter.

Hidéyoshi (signature)

Note: Sending a note of protest to a god demanding him to drive away a wild fox supposedly possessing his adopted son's daughter is Hidéyoshi's way of doing things. Hidéyoshi reflects the spirit of the age: He believed in Power. However he also believed in the *Inari* God, and built the two-storied gate of the shrine.

*Also a shrine in Kyoto with *Kitsuné* messengers.