

# The Myth of Eternal Youth: Two Japanese Perspectives

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## Abstract

The people's mind can conjure up a certain imagery that denies the reality of death and proclaims eternity and perpetual youth. The story of Urashima Tarō is well known across Japan and there is no child or adult who does not know the tale of the fisherman who rescued a turtle. In return for his kindness, the turtle assumed human form and took him under the sea, to the Dragon Palace, where he stayed three years, till he became homesick and wanted to go back to his village, but, upon his return, he learned that three hundred years had passed and his family was long dead. The story of Urashima first appeared in *Tango Fudoki* (713), then in *Nihongi* (Chronicles of Japan, 720) and, a few decades later, in 759, in *Man'yōshū* (Collection of the ten thousand leaves), the oldest anthology of Japanese poetry. There is a “feminine” counterpart to this story, the legend of Happyaku Bikuni (The eight-hundred-year-old nun) about a quasi-immortal woman who wandered throughout Japan till she reached Wakasa/Obama, where she died at an age of eight hundred years. The woman had attained eternal youth after accidentally eating mermaid flesh. The two tales introduce different perspectives on immortality and eternal youth, but, interestingly enough, both are strongly connected with water, either by plunging to the bottom of the sea, into the Dragon Palace, or by eating the flesh of a marine creature. Even if the “immortality context” of Urashima Tarō and Happyaku Bikuni may differ—the fisherman's immortality is topological, related to the special attributes of a given space; the nun's immortality is circumstantial, rendered by a set of events that made her consume mermaid flesh—what unites the two characters is their “unintentionality.” They neither asked for eternal youth nor pursued immortality as desperately as Gilgamesh or Ponce de Leon, but they were involuntarily pushed towards that outcome.

**Keywords:** Japanese folklore; immortality; time paradox; eternal youth; water; Urashima Tarō; Happyaku Bikuni

For centuries, oral and written literature have influenced each other in Japanese culture, giving birth to enduring creations that have adapted to people's minds and skilfully reinterpreted the same recurrent motif down the ages. Chinese characters, *kanji*, adopted in Japan in the 4th century, became established during the following four centuries<sup>1</sup> and were used to put down in writing the imperial chronicles, religious literature, poetry, essays, literary collections etc. Known as local gazetteers and compiled around 713 A.D., *Fudoki* were among the oldest written records and contained agricultural, geographical, and historical accounts as well as mythology and folklore.<sup>2</sup> A year earlier, in 712, a collection of myths, Shinto practices and historical facts about the reign of different emperors had already been put together in *Kojiki* (An account of ancient matters). Almost in the same period, in 720, *Nihongi* (Chronicles of Japan) was compiled as a panorama of early Japan when its culture was still in formation.<sup>3</sup> The “revolution” brought about by the writing system was crucial because part of the oral literature was thus integrated within the pages of *Fudoki*, *Kojiki* and *Nihongi* ever since the 8th century, passing on to the generations to come the knowledge and wisdom encapsulated in traditional Japanese culture.

Since ancient times, the people's mind has conjured up a certain imagery that denied the reality of death and proclaimed perpetual youth. This article aims to illustrate the different perspectives on immortality by taking into consideration two representative stories that have circulated in both oral and written Japanese literature. One is the story of Urashima Tarō, a fisherman who travelled to another world, and the other centres around Happyaku Bikuni, a nun who is said to have lived for eight hundred years. The tale of Urashima Tarō is well known across Japan and there is no child or adult who does not know the tale. Urashima, the main character of the eponymous tale, is so famous that his image can be found in *emakimono* (painted scrolls originating in the 11th century), woodblock prints,<sup>4</sup> statues,<sup>5</sup> illustrated children's books, school texts or stamps. His story has been incessantly (re)told over the centuries, in a variety of literary genres—legends, folk tales, *setsuwa*,<sup>6</sup> *otogi zōshi*,<sup>7</sup> *engi* (legendary origins of a temple), poetry and theatre—as

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth G. Henshall, *A Guide to Remembering Japanese Characters* (Tokyo: Tuttle Language Library, 1998), xiii.

<sup>2</sup> Most of the ancient provinces of Japan were present in local gazetteers, therefore the official name of each *Fudoki* also contained the name of that province: *Tango Fudoki* (the gazetteer from Tango Province), *Harima Fudoki* (the gazetteer from Harima Province) etc.

<sup>3</sup> Terence Barrow, “Introduction to the New Edition, in *Nihongi*, trans. W. G. Aston (Tokyo: Tuttle Books, 1993), v.

<sup>4</sup> In 1852, Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1797–1861) was also inspired by the image of Urashima when he created Fukushima, the 38th woodblock print of the series *Sixty-nine Stations of the Kisokaidō Road* (Kisokaidō rokujūkyū tsugi no uchi), nowadays part of one of the collections in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (<http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/fukushima-urashima-tar%C3%B4-from-the-series-sixty-nine-stations-of-the-kisokaid%C3%B4-road-kisokaid%C3%B4-rokuj%C3%BBky%C3%BB-tsugi-no-uchi-461770>) (Accessed September 12, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> In Mitoyo, Kagawa Prefecture, there is a famous statue of Urashima Tarō.

<sup>6</sup> Anecdotal literature, *setsuwa*, is a modern term that literally means “spoken story” and refers to the medieval stories that were orally narrated and then written down, resulting in new variations, which were again recorded (cf. Haruo

well as in various songs. Even a shrine on the western coast of the Tango Peninsula in northern Kyoto Prefecture (Ine) is named Urashima Jinja.<sup>8</sup> The tale of Urashima Tarō was selected by the Ministry of Education to be taught to second graders nationwide starting from the Meiji era (1868–1912) until four years after the end of the Second World War (1949). The modern version disseminated by the Ministry of Education is rather didactic and emphasizes gratitude and obedience: If you are kind to other creatures, they will repay your kindness (B375.8. *Turtle released: grateful*) and if you disobey what you are told to, you will be punished accordingly (C321 *Taboo: looking into box*).<sup>9</sup>

To a certain extent, the story of Urashima Tarō resembles the Romanian folktale *Tinerețe fără bătrânețe și viață fără de moarte* (Youth without age and life without death<sup>10</sup>), collected by Petre Ispirescu in 1882, because both tales are concerned with the motif of a supernatural lapse of time. The outline of the Japanese tale is not very complicated. A fisherman called Urashima Tarō saw some children bullying a turtle and saved the poor creature from them, releasing it into the sea. A few days later, as Urashima was fishing, a turtle swam to his boat and invited him to the Ryūgūjō (the Dragon Palace) in return for his kindness. The fisherman travelled on the back of the turtle to the underwater palace where he received magnificent hospitality from Oto-hime (Princess Oto), completely forgetting about the passage of time. He stayed in the Dragon Palace for three years, but one day he got homesick and wanted to leave, in spite of the princess's efforts to detain him. Upon his departure, Oto-hime gave him a *tamatebako* (a casket), warning him not to open it. The fisherman got back home only to find that the village had completely changed and his parents had died long ago. He learnt from one of the villagers that three hundred years had passed. Forgetting the princess's warning, Urashima opened the casket. A white column of smoke rose from the *tamatebako* and the fisherman grew old instantly. According to Aarne-Thompson-Uther classification, this modern version seems to belong to ATU 466 Type (*A Journey to the Other World*) and ATU 470B (*The Land Where No One Dies*) and combines several universal motifs such as: the hero's visit to the other world (F116.1. *Voyage to the Land of Youth*; F133. *Submarine Otherworld*; A692. *Islands of the Blessed*); his encounter with a divine woman or nonhuman female (F420.1.3. *Water-spirits in animal form*; F420.3.3. *Water-spirits have kingdom under water: queen, king, attendants, vassals*; F420.3.5. *Water-spirits visited by*

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Shirane, "Setsuwa (Anecdotal) Literature: *Nihon ryōiki* to *Kokon chomonjū*," in *The Cambridge History of Japanese Literature*, ed. Haruo Shirane Tomi Suzuki and David Lurie (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016), 280).

<sup>7</sup> *Otogi zōshi* or Muromachi tales are considered a new genre of anonymous short fiction encompassing six major categories of the stories: courtier tales, religious tales, warrior tales, commoner tales, tales of other countries, and animal tales (cf. R. Keller Kimbrough, "Late Medieval Popular Fiction and Narrated Genres: *otogizōshi*, *kōwakamai*, *sekkyō*, and *ko-jōruri*," in *The Cambridge History of Japanese Literature* ed. Haruo Shirane Tomi Suzuki and David Lurie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 357).

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.urashimajinja.org/english/index.html> (Accessed September 12, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> Midori Yamamoto McKeon, "The Transformation of the Urashima Legend: The Influence of Religion on Gender," *US-Japan Women's Journal, English Supplement*, no. 10 (1996), 46–47.

<sup>10</sup> For the English translation of *Youth Without Age and Life Without Death*, see <http://www.mftd.org/index.php?action=story&id=3486> (Accessed September 12, 2016).

mortal); the supernatural lapse of time (F377 *Supernatural lapse of time in fairyland*) and the catastrophic results of taboo violation (C321.2. *Taboo: opening gift box prematurely*; C915.1. *Troubles escape when forbidden casket is opened*).

This tale that has mesmerized the Japanese of all ages, has, in fact, undergone many changes over time. At the beginning, the name of the protagonist was Ura no Shimako, in *Tango Fudoki*, Mizunoe no Urashimako as mentioned in *Nihongi*, *Manyōshū* (Collection of the ten thousand leaves—compiled in 759) or Shimako in *Zoku Urashimako-den* (The bibliography of Urashimako—932), *Fusō Ryakki* (A concise history of Japan—12th century) and it was only in the Muromachi period (1333–1353) that the name changed into Urashima Tarō.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the motif of repaying the kindness (*on-gaeshi*), highly regarded by the Ministry of Education, was absent in the oldest versions which focused on the romance between a human being and an immortal female (T111. *Marriage of mortal and supernatural being*). It was only in the *otogi zōshi* (starting from the Muromachi period) that the motif of the animal’s gratitude appeared overtly.<sup>12</sup>

The eternal fascination with the fate of Urashima is manifested in the innumerable versions of the story across the ages:

Nara texts (710–789)

- *Tango no kuni Fudoki* (713)
- *Nihongi* (720)
- *Manyōshū* (759)

Heian texts (784–1185)

- *Zoku Urashimako-den* (932)
- *Fusō ryakki* (12th century)
- *Honchō Shinsenden* (12th century)

Kamakura texts (1185–1333)

- *Kojidan* (1212–1215)
- *Mizukagami* (late 12th century)
- *Uji shūi monogatari* (beginning of the 13th century).

Muromachi (1333–1573) and Edo (1600–1868) texts

- *Otogi zōshi*
- *Nō* plays

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<sup>11</sup> Masako Hara, “Urashimako no juyō to hen’yō: bungaku genryū to bukkyō chōryū no gōryū,” *Senri Kinran University*, no 7 (2010), 8.

<sup>12</sup> Hayao Kawai, “Mukashi-banashi no yunguteki kaishaku (sono san): Urashima Tarō,” *Yōji no Kyōiku*, no. 71 (1972), 14.

- *Kyōgen* plays
- *Ehon Urashima Tarō kaichū gunki* etc.

It would be an almost impossible task to give a bird's-eye view of all these works in a single article. As a result, I have chosen three versions to get a better understanding of how the story has evolved over the centuries. For this purpose, I intend to introduce the first versions of the story, namely the texts from *Tango Fudoki* and *Nihongi*, then I shall skip a few centuries and take a closer look at the *otogi zōshi* version, because it marks a turning point in the history of the tale, as, for example, the change of the main character's name and the introduction of the long-lived pair of turtle and crane indicate.

In *Tango Fudoki*, which contains the oldest written version of the tale, the protagonist, Ura no Shimako, goes fishing far out in the open sea. After three days of not catching anything, he finally captures a five-coloured turtle. This is, obviously, not a usual catch and the symbolic image of the turtle announces the influences of Chinese cosmology that legitimates the five essential elements (wood, fire, earth, water, and metal) associated with five basic colours (blue, red, yellow, white, and black).<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, the turtle is a representative symbol in Far Eastern mythology and is linked with long life and immutability. Ancient Chinese cosmology refers to a primordial giant turtle, or a giant fish, which carries the world on its back.<sup>14</sup> The Chinese goddess Nü-gua repaired one of the four pillars which bear the earth with one of the turtle's legs. The Chinese also believed that the ground could be made firmer and more secure if they fashioned a stone tortoise and placed heavy slabs on its back.<sup>15</sup> The turtle is one of the four benevolent animals protecting the four directions: turtle, lord of the shelled animals, in the north; *kirin* (white tiger), lord of the furred quadrupeds, in the west; phoenix, lord of the birds, in the south, and dragon, lord of scaly animals, in the east. Interestingly enough, the turtle also symbolises the Yin principle, which is feminine,<sup>16</sup> in opposition to the guardian of the south, the phoenix, which is dominated by the positive, male Yang.<sup>17</sup>

As Shimako falls asleep in his boat, the turtle turns into a very beautiful woman. When the fisherman wakes, the woman tells him that she is an immortal and that she has fallen in love with him. The divine woman proposes to marry Shimako and invites him to Mount Hōrai. The fisherman closes his eyes and, in an instant, he reaches a large island in the middle of the ocean. Most people may feel at home on the land, but vaguely uncomfortable in the middle of the ocean.

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<sup>13</sup> Yamamoto McKleon, "The Transformation of the Urashima Legend," 55.

<sup>14</sup> Hans Biedermann, *Dictionary of Symbolism* (New York: Facts on File, 1992), 369; Wolfram Eberhard, *A Dictionary of Chinese Symbols: Hidden Symbols in Chinese Life and Thought* (London: Routledge, 1986), 22.

<sup>15</sup> Eberhard, 22.

<sup>16</sup> As it is believed that there are no male tortoises, the females must mate with snakes. Thus, the tortoise is depicted together with a snake as the creature of the North (Eberhard, 376).

<sup>17</sup> John C. Ferguson and Masaharu Anesaki, *Mythology of All Races*, vol. 8, *Chinese by John C. Ferguson and Japanese by Masaharu Anesaki* (New York: Cooper Square Publishes, 1964), 243.

However, the oceanic paradise of Mount Hōrai, the Japanese equivalent of the Chinese Mount Penglai, awaits Urashima as a land full of promise. According to some historians, the two systems of the Chinese mythical paradises situate one in the east, associated with Penglai—the paradise floating on or under the sea—and another in the west, Kunlun—the earthly residence of the Supreme Divinity.<sup>18</sup>

Even though Shimako does not know anything about the woman, he obediently follows her. In short, rather than getting a woman after a heroic battle, the hero lets himself be captured by her, displaying a rather passive attitude. Shimako is innocently pulled by the woman into her world in a similar manner to that of the Irish Oisín.<sup>19</sup> The psychologist Hayao Kawai interprets the presence of the turtle as a representative symbol that illustrates the image of the earth, substance and female, in opposition to heaven, spirit, male.<sup>20</sup>

Following the turtle-woman, Shimako sets foot on the island and is astonished to see all the beauty surrounding him: “the ground there looked as if it were paved with gems. The castle gate was dark and shadowy, while the two-story castle was shiny and bright. It was a place such as he had neither seen nor heard before.”<sup>21</sup> The woman leaves him in the palace where Shimako meets firstly seven, then eight children from whom he finds out that the woman’s name is Kame-hime, princess Turtle. When the princess returns, he learns that the seven children were the Subaru (Pleiades) and the eight children, the Amefuri (The Rain Stars or Hyades). The reference to the constellations activates Chinese reminiscences that place great importance on the connection between the human and larger natural spheres, given that the passage of celestial bodies can measure and regulate cosmic time.

But the children are not the only ones he encounters in the palace. The princess’s parents are also delighted to meet Shimako and they invite him to an unforgettable feast where the fisherman enjoys the food, the music and the dances of the immortals till twilight, when he joins hands with Kame-hime and they consummate their marriage. In the unworldly palace Shimako leads a life of pleasure, but, after three years, he is overwhelmed with sorrow and longs to see his parents again. The princess is very sad to part with her husband, but, in the end, she gives him a jewelled comb box (*tamakushige*) and advises him not to ever open it if he wants to see her again. This *Tango*

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<sup>18</sup> Lihui Yang and Deming An, *Handbook of Chinese Mythology* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2005), 163.

<sup>19</sup> A woman called Niam(h) comes over the sea riding on a white magical horse and begs Oisín, with whom she has fallen in love, to come with her to Tir na n’Og, the Land of Youth. Oisín follows Niam and spends a few years in Tir na n’Og, but he becomes homesick and wants to return to Ireland. Niam(h) reluctantly agrees, but warns Oisín not to get down from the magical white horse. However, on his way home, he forgets about her warning as he attempts to help some men raising a huge stone. The minute he touches the ground, he becomes an old blind man (cf. Maria Leach, ed., *Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 817). For this comparison, see Hayao Kawai, *The Japanese Psyche: Major Motifs in the Fairy Tales of Japan* (Woodstock: Spring Publications, 1996), 96.

<sup>20</sup> Kawai, “Mukashi-banashi no yunguteki kaishaku (sono san),” 13.

<sup>21</sup> Yamamoto McKeon, “The Transformation of the Urashima Legend,” 50.

*Fudoki* version is extremely enchanting because its central theme is the romance, as suggested by the extensive dialogue between Kame-hime and Shimako, and all other motifs, such as the journey to Mount Hōrai, the beauties of the palace, even the “collateral” immortality attained while living on the marvellous island, become of secondary importance. Unlike later versions, the fisherman is not the benefactor of the sea creature, but rather the handpicked husband of the turtle-princess.<sup>22</sup>

In spite of his love for Kame-hime, the fisherman is determined to return to his village. However, as soon as he gets there, he feels quite helpless because he does not know anyone there. He learns from a villager that the elders handed down by word of mouth a story about a person called Mizunoe no Ura no Shimako who had disappeared three hundred years ago. Anyway, Shimako’s decision of returning home is quite surprising, because, without any apparent reason, he finds himself suddenly aware of the difference between himself and the unfamiliar “others” on the unfamiliar wondrous Mount Hōrai. But, even after he gets to what was once home to him, he is suddenly overwhelmed by the disturbing feeling of not belonging.

After spending ten days in the village, Shimako absentmindedly opens the comb box given to him by his wife and “instantly, his youthful, beautiful figure, which resembled a fragrant orchid, flew away into the azure sky led by the wind cloud. Shimako, realizing that he would not be able to see [the princess] again, having broken the promise, stood turning his head toward the land of immortality and walked around choking in tears.”<sup>23</sup> We cannot help wondering why the princess gave the fisherman the comb box. Did she trust Shimako to keep his promise of not opening the box? Or maybe she hoped against hope that someday they would be reunited. The researcher Yamamoto McKeon believes the gift box contained Shimako’s immortality, which would enable him to come back to his wife,<sup>24</sup> but the moment he opened it, the painstakingly preserved immortality evaporated in an instant and he resumed the transient human flow of time.

In addition to the nostalgic overtones of *Tango Fudoki*, the *Nihongi* text is one of the shortest versions of the tale:

Autumn, 7th month. A man of Tsutsukaha in the district of Yosa in the province of Tamba, the child of Urashima of Mizunoe,<sup>25</sup> went fishing in a boat. At length he caught a large tortoise, which straightway became changed into a woman. Hereupon Urashima’s child fell in love with her and made her his wife. They went together into the sea and reached Hōrai San [Mount Hōrai], where they saw the genii. The story is in another book.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Yamamoto McKeon, 52.

<sup>23</sup> Yamamoto McKeon.

<sup>24</sup> Yamamoto McKeon.

<sup>25</sup> Mizunoe no Urashimako can be translated as the child of Urashima from Mizunoe.

<sup>26</sup> W. G. Aston, trans., *Nihongi* (Tokyo: Tuttle Books, 1993), 368.

The text is more an account, rather than a fully fledged tale and it tells about Shimako's encounter with a beautiful woman who can assume tortoise form (F420.1.3. *Water-spirits in animal form*). After falling in love with her, they travelled together to Mount Hōrai (A692. *Islands of the Blessed*). We are not told what happened to them on Mount Hōrai—"because the story is in another book"—and the motifs of the time paradox as well as the taboo violation are completely absent. The only element worth mentioning is Mount Hōrai, written 常世 and later pronounced Tokoyo (the Eternal Land). Their destination, Penglai (Hōrai), is one of the three mythological isles inhabited by the genii who drink the waters of the fountain of life which flow in a perpetual steam. The pine, the plum, the peach-tree and the sacred fungus grow on the shores of the island and the crane builds its nest on the branches of a never-dying pine.<sup>27</sup> In *A Chinese Bestiary: Strange Creatures from the Guideways through Mountains and Seas* (compiled during the Han dynasty, 206 BC–220 AD) it is emphasised how difficult it was to get to the Isles of the Blessed and how any attempt at approaching these places went inevitably wrong.

Expeditions were dispatched to the three divine islands of Penglai, Fangzhang, and Yingzhou. They were said to lie in the Gulf of Bohai not far beyond where men dwelled. Unfortunately, whenever anyone approached them, winds would rise and blow his boat off course. No doubt, some must have arrived there in the past. All the Transcendents and the Never-Dying Herb can be found there. Everything including birds and beasts are white, while the palaces are made of gold and silver. Before someone reached these places, they appeared from afar like clouds, but as they arrived, the three divine islands submerged into the sea. As the people approached, winds suddenly rose and carried their boats farther away so that in the end, none of them were able to get there. Every ruler has yearned for these places.<sup>28</sup>

The hybrid result of a double geography which combines both water and land, the island implies both isolation and existence within certain factual limits. On the island the sense of "otherness" is magnified to such an extent that we may feel the urge to break free from the world we were once accustomed to. Moreover, the island is the very place where we may even experience several contradictory feelings such as hope and anxiety, temptation and fear.<sup>29</sup> Urashima of Mizunoe is guided towards such a divine island on which even rulers dream to set foot, and, thus, he is completely estranged from the human world.

In the Muromachi period, the protagonist Mizunoe no Ura no Shimako, who mesmerised the Japanese with his story about everlasting love, changed his name to Urashima Tarō. The *otogi zōshi* version starts in a similar manner to the *Nihongi* text, describing the catching of the tortoise: One day, Urashima Tarō, a fisherman from Tango Province, caught a turtle. As he took pity on the poor creature, which was believed to live for ten thousand years, he decided to release

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<sup>27</sup> Aston.

<sup>28</sup> Richard E. Strassberg, ed. and trans., *A Chinese Bestiary: Strange Creatures from the Guideways through Mountains and Seas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 205.

<sup>29</sup> Lucian Boia, "Cu privire la funcția imaginară a insulei" [On the imaginary function of the island], in *Insula – despre izolare și limite în spațiul imaginar* [The island: Considerations about isolation and limits within the imaginary space], ed. Lucian Boia, Anca Oroveanu and Simona Corlan-Ioan (Bucharest, Colegiul Noua Europa, 1999), 7–8.



it into the sea. The following day he met a beautiful woman, drifting in a small boat. At her request, he took her home to Ryūgūjō, the Dragon Palace, where they lived as a married couple. The description of the undersea palace to which Urashima is taken by the mysterious woman is one of the most appealing paragraphs in medieval Japanese literature:

When one opened the door to the east, spring appeared. The plum and cherry trees were blooming in profusion, the branches of the willow tree bent in the spring wind, and from the midst of the spring mist, one could hear the voice of the bush warbler near the eaves. Flowers were blooming everywhere in the trees. When one looked to the south, summer appeared. In a hedge separated from spring, the deutzia flowers were no doubt blooming. The lotus in the lake was covered with dew, and numerous waterfowl played amid the cool ripples. As the tips of the various trees grew thick, the voice of the cicada cried in the sky, and amid the clouds that followed an evening shower, the small cuckoo sang, announcing summer. In the west, autumn appeared. Everywhere the leaves of the trees were turning bright colours, and there were white chrysanthemums in the bamboo fence. The bush clover at the edge of the mist-filled meadow parted the dew, and the lonesome voice of the deer told us that this was autumn. When one gazed to the north, winter appeared. The treetops in all directions had withered in the cold, and there was the first dew on the dried leaves. At the entrance to the valley where the mountains were buried in white snow, the smoke was rising in lonely fashion over the charcoal ovens, clearly revealing the lowly work of the men making charcoal and telling us that this was winter.<sup>30</sup>

The mirage of “frozen time” creates a fascinating world where one can miraculously experience all four seasons at the same time just by moving from one door to another. The Dragon Palace seems like a huge amber gemstone in which hundreds of years were masterfully encapsulated and preserved in pristine beauty, unsoiled by the ruthless passage of time.

Three years passed and, in spite of the breath-taking beauty surrounding him, Urashima found himself thinking of his parents. He wanted to see them again so he told his wife that he would go home for thirty days. Upon his leaving, his wife confessed that she was actually the turtle which he had released in the sea and that she had married Urashima to repay his kindness. In addition, she gave him a box, warning him not to open it. The fisherman returned home, but the village looked like a desolate field. He learnt from one of the villagers that seven hundred years had passed, and, in the depths of despair, he opened the lid of the box, despite his wife’s words. He aged in an instant and turned into a crane which flew up in the sky to Mount Hōrai. Later on, he manifested himself as the god of Urashima Shrine in Tango Province, along with his wife, the turtle, who became the goddess of the same shrine.<sup>31</sup> Unlike the previous stories, the *otogi zōshi* version introduces the *tsuru-kame* (the crane and the turtle) motif, imagined as an ideal pair which has transcended the ephemeral human world and reunited in animal form. In Japanese lore, the crane is said to live one thousand years and the turtle, ten thousand years. Moreover, cranes are long-lived birds and serve as riding animals for immortals. Like pines, they appear to have

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<sup>30</sup> Haruo Shirane, *The Culture of the Four Seasons: Nature, Literature, and the Arts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 148.

<sup>31</sup> Yamamoto McKeon, “The Transformation of the Urashima Legend,” 78.

connotations with the grave as well as with immortality.<sup>32</sup> Another connection with immortality is the final reference to Mount Hōrai. In the *otogi zōshi* text, it is the Dragon Palace, not Mount Hōrai, which is the homeland of the turtle-princess. However, the mountain comes into clearer focus again at the end of the story, when it is presented as the felicitous destination of the long-lived *tsuru-kame* couple.

At the other end of the immortality spectrum in Japan lies the legend of Happyaku Bikuni, which, despite the fact that it has spread to 25 prefectures of Japan,<sup>33</sup> is certainly not as loved as Urashima Tarō's story. The legend has more than 110 versions, which can be found in almost any part of the main island Honshū, but not in Hokkaidō, one of the northernmost Japanese islands, and Okinawa.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless most of the Happyaku Bikuni legends centre on Wakasa, Obama, in Fukui Prefecture. The name Wakasa (若狭) is homophonous with *wakasa* (“youth,” 若さ), emphasising the motif of eternal youth. According to the legend, a man was invited to a feast where the flesh of some rare fish was being served (A153. *Food of the gods*). Disgusted by the thought of consuming the flesh of a human-faced creature, the guest avoided eating the meat which he carefully stashed in his breast pocket. After returning home, his sixteen-year-old daughter accidentally found the mysterious piece of meat and, without a second thought, ate it (C240. *Taboo: eating food of certain person*). In the years to come it seemed that the daughter, miraculously, did not age. As time went by, her parents and all her friends died, but the girl still remained young and beautiful (A153.2. *Magic food gives immortality to gods*). Eventually she became a nun and started travelling throughout the country, doing all sorts of good deeds and helping people in need. At the age of eight hundred, she got to Wakasa (Obama), where she retreated to a cave by the sea.<sup>35</sup> Even nowadays, Obama hosts two emblematic places which are entwined with Happyaku Bikuni's fate: the Kūin temple, famous for the cave from where Happyaku Bikuni passed into Nirvana, and Shinmei jinja, the shrine where her hut used to be.<sup>36</sup>

The name of the legend, Happyaku Bikuni, means “eight-hundred-year-old nun.” Because, no matter how much the girl aged, she still looked very young and her skin was extremely white, the legend was also called Shiro/Shira Bikuni (The white nun) or Yao Bikuni. Of course, there are alternative explanations for the name: some of them refer to her snow-white hair, or the fairness of her complexion (in spite of her advanced age), or to the white camellia she carries, but others connect Shira Bikuni with the mediumistic cult of the Shugendō site,<sup>37</sup> Shirayama (Hakusan), in

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<sup>32</sup> Livia Kohn, ed., *Daoism Handbook* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 127.

<sup>33</sup> Osamu Soda, *Chōju densetsu o yuku* (Tokyo: Nōrin Tōkei Shuppan, 2011), 66.

<sup>34</sup> Kazuo Kuzumi, “Nihon no ningyo densetsu: Happyaku Bikuni o chūshin ni shite,” *Bulletin of the Faculty of Human Development and Culture, Fukushima University*, no 13 (2011), 68; Soda, *Chōju densetsu o yuku*, 66.

<sup>35</sup> Michael Dylan Foster, *The Book of Yōkai* (Oakland, University of California Press, 2015), 155.

<sup>36</sup> <http://fukui100kei.dogaclip.com/2015/08/post-63a0.html> (Accessed January 7, 2017).

<sup>37</sup> Shugendō is a religion which originated in the 8th century and incorporated beliefs or philosophies from early Japanese religious beliefs, Taoism, Shintō and esoteric Buddhism. To the practitioners, called *shūgenja*, literally meaning “someone who is in the process of acquiring spiritual powers through special discipline,” or *yamabushi*, “a

Hokuriku<sup>38</sup> and the religious performance by the travelling women known as *shiradayū*, *shirabyōshi*, and *shirakamime*. Finally, this name reveals a link to the *oshirasama* puppets used by female shamans in Tohoku region<sup>39</sup> until modern times, as Kazuo Tokuda has observed.<sup>40</sup>

The term *bikuni* generally refers to a Buddhist nun, although there is a very formal hierarchy applying to both men and women according to which Buddhist followers could be classified into seven categories: *biku* (skt.: bhikṣu), *bikuni* (skt.: bhikṣunī), *shami* (skt.: sṛāmaṇera), *shikishamana*, *shamani*, *ubasoku*, and *ubai*. *Biku* to *shamani* were classes for those who had finished the initial ordination, and *ubasoku* and *ubai* were for lay followers. *Biku* and *bikuni* were monks fully qualified to teach their disciples, while *shami*, *shikishamana* and *shamuni* were semi-qualified monks.<sup>41</sup>

Table 1: Hierarchy of Buddhist followers

	<b>Lay follower</b>	<b>Semi-qualified</b>	<b>Fully qualified</b>
Male	<i>ubasoku</i>	<i>shami/shamini</i>	<i>biku</i>
Female	<i>ubai</i>	<i>shikishamana</i>	<i>bikuni</i>

However, besides this complicated ranking system, *bikuni* has come to denote two different things. In the 15th and 16th century, *bikuni*, especially the Kumano *bikuni*,<sup>42</sup> female itinerant preachers, promoted the Buddhist scriptures and took part in fund-raising campaigns,<sup>43</sup> but in the Edo period (1600–1868), a wide variety of female religious professionals combined their sacred functions with entertainment, even prostitution. Among them we may encounter female shamans, *bikuni*, dancers and puppeteers.<sup>44</sup> For instance, *uta-bikuni* were the performers who sang *kouta*<sup>45</sup> in all Japan and also worked as prostitutes.<sup>46</sup> However, Happyaku Bikuni does not seem to share the characteristics of *uta-bikuni*, but is rather associated with Kumano *bikuni*,<sup>47</sup> as the researchers Tatsuo Hagiwara and Kazuo Tokuda have pointed out.<sup>48</sup>

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person who lives in the mountains,” enlightenment meant to attain oneness with the *kami*, or gods (Stuart Picken, *Essentials of Shinto: An Analytical Guide to Principal Teachings* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994), 198–201).

<sup>38</sup> Located in the north-western part of the main island of Japan.

<sup>39</sup> The north part of Japan’s largest island, Honshū.

<sup>40</sup> Hank Glassman, “At the Crossroads of Birth and Death: The Blood Pool and Postmortem Fetal Extraction,” in *Death and the Afterlife in Japanese Buddhism*, ed. Jacqueline I. Stone and Mariko Nanba Walter (Honolulu, Hawaii University Press, 2008), 182–183.

<sup>41</sup> Kenji Matsuo, *A History of Japanese Buddhism* (Folkestone: Global Oriental, 2007), 23–24.

<sup>42</sup> Nuns affiliated with the Kumano religious complex.

<sup>43</sup> Barbara Ambros, *Women in Japanese Religions* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 87.

<sup>44</sup> Ambros, 92.

<sup>45</sup> A type of a popular song.

<sup>46</sup> Mayumi Kimura, “Happyaku Bikuni densetsu: denpa to ningyo no niku,” *Gakukai*, no 11 (1995), 50.

<sup>47</sup> We have several 15th century references to the activities of a weird “white nun,” Yao Bikuni, such as a comic *otogi zōshi* from 1480 entitled *Hitsuketsu no monogatari* (The brushmaker’s tale). The main character, a raccoon dog masquerading as a human, is accompanied by several friends on a mission to the capital. There he finds a large

The medieval tales from the 15th century (*Yasutomiki*, *Gaun Nikki*, *Karahashi Tsunamitsu Kyōki*) do not furnish specific details. For instance, all three versions tell the story of Shira Bikuni,<sup>49</sup> a woman with an impressive lifespan who travelled throughout Japan, but there is not further reference to the reason why she came to live such a long life.<sup>50</sup> In the Edo period, the writer Hayashi Razan (1583–1657) included the story of Shira Bikuni in his six volume work, *Honchō jinja-kō* (1638–1645). His version recounts the story of a girl from Wakasa whose father met a stranger in the mountains. The stranger, who seemed to be from another world (*ijin*), invited him to eat mermaid flesh (A153.3. *Banquets of the gods*), but the man refrained from consuming it and brought it home where his daughter accidentally found it in the sleeve of his *kimono* and ate it. After that incident, she came to live four hundred years.<sup>51</sup> The name of the girl who became a nun was Shira Bikuni.<sup>52</sup> Unlike the medieval versions, this account makes clear that it was the mermaid’s flesh received from someone from another world that made Shira Bikuni immortal.<sup>53</sup>

In a legend from Toyama Prefecture eight men are lured into the mountains and offered quite a feast, but they have misgivings about the food gift they received from their host and dump it in the river. The story unfolds as follows: Eight men from Kurobetani were playing go, which they enjoyed very much, when an old man turned up and joined their group. After a while the old man asked the eight friends to come with him into the mountains. They accepted his invitation, passed a waterfall and reached a mansion painted in red where they were copiously supplied with food for a few days. After the feast was over, they received as a gift the flesh of a mermaid. On their way home, they had felt bad and threw the meat in the river. After three years and three months had passed, they remembered the red mansion beyond the waterfall and decided to go there again, but, despite their efforts, they were not able to find it. It seemed that a girl found the piece of meat thrown in the river, ate it and lived 300 years<sup>54</sup>. The girl in the legend was mysteriously

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number of people gathered at the Nishidōin temple, where a nun from Wakasa has been preaching. They engage in a religious dialogue and the nun tells them different stories about the origins of various professions, arts, and technologies, including her own story. Although she appears to be in her eighties or nineties, she is in fact 900 years old. She informs them that, although recently people have taken to calling her the “eight-hundred nun,” she was originally known as the “white nun of Wakasa” and that she became a disciple of Hottō Kokushi (Muhon Kakushin) when she visited his temple, Yura no tera, on pilgrimage to Kumano. “This reference marks her as an ancestor of the traveling religious who became known as the Kumano *bikuni*, for whom an identification with Yura no tera and Hottō Kokushi, was an essential foundational story. Legend has it that Muhon Kakushin’s mother was Myōchi, the founder of the Kumano *bikuni* order” (cf. Glassman, “At the Crossroads of Birth and Death,” 182–183).

<sup>48</sup> Glassman, “At the Crossroads of Birth and Death,” 182–183.

<sup>49</sup> Soda, *Chōju densetsu o yuku*, 69.

<sup>50</sup> Kimura, “Happyaku Bikuni densetsu,” 48.

<sup>51</sup> Sometimes the figures may vary: four hundred years, eight hundred years, one thousand years, but all these numbers tend to emphasise the impressive lifespan of several hundred years of age.

<sup>52</sup> Kuzumi, “Nihon no ningyo densetsu,” 67.

<sup>53</sup> Kimura, “Happyaku Bikuni densetsu,” 49.

<sup>54</sup> Kuzumi, “Nihon no ningyo densetsu,” 69.

drawn to the river where she found the piece of meat (which would grant her eternal youth) like the serpent from Gilgamesh, which was instinctively attracted to the fragrance of the wonderful plant of immortality that grew at the bottom of the sea. Even if the events take place in the mountains, the connection with water is still very strong. The waterfall can stand for a portal to another world, whereas the river is important because it symbolises a dynamic stream with its flow and its floodings, the very basis for the historical reckoning of time itself. The dividing line between its two banks marks the boundary between this world and the other.<sup>55</sup>

However, the food that can restore youth does not always come from the other world located in the mountains, but also from the sea. The heroine in an Aomori legend, no longer a girl but a married woman, was driven away by her angry husband who left her only one option—to become a nun: Once there lived a happy family consisting of a man, his wife and their child. They led a peaceful life, picking up the fish washed ashore by the waves. One day, their child went to the seashore and found a fish. They all decided to grill it and split it in three, but the fish smelled so good that the wife could not help herself and ate up all three pieces. To her astonishment, she grew as young as a teenager of seventeen or eighteen years old. As her husband gave her a good scolding, the woman ran away and became a nun. One hundred years had passed, but she still looked very young and seemed eager to tell her story to anyone in the Ishiwaki Gulf who wanted to listen to her. The fish she ate must have been a mermaid and that is why she lived such a long life.<sup>56</sup> The novelty of this legend consists in “the source simplification” which has cut down the chain of coincidences and go-betweens (guest-feast-father-daughter) and reduced it to only one person—the woman who has eaten the mermaid flesh.

But in most legends, the woman who has consumed mermaid flesh is portrayed as a Buddha follower who travelled throughout Japan, leaving behind many legendary relics to account for her existence: pagodas, such as the stone tower in Mitoyo, Kagawa Prefecture,<sup>57</sup> trees (pines, cedars or camellia trees) that mysteriously grew from her cane or chop sticks<sup>58</sup> and bridges.<sup>59</sup> Since Happyaku Bikuni lived a very long life, she might even have witnessed the downfall of the Taira clan<sup>60</sup> and the valiant deeds of Minamoto<sup>61</sup> no Yoshitsune.<sup>62</sup> She took pity on human suffering and had such a kind heart that she gave up years of her life to counterbalance the effects of

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<sup>55</sup> Biedermann, *Dictionary of Symbolism*, 285.

<sup>56</sup> Kuzumi, “Nihon no ningyo densetsu,” 68.

<sup>57</sup> Shōji Yoshimoto, *Nihon zenkoku shinwa densetsu no tabi* (Tokyo: Bensei Shuppan, 2009), 997.

<sup>58</sup> Kimura, “Happyaku Bikuni densetsu,” 49.

<sup>59</sup> Akemi Itō, ed., *Nihon densetsu taikai*, vol. 6 (Toyama, Ishikawa, Fukui) (Tokyo: Mizuumi Shobō, 1987), 425.

<sup>60</sup> Taira (Heike) was a major Japanese samurai clan during the Heian period (794–1185) which was annihilated by the rival clan, Minamoto (Genji).

<sup>61</sup> Minamoto no Yoshitsune (1159–1189) was a famous military commander of the Minamoto clan who had fought in the Genpei War (1180–1185), the war between the Heike and Genji clan.

<sup>62</sup> Yasuko Kojima, “Happyaku Bikuni,” in *Nihon Kidan Itsuwa Densetsu Daijiten*, ed. Kunihiro Shimura and Yasushi Matsumoto (Tokyo: Bensei Shuppan, 1995), 746; Kimura, “Happyaku Bikuni densetsu,” 52.

sickness and ailments, as recorded in a legend from Fukui Prefecture. A young girl who had unintentionally eaten *reiniku* (靈肉 meat with magic powers) was destined to live 1000 years. When she was eight hundred years old, she took pity on the lord of Wakasa, who had been suffering from a serious illness, and sacrificed two hundred years of her life to cure him. Due to her sympathetic nature, she was afterwards celebrated as the goddess Happyaku-hime Myōjin.<sup>63</sup>

Besides these personal qualities, Happyaku Bikuni was also “weather wise.” Many folk genres express knowledge concerning the full range of climate conditions based on the fact that weather has become an omnipotent force that can shape culture.<sup>64</sup> The gift of weather forecasting was apparently a typical characteristic of Japanese mermaids, who could foretell the coming of a tsunami.<sup>65</sup> According to a legend from Toyama Prefecture, eating mermaid flesh not only grants long life, but can also rejuvenate one. Long ago in Kurobe (Toyama Prefecture) there lived an old wise woman. One night, looking at the stars, she foretold a terrible disaster and rushed to Kurobe to warn the people that they should take shelter as a tsunami would hit the town. Unfortunately, no one believed her. That night a tsunami did strike and almost one thousand houses collapsed. The only one left alive was the old woman who crossed Kurobe River and wandered a while until she reached Wakasa. People called her Jōsei Otoro. She did not eat much, only a few dried persimmons, but she lived for eight hundred years, as she herself had confessed to someone from Takase village who came to visit her several hundred years after the great tsunami had hit the city. She also predicted that she would live till the flowers of the camellia tree growing by her cave scattered. Besides this, people would also tell an intriguing story about the old woman. The bottom of the backyard pond of Zenshō temple (Nyūzen, Toyama Prefecture) seemed to be connected with the Dragon Palace. One year, a very important guest visited Zenshō temple and was entertained by Otoro’s husband. After the guest had left, the old man brought home the leftovers of the feast. Otoro ate the food—which turned out to be mermaid flesh—and she miraculously grew young again and lived a very long life.<sup>66</sup> The storyline moves backwards in a sense, starting with Otoro’s unusual powers and then summarising the facts that had caused her rejuvenation and longevity. The legend also implies that there could be a correspondence between Zenshō temple and the Dragon Palace, the oceanic paradise where time flows at a slower pace. There is also a similar legend in which Happyaku Bikuni is depicted as a wise prophetess, even if her abilities are sometimes limited. Happyaku Bikuni was born in Nawamata (present-day Wajima, Ishikawa Prefecture) and people believed that she could forecast the weather for the next seven days. Several fishermen heard this rumour and wanted to take her to Wakasa to forecast the

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<sup>63</sup> Kazuo Kuzumi, “Nihon no ningyo densetsu,” 69; Moto Shida, “Yao bikuni,” in *Nihon mukashi banashi jiten*, ed. Kōji Inada (Tokyo: Kōbundō), 964.

<sup>64</sup> Sarah Strauss and Benjamin S. Orlove, eds, *Weather, Climate, Culture* (New York: Berg Publishers, 2003), 7.

<sup>65</sup> Sami Fujii, “Kame no oshie: Minkan setsuwa ‘ningyo to tsunami’ no shiza yori,” *Onomichi Daigaku Nihon Bungaku Ronso*, no. 2 (2006), 51–71.

<sup>66</sup> Itō, *Nihon densetsu taikēi*, 138.

weather for them, but she replied that it would not be possible because she could not see the seven islands from there.<sup>67</sup>

The unique nature of the princess of Wakasa, who will later become Happyaku Bikuni, has sent her from the centre to the periphery of society, conferring on her a liminal status as both inside and outside the community. Because she was an albino, she decided to enter a Buddhist nunnery and became a *bikuni* during the reign of the emperor Kōtoku (596–654). People used to call her Happyaku Bikuni due to the fact that she received the medicine of immortality from the Dragon God and came to live for eight hundred years. One day she arrived in Etchū Province (present-day Toyama Prefecture) and began to live in a cave in the Yoneyama Mountains, near Tochizu (Tateyama). When she visited Wakasugi in Kamiichi, she sat under a tree and ate her lunch. After she had finished, she stuck her cedar-wood chopsticks in the ground and foretold that she would die when the huge cedar—grown from her chopsticks—withered. Once she had left that place, the chopsticks put forth buds and grew taller and taller. The tree had a peculiar shape, with thinner lower branches and thicker upper branches, which is why the local people called it *sakasa sugi* (the upside down cedar) or *Wakasa sugi* (the cedar from Wakasa)<sup>68</sup>. This time, the princess has escaped death not because she has eaten mermaid flesh, but because she received unusual medicine from the Dragon God. The connection with the Dragon God, and, consequently with the Dragon Palace, might also have awoken some hidden spiritual powers that helped her anticipate the upcoming events in her life, including the moment of her death.

The motif of the withering tree paralleling Happyaku Bikuni's lifespan, a central element in the structure of the following narrative, is a subtle invitation to an open ending which leaves us contemplating the possibility that the nun might still be alive. As a fisherman's daughter ate some mermaid flesh, she lived eight hundred years till she lost interest in life and entered a cave in the courtyard of Kūin temple. The cave was so deep that it seemed to reach as far as the city of Kyoto. When she entered the cave, she planted a tree and told the people that she would be dead when the tree died. Surprisingly, the tree did not wither and the water kept flowing from the rock walls of the cave.<sup>69</sup> But there are legends that reject the open ending and leave no room for doubting Happyaku Bikuni's death. It is said that in what is now Obama (Fukui Prefecture), Happyaku Bikuni fell off the bridge and subsequently died. The bridge was afterwards called Korobi-bashi (Fall-off Bridge).<sup>70</sup>

The existence of proper descendants sheds a different light on Happyaku Bikuni's family life. We can infer that she had a husband and a couple of children to whom she passed on her long-lasting genes. However, her surprising physical features extract her from an ordinary female fate

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<sup>67</sup> Itō, 142.

<sup>68</sup> Itō, 142.

<sup>69</sup> Itō, 144.

<sup>70</sup> Itō, 142.

(A153.2.1. *Gods' food gives supernatural growth*). Saemon Tarō from Ushiya (present-day Noto, Ishikawa Prefecture) was one of Shira Bikuni's distant descendants. Shira Bikuni became immortal after stealthily eating the food her father had brought home from a feast for the Rotating and Saving Association. The consumption of the strange food caused her to live a long life and also made her so strong that she could easily kill a creature as big as a raging bull. The legend has it that in Wakasa area there was a village where people were short-lived, so they asked Shira Bikuni to come and marry one of the men in the village. As soon as she accepted their offer, the village turned into a place where people lived a long, long life. Eventually the nun died and her tomb is said to be in the cemetery belonging to Saemon family.<sup>71</sup> The legend is noteworthy because it emphasises the fact that Happyaku Bikuni could shape the surrounding world and offer others a different destiny—that of a long, happy life. Maybe the turtle-princess, who had fallen in love with Urashima, had similar qualities which interfered with time and space and rendered the people around her immortal.

Although there are slight differences in the interpretation of the causes of Happyaku Bikuni's immortality, most legends seem to provide as a common focal point the consumption of the mermaid flesh. But why mermaid? And what did mermaids look like in Japan? Were they like “their sisters” in Andersen's tale? Apparently not, especially if we take into consideration the references from *Nihongi*, *Kokon Chōmonjū* (1254), *Wakan Sanzai zue* (1713), or *Rokumotsu Shinshi* (1786) where the mermaid is described as a child-like creature, neither human nor fish (*Nihongi*); or a big human-faced fish, with a monkey-like protruding mouth and sharp, tiny teeth (*Kokon Chōmonjū*).<sup>72</sup> In Toriyama Sekien's *Konjaku Hyakki Shūi* (1781)<sup>73</sup> the picture of a mermaid shows a creature about the size of a child with a fish-like lower body, with the upper body roughly humanoid. It had reptilian scaly skin, webbed hands and ruffled hair. Moreover, the word for mermaid is *ningyo* in Japanese, written with two characters: 人 (human being) and 魚 (fish). The Japanese term—even more than its English equivalent—emphasises the idea that the mermaid is an “in-between being,” a liminal creature, exhibiting both human and fish features.

But, when it comes to eating mermaid flesh, the marine apparition is perceived more as a creature that bears a resemblance to a human being than to a fish; therefore the consumption of mermaid flesh is somehow equivalent to an act of cannibalism (*C220. Taboo: eating certain things*). The common reaction to eating mermaid flesh is nothing short of disgust: A man peeped in the kitchen and saw on the chopping board a mermaid-like creature that was about to be cooked. Strangely, it seemed to be smiling at him. The man panicked and ran away to warn his fellows

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<sup>71</sup> Itō, 144.

<sup>72</sup> Kimura, “Happyaku Bikuni densetsu,” 53.

<sup>73</sup> *Konjaku Hyakki Shūi* [Supplement to The Hundred Demons from the Present and the Past] is a book from the *Gazu Hyakki Yagyō* series [The Illustrated Night Parade of a Hundred Demons] which was inspired by Japanese literature and folklore and contained natural bestiaries, collections of ghosts, spirits, spooks and monsters.



that they would be served mermaid flesh and that they must under no circumstances eat it.<sup>74</sup> In Niigata Prefecture someone tried to cook a creature as big as a girl, whose lower body looked like a fish. He put it on a chopping board, but suddenly grew disgusted and would not touch it.<sup>75</sup> Despite this, a few people do know what to do with mermaid flesh:<sup>76</sup> A legend told at Enpuku temple (Kasugai, Aichi Prefecture) tells us about a large crowd gathered around a fisherman who had caught a strange fish—actually a mermaid. A passing Buddhist priest, who heard the people talking excitedly about the catch, stopped and told them that they would be protected from evil and that good fortune would be upon them if they gave “the fish” as an offering to the temple. That night happened to be the night of *Kōshin*<sup>77</sup> when everybody partook in the feast, including a greedy girl who could not help herself and ate up the mermaid flesh. When she grew up she became a very beautiful young woman and many men fell desperately in love with her, but, as the years passed, she turned eight hundred years old. The woman grew so weary of the world in which she had lived that she shaved her head and became a nun. She stopped eating any food, entered a cave in the mountains, and died reciting a Buddhist prayer.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Takeru Onochi, “Happyaku Bikuni denshō no shiseikan,” *Jinbun Kenkyū: Kanagawa Daigaku Jinbun Gakkaishi*, no. 155 (2005), 61.

<sup>75</sup> Onochi.

<sup>76</sup> Still, there is one legend that narrates the positive outcome of eating mermaid flesh, provided one is strong enough to overcome one’s dislikes and go beyond appearances. One night, a beggar dressed in rags happened to pass by the people celebrating the god Nijūsanya Sama. He politely asked to be allowed to take part in the feast and eventually joined the party. When the banquet was over and the moon up in the sky, the beggar was about to take his leave, but, at the last moment he invited his host and his two friends to his house for the next celebration of Nijūsanya Sama. When the day of the celebration came, they set off for the beggar’s house, which was deep in the mountains. When they got there, the beggar invited them to have some tea while he was tending to the cooking. However, the two friends of the man who had hosted the previous feast could not stay put and wanted to see what the beggar was cooking, so they peeped through a hole in the kitchen door and saw him cutting up an infant on the chopping board. They were so terrified at this dreadful sight that they left the house in a hurry, but missed their footing at the gate and hit their heads on a stone. They died instantly. Actually the beggar was not a man, but Nijūsanya Sama in disguise and the food he was about to cook was, in fact, a mermaid, a famous fish which ordinary men could not eat. His guest ate his fill and was ready to return home. The beggar handed him a sword and told him to pass by the two dead bodies at the gate and not to look back. He also advised him to turn windward and cut the three *shichi* (the soul of someone who has met a violent death) he was going to meet on his way back. Upon leaving, the man did encounter the three *shichi*, one black, one white and one yellow, and he cut the yellow ghost which stood in the middle. A shower of gold came falling down and nearly covered him. He took the money and became a very rich man (cf. Fanny Haggin Mayer, trans., *Ancient Tales in Modern Japan* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 309–310).

<sup>77</sup> On the night of the 57th day of the sixty-year cycle, when the Three Worms living in the body were said to ascend to Heaven and report the deeds of the host, people used to hold a vigil which was named *gengshen* in Chinese, or *kōshin* in Japanese. The practice of *kōshin* involved purification exercises as well as waiting up all night because the Three Worms left the body during sleep. Aristocrats enjoyed this practice, holding vegetarian feasts, community activities and prayers to a protective deity (cf. Livia Kohn, *Introducing Daoism* (London: Routledge, 2008), 202).

<sup>78</sup> Yoshimoto, *Nihon zenkoku shinwa densetsu no tabi*, 998.

The liminality of the half-human, half-fish creature can expand its influence on the person who eats the mermaid: After consuming the strange meat, the heroine of the next story cut herself off from society and became a recluse who avoided daylight and any human company. In Tateyama (Nakaniikawa District, Toyama Prefecture) people used to wait up and listen to interesting stories during the night of Kōshin. Once a woman from Maetate (Oyama shrine in Tateyama) invited the people in the neighbourhood, including Shirobē, to spend the night of Kōshin at her house. The people went to her house where they ate their fill and enjoyed the stories. Upon leaving, each of them received a lunch box. When Shirobē got home, he forgot about the gift and left it in the cupboard, where his daughter found it and ate it. People said that it was actually mermaid flesh and ever since that incident the girl did not age a bit. The girl was afterwards named Shira Bikuni because her skin was very white. The eight-hundred-year-old girl did not like to go out into the daylight, and, as a result, no one seemed to have seen her face. However, one night a manservant happened to catch a glimpse of her face. As a result, the nun decided to leave the place, but not before planting a Japanese cedar in the garden of Hakusan shrine. She arrived at Wakasa, where she was called Happyaku Bikuni.<sup>79</sup>

Shame is another psychological aspect of the legends concerning the eight-hundred-year-old nun: The death of her loved ones throws Happyaku Bikuni into a cycle of guilt and shame that projects her outside family bonds, and, hence, outside society. To her, immortality is not a blessing, but a curse because she is forced perpetually to witness the loss of her husband or children. A girl accidentally ate the mermaid flesh that her father had brought home after returning from a luxurious feast. Several years later, she was old enough to become a bride, so she got married. As time passed, she and her husband gradually aged. One day her husband passed away and, to her surprise, she grew young again. After a while she decided to marry a man from a different province, but had a similar experience: after her husband had died, she was again young and beautiful. She was so embarrassed that she hid herself and no-one knew where she had gone. However, many years later she returned and retreated to a cave in the Kūin temple, Wakasa. At that time she was eight hundred years old.<sup>80</sup> Happyaku Bikuni's family life seems to be recurrent as she experiences over and over the same pattern in which the death of her husband "reboots" her entire life. In the family circle, she can age like an ordinary human being, but as soon as the family bonds are dissolved, she is again young and beautiful.

Happyaku Bikuni was not exactly immortal (as the legends about her tomb prove), but she had an impressive lifespan, so long that the passing generations lost track of her age and believed that she was actually immortal. Like Urashima Tarō, the nun experienced a different flow of time. To Urashima, life in the Dragon Palace or on Mount Hōrai was very slow-paced and the protagonist felt that three hundred years were no more than three years in the oceanic paradise. The moment

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<sup>79</sup> Itō, *Nihon densetsu taikēi*, 137–138.

<sup>80</sup> Kaori Nagasaki, "Happyaku Bikuni," in *Nihon setsuwa densetsu daijiten*, ed. Kunihiro Shumura, Haruo Suwa (Tokyo: Bensei Shuppan, 2000), 759.

the fisherman opened the comb box, time resumed its normal flow, measured according to human standards. Similarly, time passed very slowly to Happyaku Bikuni and people thought that she would live forever. In the final part of each story, both Urashima and Happyaku Bikuni, look trapped in their liminality and they are, in a sense, in two places at the same time. On the surface, their bodies seem to live in human society, but their souls keep dreaming of a different world. In fact, Urashima dwells in perpetual longing. The fisherman is not only infatuated with distant spaces, but also with the princess from another world—which makes him a distinct Japanese version of Odysseus who has fallen in love with Calypso. In the Dragon Palace/Hōrai Island, he misses his birthplace, and, after reaching his old home, he is nostalgic about the days spent with the turtle-princess. Urashima’s trip to another world could be a voyage into oblivion, as the remote island may be a metaphor for being forgotten by the community he chose to leave. He wishes to be again among human beings because he wants neither to forget (his parents, his neighbours, his childhood) nor to be forgotten. On the other hand, Happyaku Bikuni travels—like the mythical Wandering Jew—from one place to another in search of her own death. Her life is nothing but a pilgrimage from the excess of the senses (the gluttony/curiosity of eating mermaid flesh—consuming meat was a forbidden action according to strict Buddhist standards) to the absence of any worldly desire and attaining Nirvana. In alchemical terms, she undergoes different stages, from *nigredo* (blackening) to *albedo* (whitening), when all the impurities are washed away<sup>81</sup> as her alternative name, Shira Bikuni (White Nun), suggests. White is also the distinctive colour of those coming from the other world. Lanval reached Avalon following a white stag<sup>82</sup> and Guingamor, who was hunting a white boar, crossed a river and passed into a mystical kingdom. Niam(h) was riding a white magical horse when she took Oisín to Tir na n’Og, the Land of Youth.<sup>83</sup>

Even if the “immortality context” of Urashima Tarō and Happyaku Bikuni may differ—the fisherman’s immortality is topological, related to the special attributes of a given space; the nun’s immortality is circumstantial, rendered by a set of events that made her consume mermaid flesh—what unites the two characters is their “unintentionality.” They neither asked for eternal youth nor pursued immortality as desperately as Gilgamesh or Ponce de Leon (H 1376.7, *Quest for immortality*), but they were involuntarily pushed towards that outcome. The Babylonian legend of Adapa, the son of the god Ea, recalls the hero’s visit to the Celestial Court where he is called to be punished for the killing of the South Wind. He appears in mourning garments and is, thus, forgiven and offered the water of life and the bread of life which will make him immortal, but he refuses to eat or drink, believing, as his father has warned him, that the gods desire him to partake of the bread of death and to drink of the water of death.<sup>84</sup> Adapa was a fisherman, like

<sup>81</sup> Hans Biedermann, *Dictionary of Symbolism*, 380.

<sup>82</sup> Logan E. Whalen, *A Companion to Marie de France* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 151.

<sup>83</sup> Whalen, 129; Tomie Inoue, “Voyage dans l’autre monde: Comparaison de ‘Urashima Tarō’ avec les lais Bretons et les romans en France,” *Memoirs of Beppu University*, no 39 (1998), 7.

<sup>84</sup> Elizabeth Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh and Others* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 182.

Urashima Tarō, and, like Urashima Tarō in the modern versions,<sup>85</sup> he unknowingly refuses the gift of immortality. The god Ea tricked Adapa out of immortality, in contrast with Happyaku Bikuni, who was tricked into immortality. Furthermore, eternal youth was not necessary a blessing, but a curse. The *manga* artist, Takahashi Rumiko, took up the motif of the mermaid flesh that can grant immortality and designed a series of graphic novels called *Mermaid Saga* which tell the tale of Yuta, an immortal who has been alive for five hundred years. Throughout the series, he wanders across Japan searching for a cure and meets other people whose lives have also been ruined after eating mermaid flesh.<sup>86</sup>

Another element common to the two stories is water. To Urashima, immortality lies across the sea, in the underwater paradise of the Dragon Palace or on the miraculous island Hōrai, while to Happyaku Bikuni, the source of her eternal youth is the flesh of a mermaid—a marine creature. The connection between water and immortality has been illustrated in an array of examples. On the first of January, people in Japan scoop *waka-mizu* (young water) from the nearest well or spring because it is believed to ward off the evil spirits. They also put it in the household shrine as an offering to the god of the year, prepare tea or cook with it.<sup>87</sup> The symbolism of the water as well as that of the island was central to the Greeks who lived in an archipelago surrounded by water. They identified Elysium with the mythical Islands of the Blessed located at the ends of the Earth, “the far west.”<sup>88</sup> The island of Avalon, the legendary place where King Arthur was taken to be healed, is described as an earthly paradise with eternal springs, moderate heat or cold and beautiful maidens.<sup>89</sup> The Fountain of Youth was believed to restore youth to anyone who drank or bathed in its waters. A funny Japanese folktale called *Waka-gaeri no mizu* (The water that can restore youth) narrates how an old woman became thirsty when she was gathering wood. She went back into the hills and found a spring where she took a drink. After drinking from it, she turned into a seventeen- or eighteen-year-old girl. Her old husband was surprised when she returned home and asked her what had happened. When he heard the story, he decided to be young himself, so he set out to look for the spring, but he never returned. It seems that he had too much “water” and turned into a baby.<sup>90</sup> The story is interesting because it subtly furnishes the idea of the proper dosage of youthfulness and the dangers of being too greedy or too ambitious when it comes to restoring youth. A story of the “Water of Life” from the *Alexander Romance* describes Alexander the Great and his servant crossing the Land of Darkness to find the mythical

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<sup>85</sup> The end of *Tango Fudoki* portrays Shimako looking at the Land of Immortality with tears in his eyes, while in the *Nihongi* version Shimako reached Mount Hōrai, the earthly paradise. The final episode in the *otogi zōshi* is not about death, but about the couple’s transformation into two symbols of long life in Far Eastern tradition—the turtle and the crane. It is only in the later versions where Urashima opens the box, gets old and, eventually, dies.

<sup>86</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mermaid\\_Saga](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mermaid_Saga) (Accessed January 16, 2017).

<sup>87</sup> Tarō Wakamori, ed, *Nihon minzoku jiten* (Tokyo: Kōbundō, 1994), 805.

<sup>88</sup> Kathleen N. Daly, *Greek and Roman Mythology A to Z* (New York: Facts on File, 2004), 45

<sup>89</sup> Howard Rollin Patch, *The Other World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950), 287.

<sup>90</sup> Mayer, *Ancient Tales in Modern Japan*, 87.

spring.<sup>91</sup> In Romanian folktales, the characters are restored to life if splashed with “apă vie” (live water), but they remain dead forever if touched by “apă moartă” (dead water). In the Babylonian tradition, the goddess Ishtar descends to the underworld, searching for Tammuz in order to restore him with the water of life. However, she, too, has to be given fresh living water before her ascent to the upper world.<sup>92</sup> Achilles, about whom it was foretold that he would die young, was dipped by his mother, Thetis, in the River Styx, which was supposed to offer the powers of invulnerability. This poses a very intriguing question: Is invulnerability tantamount to immortality? Achilles could have lived forever if it had not been for his heel. The elves were almost immortal if they lived peacefully, but when they had to face war and destruction, they were killed as easily as an ordinary human being. On the other hand, immortality does not rule out invulnerability, given that Urashima, who was offered the opportunity to live in the Land of Immortality, was vulnerable to memories and Happyaku Bikuni, who outlived any member of her family, had to witness helplessly the death of everything and everybody she loved and cared for.

In the universal flow of things from birth to death, the two stories describe the mirage of immortality which lures the neophyte with flamboyant promises of eternal youth, but when it is actually experienced, it only gives rise to poignancy, loneliness, despair, shame, guilt and emptiness. As a metaphorical conclusion, I would like to end this article by introducing a 17th-century story, recorded in *Wakasa no kuni denki* (1616), which perfectly bridges several significant elements from both stories. The legend makes two references to immortality, one when mentioning Hōrai Island, and the other when bringing into focus the mermaid flesh which is believed to grant a long life: Ten fishermen went out to catch some fish but a great storm arose and they drifted away till they reached an unknown island where they found a gorgeous mansion. Several courtiers dressed in beautiful kimonos and wearing elaborate head-dresses welcomed them and asked them to come inside the house, which was full of gold, silver and sparkling treasures. The guests were invited to eat the feast that had been carefully prepared for them, but they happened to catch a glimpse of what was being cooked, and, to their surprise, saw that their food was a human-faced creature. They ate their fill, but refrained from consuming the peculiar dish that looked like human flesh. At last the storm abated and the sun shone forth again, so they prepared to return home. However, one of them stashed a piece of meat in his sleeve, and, when he got home, his daughter found it and, considering it a gift, ate it. Ever since, she was never been sick and came to live for eight hundred years. Everybody admired her for her beautiful face and white, transparent complexion which always looked young and fresh. The island which the ten fishermen had visited during the storm turned out to be Hōrai Island and the flesh which they were supposed to eat was mermaid flesh. People say that the young girl who had consumed the strange piece of meat never married and travelled throughout the country, repairing the ruined temples and shrines, building bridges, finding water and hidden springs or planting trees. In the

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<sup>91</sup> David Zuwiyya, *A Companion to Alexander Literature in the Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 75.

<sup>92</sup> Jane Garry and Hasan El-Shami, *Archetypes and Motifs in Folklore and Literature* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2005), 491.

end, she arrived at Obama (Wakasa) and retreated to a cave, where she eventually died.<sup>93</sup> Up to a point, the story is very similar to that of Urashima Tarō, who also went fishing and travelled to Hōrai Island. Maybe if the ten fishermen had eaten the mermaid flesh which had been prepared for them at the feast, they would have shared the same fate with Urashima and would have become ten immortals living in an oceanic paradise, who, after a couple of years, would have become homesick and returned home only to find that several hundred years had passed ... Anyway, after reading this story, I cannot help wondering what would have happened to Urashima if he had not opened the comb box. Maybe he would have become the masculine counterpart of Happyaku Bikuni, lamenting the loss of his loved ones, living eight hundred years among the perpetually changing generations of young people turning old in several decades. Or perhaps he would have roamed east and west, north and south, trying to find his lost turtle-princess, Mount Hōrai or the Dragon Palace. Who knows? Maybe ...

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<sup>93</sup> Soda, *Chōju densetsu o yuku*, 59.

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