2-25-2021

BAKENEKO: a Look into the Origins of Japan's Supernatural Cats

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Recommended Citation

Taulbee, Cedar, "BAKENEKO: a Look into the Origins of Japan's Supernatural Cats" (2021). *University Honors Theses*. Paper 965.

<https://doi.org/10.15760/honors.989>

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BAKENEKO

A look into the origins of Japan's supernatural cats

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Bakeneko: A look into the origins of Japan's supernatural cats

Cedar Taulbee — First Edition

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This book was created as a senior thesis to complete a Bachelor's of Arts in Graphic Design for Portland State University's Honors College, under the advising of Sean Schumacher.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to my family: Taffy Taulbee, Carsen Taulbee, and Cullen Taulbee. Thanks to Sean Schumacher, my advisor, and to Zack Davisson, whose expertise helped make this book possible. And a big thanks to Mayo, my mom's cat, who inspired me to create this book and whose image appears countless times in its pages.

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Introduction

Cats are strange and mysterious creatures. Cultures all around the world have created myths and legends surrounding house cats, stories laden with superstition and usually a touch of fear. In most of the West we have black cats and their association with witches and black magic. In Ancient Egypt, as most of us know, cats were worshipped as sacred animals. And in Japan there are *bakeneko*.

I use *bakeneko* as a general term, but what I am really referring to is *kaibyō*, which is a Japanese word used to describe supernatural or “strange” cats. And Japan has a lot of them. Almost since cats were first introduced to the archipelago in the mid-800s, stories have come about of their strange powers, their propensities toward shape-shifting, and all other sorts of strange myths.

But if you’re like me, you may be wondering: why? What about cats and culture in general has led to this inevitable fascination, and sometimes demonization, of our domestic feline friends? The more I read about these legends, the more I wondered on these questions, and the deeper I had to go to find the answers. So join me in looking at the origins of these strange cats, and the underlying factors that have helped form Japan’s complicated relationship with these mysterious and wonderful cats.

About Kaibyo

One could use the word *bakeneko*, meaning “change cat” to describe Japan’s variety of supernatural cats, as most if not all of them are changing creatures. *Obake* or *bake-mono*, meaning “changed things,” is a term commonly used to describe various spirits and monsters in Japanese mythology. But a more fitting term might be *kaihyo*, which literally translates to “strange cats.”

And strange they are. From the *bakeneko* which wears a human towel on its head and transforms into beautiful women on command, to the fearsome *nekomata*, the split-tailed cat that can reach truly monstrous sizes, Japan’s mythology has a menagerie of supernatural cats, both good, evil, and shrouded in mystery.

So let’s take a look at the many strange cats which Japan’s folklore has to offer. The legends that surround them, the various superstitions, and the observed characteristics of these supernatural felines.

Varieties

Although there is a wide variety of different kinds of supernatural cats in Japanese folklore, many of them are quite specific, and the majority of them can fall into the same general categories as the two most common kinds of supernatural cats. For that reason, I will be focusing on the two most commonly referenced supernatural cats in Japanese folklore. The first is the *bakeneko*, or “change cat,” and the second is the *nekomata*, which is commonly translated to “split cat.” In some stories the lines between these creatures fade, and *bakeneko* can become *nekomata* with enough age and power. However, they have very different origins, and the stories behind both have changed over time.

Bakeneko

The first and most common kind of cat demon which appears in Japanese mythology is the *bakeneko*. In many places, and by many people, it was believed that all cats are *bakeneko*. Or, at the very least, that all cats have the potential to become *bakeneko*. Cats were thought to be inherently powerful and dangerous creatures, and this attitude towards them led to a lot of specific practices and superstitions surrounding the Japanese relationship with cats.

One of the most common beliefs about cats and *bakeneko* was that their power came from their tails. No one knows exactly why, but it was thought that a cat's tail was a mysterious entity that housed a cat's power. The longer the tail, the more powerful the *bakeneko*. In some cases it was believed that the way to recognize a *bakeneko* was through the length of its tail, as only cats with very long tails were powerful enough to become *bakeneko*. As a result of this superstition, it was common practice for Japanese households to bob the tails of their cats at birth. In many ways this was considered a generous act, as it saved the cat from becoming a demon. However, there were still other precautions taken.

Another common superstition about *bakeneko* was that they were very old cats. It was believed that cats would become *bakeneko* only when they had reached a great age, at which point their power would become so strong that they would become *bakeneko*. A common practice which arose from this was a custom of getting rid of cats once they reached a certain age. The exact age varied by region. In some places it was common to get rid of cats when they reached three years old. This practice came from a famous proverb which stated: "Feed a dog for three days and he will remember your kindness for three years. Feed a cat for three years and she will forget your kindness."

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days.” This proverb was commonly cited as a reason not to trust cats, but in some regions it was taken quite literally, meaning that a cat could not be trusted beyond three years. In other provinces however, the age at which a cat should leave a family was thought to be much older. Some people believed cats over the age of ten were not to be trusted, and in other regions the age was as high as thirteen years. Some claimed that a cat should never be cast out, for fear of them returning to exact revenge. In these cases, it was believed that a cat would leave on its own accord after the appropriate amount of time had passed, as it respected the family enough to know what had to be done.

These superstitions may seem extreme, but they came from a real fear of what would happen once a cat became a *bakeneko*. They were not usually considered to be gracious or benevolent creatures. *Bakeneko* were thought to cause all sorts of mischief, ranging from reanimating corpses to feeding vampirically on the blood of men who wronged them. *Bakeneko* were often thought to disguise themselves as women in order to prey on their husbands. In order to take on

a woman’s appearance, a *bakeneko* had only to wrap the woman’s towel around its head and dance around on its hind legs. It would then use its disguise to kill and feed on the woman’s husband. If a person in a household should die, they should not have by any means been left alone with the cat. If the cat jumped over the corpse, or ran under the raised coffin, it would impart its energy into the corpse and reanimate it as a vampire. This could be prevented only by placing a sword across the corpse.

手拭い

When I say the cats would wrap a towel around their heads, what I really mean is a tenugui. A tenugui is a traditional piece of Japanese cloth which is translated as “towel” because it was one of its original functions. But a tenugui is much more than a towel. It is a thin piece of smooth cotton cut into the shape of a rectangle with raw edges. These cloths were used to wrap bentos, for drying hands and cleaning, and they were commonly worn wrapped around the head in a variety of ways. So when a cat wrapped a woman’s tenugui around its head, it was really wearing a piece of her personal clothing, a detail which lends more sense to the folk story.

猫また

Interestingly enough, the translation of *nekomata* as “split cat” came later than the name itself. *Nekomata* were the first variety of supernatural cat to appear in Japan, and originally they didn’t appear to be particularly magical. They were originally said to be large cats which resided in mountainous regions and preyed on unfortunate passersby. The name *nekomata* was written as 猫また, 猫 or “neko” translates directly to cat, however また is hiragana, meaning it is written in a way that indicates pronunciation rather than meaning. また just means “mata,” without any indication of what it might mean in this context (this is because there are a number of words which are pronounced this way in the Japanese language.) The name was later written as 猫又, which is often translated as “split cat” or “forked cat,” though a more literal translation is “again cat.” It was around this time that the perception of *nekomata* shifted, becoming monster cats with split tails rather than wild cats of the forest.

Nekomata

The second most common kind of supernatural cat to appear in Japanese folklore is the *nekomata*, or the “split cat”*. *Nekomata* are called split cats because they were believed to be very old cats who grew two tails (presumably because one was not enough to contain their power.) In most cases *nekomata* are cited as having evolved from *bakeneko*, and they are generally described as a more powerful version of them. Because of this, *nekomata* don’t have many unique powers of their own, they just have elevated versions of the powers of *bakeneko*.

Just as *bakeneko* were believed to be cats who grew to a very old age, *nekomata* were thought to be *bakeneko* which reached an even greater age, at which point they would grow to monstrous sizes and their tails (as well as their ears in some accounts) would split into two. This evolution is similar to that of the *kitsune*, or the Japanese fox spirit. According to folklore, the more tails a *kitsune* had, the older and more powerful it was. There are some accounts of fearsome *nekomata* with more than two tails as well, indicating that spirit animals in the Japanese tradition were generally thought to gain more tails as they gained more age and power.

Colors

The color of cats, much like in the West, was a topic shrouded with superstition in Japan. That, however, is where the similarities stop. In Japan, black cats were regarded with a general sense of neutrality. They were not necessarily benevolent, but they were also not evil by any means, except to the extent that all cats were believed to be. There was a definite hierarchy in the favoring of cats in Japanese culture. Though the specific order of this hierarchy varied by region, there are some definite similarities which one could argue were universal among the Japanese archipelago.

Reddish-brown cats were considered to be the most powerful – and the most dangerous. Known commonly as the “golden flower” cat these animals were feared and dreaded among the Japanese people. Not only were they considered to be the most powerful of the bakeneko, they were also the most evil among them.

Calicos, or “tri-color” cats were considered to be almost as powerful as golden flower cats, but with one key difference: they were good. Calicos were thought to be one of the only cat varieties that could be trusted as a house-cat, and many people thought they brought good luck. This is because they were thought to ward off bakemono, or spirits.

Black cats were actually among the few cats who could be generally trusted. They were not considered to be entirely powerful, nor entirely good, but they were thought to possess a very useful skill. In Edo period Japan, black cats were believed to have the power to foretell the weather. Because of this, many sailors kept black cats aboard their ships as a sort of barometer.

Good vs Evil

Kaibyo can appear as evil or benevolent creatures, depending on what stories you read. Generally speaking, *bakeneko* and *nekomata* were thought to be at least mischievous, and all *kaibyo* were considered dangerous. Many stories tell of evil *bakeneko*, but many also tell of cats who served noble causes but were suspected of evil anyways. These stories usually end with the cat getting revenge on the person who wronged them, usually with their strong supernatural powers. These were cautionary tales, and they suggested a respectful view of cats rather than a fear based one. Cats were not to be trusted, but they were to be treated with respect, and they should never be crossed.

One such story tells a tale of a cat who belonged to a noble woman. It was the woman's most cherished cat, and she took it with her wherever she went. One day she was walking with a samurai, with the cat walking beside them as usual. The cat began acting very strange, meowing loudly and walking between the lady's legs. The samurai grew suspicious of the cat being a *bakeneko* and cut its head off with his sword. The cat's head

flew up to the ceiling where it caught in its jaw a venomous snake which had been about to drop on the lady's head. The samurai realized he had made a terrible mistake, as the cat had only been trying to warn the lady of danger. The woman mourned its death so greatly that a shrine was dedicated to it. In this story, there is no vengeance at the end.

Another story, a version of perhaps the most famous bakeneko tale, The Vampire Cat of Nabeshima, tells of a cat who avenges his owner. The story tells of the feudal lord Nabeshima, who liked to play *goh* with a particular blind man, and this blind man had a pet cat. One day, the blind man beat Nabeshima repeatedly, and in his rage, Nabeshima decapitated the man. When the news of his death reached his mother, she urged the cat to do something to avenge his death. The cat then disappeared, and the mother didn't know what happened to it. The cat had gone to Nabeshima and was impersonating one of his favorite mistresses so as to slowly drain his life force. In the end the cat's mission is foiled by a loyal retainer, but this story offers an interesting example of a slightly different view of cats. This cat was loyal to his master, to the point that it enacted revenge against his murderer. Cats were known to hold grudges in Japanese

mythology, one of many reasons that people were advised not to cross them. But this story offers an interesting example of the ambiguous morality of these supernatural cats. The cat was only trying to right a wrong which had been committed against an innocent man, but was stopped in the end by a noble guard. Was the cat in the wrong? Or was it acting morally?

As you can see, not all accounts cite cats or *bakeneko* as truly evil. This is in part because of Japan's traditional cultural views on morality, wherein there isn't a strict line drawn between good and evil the way there is in the West.

Origins of Beliefs

On Naturally Mysterious Traits

A fairly universal reason why cats are perceived as supernatural creatures comes from their very natural behaviors. Anyone who has or has had a cat will understand why. Cats have strange little quirks that can be off putting to people. The way they stare at you, the way they silently creep around like they're hiding something. The way they just seem to appear in strange corners. Cats are inherently mysterious. It is said that the creation of superstitious beliefs surrounding cats in Japan coincided with their becoming common and widespread. More people saw them acting according to their nature, independently, and suddenly they were not seen as so wonderful and charming.

One notable myth that has come about as a result of cats' behaviors is the very common belief that a *bakeneko* or *nekomata*'s power comes from its tail. As I described in a previous section, it was believed by many that a cat's power resided in its tail. This belief was so widespread that it became common practice to bob, or cut off, a cat's tail at birth. It is speculated by many that this is a direct result of the way cats play with their tails. If you've ever had a cat, you might have noticed that cats have a strange habit of chasing their tails. It can be off putting to watch however, because the cats don't seem to be aware that the tail is a part of them. They stalk, watch, and pounce on their tails as if it's a bird or rodent they're chasing. Once they catch the tail, many cats will chew on it like they've caught their prey. This behavior was disturbing to many Japanese folk of the time, and they began to speculate on why cats would act this way. Was the tail not a part of the cat at all? Perhaps it was a demon which attached itself to the cat, waiting for the right moment to take it over completely. There is also the fact that a cat's tail was thought to resemble a snake. Snakes were considered bad luck in Japan, so the serpentine nature of the appendage, paired with the strange behaviors cats exhibited with them, made a perfect recipe for superstition.

Specific Myths

Though it may seem obvious, one of the key categories we can see behind the origins of cat myths relates to specific instances which were retold and fantasized. In short, we can trace some stories and beliefs back to very specific origins.

For example, a common belief about cats during the Edo period was that it was bad luck to see a cat drinking oil from a lamp. This may sound like strange and off putting behavior, but the reason cats did this is actually fairly simple. At the time, the most common fuel for lamps was fish oil. In this era, cats were typically just fed whatever leftovers their owners had, which more often than not was just grains and vegetables. It's easy to understand why a cat, who is an obligate carnivore, may crave the rich fattiness of fish oil. Now imagine looking up in the night to see your cat standing on its hind legs, lapping at oil and illuminated

lamp, which is likely your only light source. It's not hard to understand why people of the time, who were already inclined to superstition, might take it as a bad omen. If you then consider the possibility that bad luck might have befallen this person the next day, it's easy to see how connections were made and a rumor may have been started. This belief could also have contributed to the common myth that *bakeneko* would stand on their hind legs and sometimes dance about when they were doing something mischievous. This particular story may contain a lot of speculation, but not all origins are so open to interpretation.

One such myth which can be traced definitively back to one occasion is the story of *bakeneko* prostitutes. During the Edo period, a myth became popular which suggested that some prostitutes were actually *bakeneko* in disguise. Interestingly enough, this was not a scary myth to most. In fact, it became quite common for men to go about seeking out these *bakeneko* prostitutes. This myth came from a specific story which was told many times, about a particular man who had an encounter with one of these *bakeneko*. He had just spent the night with a prostitute and was sleeping, but he woke up in the middle of the night. In the dark, he saw the prostitute in *bakeneko* form, hunched over a bowl of fish in the corner of the room, eating quietly. The sight scared the man, and he promptly went back to sleep. This story, as mentioned before, has a pretty straightforward origin. During the Edo period, it was considered rude for prostitutes to eat while they were

with a customer. This was because they were expected to exist only for the pleasure of the customer in those moments, and they therefore were expected to not express any desires of their own, nor partake in anything pleasurable. Because of this, it was common for hungry prostitutes to wake in the middle of the night while their customers slept and silently eat some leftovers in a dark corner of the room. It's not hard to imagine a man who fell asleep drunk with a prostitute, waking up in the night disoriented and being frightened by the confusing scene he stumbled upon. The man's mind might make sense of things with a strange story of a cat demon.

Shintoism *and* Buddhism

Perhaps one of the most important factors we have to look at when we're considering the origins of Japan's superstitions, is the religious and cultural landscape in which they came to exist. Here we look beyond the reasons why cats were seen to be supernatural in general, and begin to consider why the legends take the form that they do. Japanese cultural customs and beliefs from the Kamakura to Edo periods differed significantly from Western tradition, and it's important that we understand these stories from the cultural sphere they were conceived in. So without further ado, let's learn about how Shintoism and Buddhism affected and formed Japanese folklore traditions.

Natural Hierarchy

The first thing that it's important to understand in terms of Japanese culture and religion is the perceived relationship between the three realms of existence: Nature, Man, and God. To begin, we have to understand the Western perception of these three things, as that is the perspective that many of us have unconsciously internalized. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, there is a definite hierarchy between these three groups, and that order is based on two dichotomies that we have created. The first is material versus spiritual, and the second is finite versus infinite. When these traits are taken into account, there emerges a clear hierarchy in Western thought. Nature, which is finite and material, takes the lowest rung. Above it is Man, which is finite but spiritual, and at the very top of the hierarchy is God, who is both spiritual and infinite. There is a strict and unchanging hierarchy in this relationship. Something cannot exist in multiple

groups, and that made the pecking order in Judeo-Christian cultures quite clear. This is something that most people living in the Western world inherently understand. But this is not the way that these relationships are viewed in all parts of the world, and there is no tradition that proves this quite like the Japanese.

In Japan, these three groups were (and in some cases are) still considered to exist, but the relationships between them were interpreted in an entirely different way. Japan's cultural and religious beliefs have been largely shaped by the Japanese landscape, which is nothing if not an ever-changing world, prone to natural disasters and seasonal changes. This can be evidenced in the way Japanese cuisine has developed, as a tradition which relies heavily on the seasonal availability of different fish and vegetables. This is all to say that the Japanese did not have a strong concept of the definite. Change and impermanence is at the core of both Shintoism, the traditional religion of Japan from which most folklore sprung, and Buddhism, as it existed in Japan. This can even be seen in the Japanese language itself, where the meaning of words can change drastically depending on context. This led to an equally fluid perception of the rela-

tionships between things. And here's where we return to those three realms of existence. The Japanese similarly believed in Nature, Man, and God, though "God" was really an ever-changing cast of spirits. This, however, is where the similarities stop. The Japanese believed that all of these groups existed on the same plane of existence, the same level if you will, in contrast to the hierarchy of the West. They also shared many qualities. "God" was really *kami*, which described everything that was thought to be beyond understanding. Mt. Fuji was considered a *kami*. Nature could be *kami*, as it was inherently spiritual. All groups were both finite and infinite. There was a sense of oneness

between all these groups. And because these groups were not strictly defined, nor were they considered definite by our understanding, it was considered relatively common for there to be "slippage" between these groups. The animal form was temporary, as was any other form, so a cat might turn into a spirit, a spirit into a man, or any other possible transition. Some creatures might exist between certain groups, straddling the line between the natural world and the spirit world. This is a line that *bakeneko* were thought to cross between frequently. This equal playing field also led to a sense of neutrality in the relationships, which translated to a feeling of mutual respect. This is why cats were treated more as companions, free to come and go as they pleased, than they were as pets which a person or family owned.

Blurred Lines of Morality

Another important cultural tradition we have to dissect to really understand what role kaibyo play in Japan is the Japanese tradition of morality. This is another area we Westerners can't fully grasp without consciously changing our lens. In the modern day, it's likely that many Japanese people can't grasp this traditional concept of morality, as Western culture has had a strong influence on Japan's development. But it's another area that's critical to the understanding of supernatural creatures, cats or otherwise, in Japanese folklore. Japan's sense of morality can actually be related back to the sense of hierarchy, or lack thereof, that we talked about before. But once again, we first have to briefly go over the general form of morality that we have in the West.

The first fundamental of Western morality is that Man has free will. Because we have free will as well as intellect, we should in theory know what we should and shouldn't do, and we have the power to act accordingly. And because we have God, as an infinite being who holds a definite place above us in the natural hierarchy of things, a "sin" or wrongdoing is primarily seen as such because it defies God's will. But here we get into the fundamentals of what makes something a sin. Firstly, the person must be aware of the fact that they are going against God's will. Accidentally defying Him is not punishable, as the person had no intention of committing a sin. The second qualifier is that the person had the option not to commit the sin. This once again goes back to intention. In the Western lens, intent and morality are inextricably entwined. If a person has evil intentions, they commit evil deeds, but if they have good intentions, they cannot be held accountable. This is something we instinctively understand in the West. But Japan had a very different structure.

In the Japanese tradition, there were no definite good and evil acts. There were events and things which were inherently bad, and should therefore be avoided, but these associations didn't go as far as defining the responsibilities of those involved. Rather than focus being put on the perpetrators of evil, there was instead a focus on whoever was directly involved, whether they were responsible or not. This dichotomy can be considered purity versus defilement, rather than good versus evil. A person who became sick became bad in a sense, regardless of their own intentions or responsibility. This defilement would be solved through a purification ritual, which can be compared to repentance in the West. Because of the relativity of the hierarchy between all living and nonliving things, there was no fear of *kami* punishing people, and there was no infinite God to prescribe a doctrine of what was good or evil. Therefore people went about their lives avoiding impure things as much as possible, and purifying themselves when they must be encountered. The important thing to take away from this is that people and creatures themselves were not considered to be bad or good in any definite sense.

How it All Relates

At this point I'm sure you're wondering how all of this abstract talk about Japanese religious traditions relates to the origins of *bakeneko*, but I assure you that they do. It may not directly relate to the specific myths surrounding *bakeneko*, but we can certainly see the influences of these traditions in the stories that came to be about supernatural cats in Japan. By considering the form of Japanese morality while looking at these stories, we can come to have a deeper understanding of the attitudes that these creatures were regarded with. Like I said before, *bakeneko* were not necessarily good or bad. They committed mischievous acts, sometimes good, but sometimes evil by nature. Yet there was no general commitment to these creatures being evil. The general attitude from most was not black and white (good and bad), there was instead a sense of respect. *Bakeneko* were fearsome, yes, but they were also just another creature which existed

in the world. This concept is much easier understood when it's regarded through the lens of traditional Japanese morality. More than anything, *bakeneko* were powerful, and that power could be directed in any number of ways, meaning the only important thing to remember was that you shouldn't get on their bad side.

By examining the traditional interpretation of spiritual hierarchy in Japanese culture, we can start to understand the place *bakeneko* and other *kaibyo* hold in Japanese culture. *Bakeneko* are by no means the only supernatural animal which the Japanese believed in, and we can see now that from the standpoint of Japanese religion it's natural to have believed that certain animals could shift between states of being. In the same way that many humans and spirits were believed to. It's only by looking at all of these cultural influences that we can truly understand the environment which fostered these superstitions.

怪猫

Conclusion

Although the commonality of genuine belief in *bakeneko* has, for the most part, died out in modern Japan, their influences can still be seen in the pop culture of today. For example the *maneki neko*, more commonly known as the “lucky cat,” although not always regarded as a *bakeneko*, can be seen depicted in statues sold in shops around the world. The legends surrounding *bakeneko* can time and again be seen translated into modern manga and anime, with cat girls being a particularly prevalent example. While much of the fear and mystery surrounding cats has dissipated, the fascination has remained. It’s impossible to deny Japan’s distinct interest in these creatures, with popular characters and concepts such as Hello Kitty and cat cafes dominating the public interest. Japan’s culture is inextricably intertwined with cats, in all number of ways. In a way, understanding the traditional folklore surrounding cats can help us understand Japanese culture as a whole.

While some cultural interests and traditions have remained, there is no denying that as far as the tradition of *kaihyo* goes, all of these stories formed a very long time ago. It’s hard to say exactly why and how these tales and myths came to be. Consequently, we as modern readers can only really guess as to the true origins of Japan’s *kaihyo*. There is much about the Japanese landscape at the time that we may never fully understand. But through this book we can begin to lift the veil of mystery that these creatures are shrouded in. They are a unique aspect of Japan’s rich history of folklore and superstition, and they continue to play an important role in Japanese society today. It seems that for better or for worse, when it comes to Japanese culture, cats are here to stay.