THE FOUR FACES OF TIME IN JAPANESE FOLKTALES[1]

Abstract: *Japanese tradition is not a lifeless mosaic of the ages long gone, but a living repertoire of beliefs and concepts that shaped the mentality of the people who tried to incorporate in it the selected wisdom of the past generations. By organizing time in the calendar, the Japanese created meaningful units with precise seasonal points such as the two equinoxes and the two solstices. Spring, summer, autumn and winter build up the four faces of time that compete with each other as pairs as opposites, but, at the same time, complement each other. To Japanese, the most important seasonal rhythms are spring (as the time of seeding) and autumn (as the time of harvest). A secondary prominence is assigned to summer (as the time of heat and drought) and to winter (when weird creatures such as Snow Woman, Obome etc. come forth).*

Keywords: *Japanese folklore; seasons; time.*

Time, history and spirituality are irrefutable concepts that shaped humankind across the ages. Along with the change of time, some traditions have lived, whereas others have become extinct. Nevertheless, by tradition we do not mean the transmission of a lifeless deposit, but a living repertoire incorporating the selected wisdom of past generations. The same ideas hold true for the Japanese tradition, as it is depicted in the Japanese folktales. By organizing time in the calendar, the Japanese created meaningful units with precise seasonal points such as the two equinoxes and the two solstices. Spring, summer, autumn and winter build up the four faces of time that compete with each other as pairs as opposites, but, at the same time, complement each other in a subtle gradation.

Although the Japanese civil calendar was a lunar calendar, farmers needed a calendar that would tell them the best times for planting and harvests, activities that followed the seasons of the natural year. Ancient Chinese astronomers provided a solar calendar that was both simple and accurate and that became an unofficial calendar for Japanese farmers.

In addition to the Sino-Japanese names, the months had poetic names of Japanese origin: (1) *mutsuki*: the month of affection—when family and friends join to celebrate the New Year. (2) *kisaragi*: the month of putting on more clothes against the cold. (3) *yayoi*: the month of renewed growth. (4) *uzuki*: the month in which the deutzia blooms. (5) *satsuki*: the month of planting rice shoots. (6) *minazuki*: the waterless month. (7) *fuzuki* or fumizuki: the month in which the rice ears swell; the month of writing poetry. (8) *hazuki*: the month of (falling) leaves. (9) *nagatsuki*: the month of long nights. (10) *kannazuki*: the godless month—when legend has it that the gods leave their homes all over Japan to assemble at the Great Shrine of Izumo. (11) *shimotsuki*: the month of frost. (12) *shiwasu*: the month of busy priests—who run about attending to religious services as the year draws to an end. These names are rarely used as parts of full dates (*Japan: An Illustrated Encyclopedia*, 1993: 154-155).

In some parts of Japan it is believed that the passing of the seasons match the passing of the local god. The deity Dokô dwells in the kiln in spring, in the well in summer, at the gate in autumn and in the garden in winter (Ida, I., 1982: 298-303). In other regions, the seasonal change goes beyond a mere visual perception. In Ishikawa

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prefecture there is a precipice in which a *tengu*[1] beats the drum whenever the seasons change (Okura, M., 1972: 13).

Spring

Spring is the period between winter and summer and refers broadly to ideas of renewal, rebirth and growth. In East Asian Solar calendar, spring begins on 4 February and ends on 5 May. Similarly, according to the Celtic tradition, which is based solely on daylight and the strength of the noon sun, spring begins in early February (near Imbolc or Candlemas) and continues until early May (Beltane). The character for sprig, 春 combines 屯 (swelling buds) + 日 (sun/day) + 艸 (grass/plant), meaning that spring is the season when buds swell, as well as the period of youth, of sexual desire.

In one spring of Kan'en era (1748-1751), people were gathering around a cherry tree to view the cherry-blossoms when a voice inside the tree announced "this is the last year when you can enjoy the beauty of this cherry-blossoms. Farewell!". This incident repeated for three days, thus people got scared and stopped coming. The next year the cherry tree faded, as it was predicted the year before (Fujisawa, M., 1928: 40).
At many shires people would shoot arrows to keep off the Plague God or other evil gods. Because these gods' threat persisted since ancient times, archery has been invented to keep the evil gods at bay (Yanagita, K., 1930: 5-6).

There are several days in spring that have a particular significance. For instance, *higan* is a seven-day Buddhist memorial service held twice a year, centering on the vernal and autumnal equinoxes. The word *higan* is derived from the Chinese equivalent of the Sanskrit word *paramita*, which refers to the eternal paradise awaiting those who achieve enlightenment (*satori*), as opposed to "this shore" (*shigan*), in which one wanders through the pain of living. The *higan* rites are intended to help souls pass from the world of confusion to the world of enlightenment. *Higan* is an important event even today. It is a time for family gatherings, visiting family graves, and offering "*higan* dumplings." A proverb associates it with the change of seasons: "Winter cold and summer heat end at *higan*". The day before spring *higan*, people would build small snow mounds on the graves of their relatives. First thing in the morning, they would hang paper lantern at the entrance and then go to visit the tombs of their ancestors. The spirits of the ancestors return to their previous home floating on the smoke released by the incense sticks. People would eat rice porridge with red beans for breakfast (Ōtake, N., b. 1982: 698). At spring *higan*, people buried salt on the four corners of the house and threw a pond snail on the roof to prevent against the fire that might break off during that year (Yokoyama, T., 1961: 45).

The *tsuchinoe* (*yang*, earth) day nearest to the vernal and autumnal equinoxes is called *shanichi.* On these days, people take a break from farming, and a custom of meeting in *shanichi-kô* (*shanichi* community associations) and *chijin-kô* (earth *kami*[2] community associations) also exists. Also, the spring *shanichi* is considered to be the standard day for the soaking and softening of seeds. In China, *shanichi* was the festival day for celebrating the *sha* (Ch: *she*), which refers to the "land *kami*". The date of *shanichi* celebrations in China varied by region and time period, but their functions

[1] *Tengu* are supernatural beings who can take a human-like form, often retaining avian wings, head or beak. The *tengu's* long nose seems is a humanization of the original bird's beak.
[2] Gods

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generally have not: the spring *shanichi* was to pray for agricultural production and the autumn *shanichi* was to express gratitude for the harvest and to divine the coming harvest year. Japan's *shanichi* celebrations also came from these traditions, but as it spread from region to region. For example, people living in Tokushima Prefecture have a custom in which they call on Ojishisama and celebrate that *kami* in parish festivals in which the *tôya* (secular households overseeing the ritual in their area) pounds *mochi*[1]. On *shanichi*, the people of Nagano Prefecture honor the *ta no kami*, or "the god of the fields", in their celebrations. They believe that in the spring, the *ta no kami* descends from the mountains to watch over the rice cultivation and returns again to the mountains in the autumn, and worship him by pounding *mochi* in both spring and autumn. In some parts of Fukuoka Prefecture, Kaho District, people call it *oshioi*, and have a custom of purifying the house within and without using ocean sand brought home from the beach[2].

It is forbidden to work in the fields on the days of spring *shanichi*. If you ignore the taboo on purpose the seven generations from now will be poor, but if you do it by accident, only next generation will suffer the consequences (Tôkyô Joshi Daigaku Shigaku-ka, 1970: 87).

Summer

Summer is the warmest of the four seasons. At the summer solstice, the days are longest and the nights are shortest, with day-length decreasing as the season progresses after the solstice. The character for spring, 夏, is a pictograph of a dancer (compare 仮) whose face is covered by a large, square mask, therefore summer has the extended meaning of a dance performed in celebration of the coming of warmth.

Drought is the main consequence of a hot summer, as it was felt in Ryôgami village, Chichibu province. On a very hot summer day an exhausted monk entered a house and asked for a glass of water. The old woman inside the house was happy to offer him the last drop of water she had in the pitcher. Learning from the old woman how difficult it was to find fresh water nearby, the monk decided to build a well. He struck the ground with his cane and water sprang forth. The monk was actually Kôbô Daishi[3], but the villagers realized that only after his departure. Ever since the well has been named "Kôbô's well" (Ikehara, S., 1994: 227-228). Water may spring forth or fall from the sky as drops of rain and for that there are a lot of ingenious devices to make rain fall to the ground. A monk from the Takamatsu temple, Sanuki province, decided to put an end to the terrible drought in that region. He made for Suribara Valley where a lot of dragons and thunders dwelled hidden in the clouds. He came by and started to tickle their navels and all burst into laughing, releasing a lot of rain drops to the ground (*ibidem:* 442-443). Once befriended, *kappa*[4] have been known to perform any number

[1] *Mochi* is a Japanese cake, made of rice pounded into paste.

[2] http://eos.kokugakuin.ac.jp/modules/xwords/entry.php?entryID=1047 retrived on the 2nd of July 2011

[3] Kōbō Daishi (774–835), posthumously known as Kūkai, was a Japanese monk, scholar, poet, and artist, founder of the Shingon or „True Word" school of Buddhism.

[4] *Kappa* is about the size of a child, with scaly, reptilian skin ranging in color from green to yellow or blue. *Kappa* inhabits the ponds and rivers of Japan and has webbed hands and feet. His most notable feature is an indentation on the top of their head that holds water; this is regarded as the source of his power. This cavity must be full whenever a *kappa* is away from the water; if it spills, the *kappa* will be unable to move.

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of tasks for human beings, such as helping farmers irrigate their land. The people living at the foot of the Shiro Mount found an unconventional way to get rid of the drought. One summer day, a man went fishing to Shiroyama Pond. Although he had caught a lot of fish, he did not find his net when he was about to leave for home. Eventually he realized that it was the deed of a *kappa*, and, with the help of other villagers, he drained all the water of the pond. Afraid their indentation on the top of its head may get dry, *kappa* ran to the mountain peak and prayed for rain. In an instant the sky was filled with heavy clouds and it started to rain. The people learned that, when the year is too dry, they should drain the water of the Shiroyama Pond and *kappa* would immediately start praying for rain (Ikehara, S., *op. cit.:* 388-389).

The hot weather affects all the beings, including the dragon, the symbol of power in Eastern cultures. One summer morning, a few people gathered around the swamp behind the Sowa temple, Musashi county, where they encountered a huge dragon. They all fled as fast as they could, leaving behind their baskets full of eggplants. One evening, an old man dreamt of a dragon, the god of the Sowa Swamp. The dragon apologized for having eaten all the villagers' eggplants, but that had helped him recover from a terrible illness. Due to that dream, the people learned that eggplants could cure any illnesses caused by the heat of summer and decided to bring eggplants to the temple as offerings to the local god, celebrated on the 26th of August (*ibidem*: 418-419).

The vegetation imposes its own rules: summer is the season of growth and luxuriance, whereas winter is the period of decadence and decay. Nevertheless such rules can also be broken, as in the legend *Saigyô's Peak* (Kamakura city). In Koshikoe, Saigyô[1] met a beautiful girl to whom he asked where she was going. The young woman replied that she was out to cut "the grass that grows in winter and fades in summer". The monk was taken aback by these words, but he finally realized that the girl was talking about wheat (Ôshima, Y. *et alii*, 1987: 96).

Japanese were particularly careful about possible illness brought by the summer heat. Fifteeen days after New Year, the *shimenawa*[2] that had been used on the occasion are burnt. *Mochi* are pounded on that very fire and then eaten in order to prevent any summer illnesses. In other regions *mochi* are thrown in the sea. The day is considered a holiday and nobody is supposed to work on that day (Mori, S. (ed.), 1960: 13). The beans that remained from *setsubun*[3] or from New Year are either kept till summer when they are eaten to prevent summer illnesses (Kokugaku-in Daigaku Minzokugaku Kenkyûkai, 1975: 99-104) or they are kept in the family alcove till the first thunderclap in summer; people eat them so as not to get struck by the lightening (Takeda, A., 1958: 83-84). In summer if you hang a bunch of onions by the eaves of your house, your children will never catch any infectious decease during that year (Sakuma, N., 1940: 7). During boys' festival in May, the girls throw mud at the boys who are not supposed to dodge lest something bad may happen to them in that summer (Kokugaku-in Daigaku Minzokugaku Kenkyûkai, 1979: 89). One summer the thunder struck a wine shop. When the merchant opened the door to see what had happened, he saw a light ball and some black smoke inside. After a while the light ball went up a pillar and disappeared. The traces left behind looked like a dog's bite. In the storehouse

[1] Saigyō (1118 –1190) was a famous Japanese poet of the late Heian and early Kamakura period.
[2] *Shimenawa* is a braided rice straw rope used for ritual purification in the Shinto religion.
[3] *Setsubun* (Bean-Throwing Festival or Bean-Throwing Ceremony) is the day before the beginning of spring in Japan. The name literally means "seasonal division" and is associated with the Lunar New Year.

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there was a folding screen on which a picture of the thunder was painted. The colors of the folding screen had all faded away after that incident (Momoi, T., 1974: 264-265).

In summer weird beings may also inhabit the overheated imagination of the people. Summer is the time when foxes show up carrying paper lanterns ("Nagano-ken-shi Minzoku-hen Chûshin Chihô Kotoba to Denshô", *Kitsune no hanashi: Kitsune-bi 2*, 1990: 492). It is also the time of *umibôzu*[1], a spirit who is said to live in the ocean and capsize the ship of anyone who dares speak to it (Miyagi-ken, 1956: 496-497). You can also see some *kitsune no yome-iri* (foxes' weddings) in moonless fine nights of summer when tiny lights move rhythmically to and fro (Kanishi, I., 1995: 6). In summer, at midnight, between 12 and one o' clock in the morning a voice is shouting: "*Take no ôsuke* is going upstream". Should you hear that voice, there are only three years left of your life. This is the reason why the fishermen are not supposed to fish at midnight. *Take no ôsuke* is a tailless salmon with the eyes as big as the paper lanterns, long hair and a huge head (Tôyô Daigaku Minzokugaku Kenkyû-kai, 1987: 162). A footless, white clad ghost crawls up the hip of the people who will not visit the temple in summer, when it is very hot. Some people encountered the specter on their way home from a wake (over a dead body) (Tsuru Bunka Daigaku Minzokugaku Kenkyû-kai, 1983: 59).

Ghost stories have been a mainstay of summer in Japan. In the summertime of old Japan, when the oppressive heat and humidity rendered daylight activity all but unbearable, people longed for the night and the scant relief brought by the setting sun. The people would play Hyakumonogatari Kaidankai (A Gathering of 100 Ghostly Tales), and silently the spirits would return. 100 candles would be placed in a circle, and the players would each tell a ghoulish tale, often a story from their local village, or perhaps a more personal experience. As each tale ended, the storyteller would douse a single candle, the light slowly fading as the tension rose. The game was said to be a ritual of evocation, the expiration of each story and each candle summoning more spiritual energy, transforming the room into a beacon for the dead. With the vanishing of the final light, someone or something terrible would be waiting in the darkness.

The eleventh day after the summer solstice is called *hangeshô* – the middle of summer. That day, a wealthy peasant was still sowing when the sun went behind the horizon. Annoyed because he was not able to finish his work, he beckoned the sun not to set, but because of his insolence of making the sun stop in the sky, he ran high fever and eventually died (Ôtake, N., a. 1982: 710).

On *doyô* (dog's day) in summer, even the sharks go to visit the Great Ise shrine (Tôkyô Joshi Daigaku Shigaku-ka Minzoku Chôsa, 2005: 261). On *doyô*, people are supposed to eat eel so as not to catch any summer disease, but it is bad luck to eat crabs and melons. You can give the rice offerings prepared for the ancestors to the children, but do not let them fall asleep immediately after eating the offerings, because they might turn into a cow ("Kôshô Densetsu 10", *Chûkyô Densetu*, 1995: 134-135).

O-bon is a Japanese Buddhist custom to honor the departed spirits of the ancestors. This Buddhist custom has evolved into a family reunion holiday during which people return to ancestral family places and visit and clean their ancestors' graves. It has been celebrated in Japan for more than 500 years and traditionally includes a dance, known as Bon-Odori. The festival of Obon lasts for three days, when the spirits of ancestors are supposed to revisit the household altars. During Obon festival, on the 16th day of the month,

[1] This spirit's name combines the character for "sea" with the character of "Buddhist monk".

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children are allowed to fish the offerings that were set afloat for the ancestors, boil them and eat them so that they may not catch any summer disease (Asano, I., 1998: 3).
Briefly, summer folktales refer mainly to *kappa* (warning people not to let children bathe in the river alone), to food that cure summer illnesses or to *kitsune-bi* (Nakajima, S., 1937: 19), *inen-bi* (Sakihara, H., 1975: 22-23), *ten-bi* (Hirose, K., 1940: 63), *oni-bi* or other illusory fires that appear on rainy summer days (Takahashi, T., 1991: 36).

Autumn

Autumn marks the transition from summer into winter. In Western cultures, personifications of autumn are usually pretty, well-fed females adorned with fruits, vegetables and grains that ripen at this time. The character for autumn, 秋, shows 禾 (grain/rice) + 束 (bundle), meaning the harvested crops in autumn. The character was later reinterpreted, by combining 禾 (grain) with 火 (fire) and 龜 (turtle), meaning to dry and shrink the size of harvested crops (as turtle meat is dried over a fire). The present form repositions 禾 and 火, while eliminating 龜.

The autumn brings changing weather, cold rains, frost and hail. Every year when autumn was near, the rice harvest in Asai, Musashi county, was destroyed either by rain or by hail. The people were very worried and sought for the advice of Bushû, a monk attending the Sôgen shrine. He told them to build a small shrine in the middle of the field. They all prayed in front of the shrine and, to their bewilderment, the next year the rain and the hail produced no significant damages. After several years they had to move the small shrine to another location, and, consequently, the rice harvest was extremely poor that year. The following year, when they moved the small shrine back, they got a very good rice harvest. On the 8th of April people started to celebrate the flower festival, a tribute to monk Bushû, their advisor (Ikehara, S., *op. cit.*: 344-345).

The agricultural life stays within two time limits: spring, as the season of sowing and autumn, as the season of harvest. A girl called Aguri would show up by a local temple every spring and every autumn and work very hard helping the villagers. In autumn the gird disappeared, but in spring she showed up again. In the fifth year, the girl did not show up any more, but a villager had a dream in which Aguri asked him to lend her a small amount of money. Learning that Aguri needed money, the villagers gathered the required amount and placed it by a cedar tree near the temple. In another dream Aguri thanked them for the money and informed them that she had become a goddess; she also asked them to build her a small shrine on the spot a cedar tree would grow overnight. The villagers did build a shrine dedicated to Aguri Inari and the goddess has protected them ever since (Narita, O., Ôzaki, K., 1986: 214).

On the 16th of February and on the 16th of October the rice field god is celebrated. In spring the god descends from the mountains, becoming the god of the rice field and in autumn the god turns into the mountain god (Ōtake, N., d. 1982: 694). On spring *shanichi* the harvest god (*saku no kami*) leaves people's houses and goes to the rice field while on autumn *shanichi* the god returns to people's houses. In spring the houses are decorated with red rice (for auspicious occasions) and in autumn sheaves of rice are set in front of the houses and people eat hot white rice flavored with carrots, beans and potatoes as a sign of gratitude for the rich harvest (Ōtake, N., c. 1982: 694). The 20th of February is called Haru-Ebisu and the 20th of November, Aki-Ebisu. The

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god of luck, Ebisu, goes out to earn money in spring and in autumn he comes back home with his earnings (Moritani, S., 1984: 609).

At autumn *higan* the dragon flies carry the souls of the ancestors so you are not to kill such those insects, especially that time of year (Mizusawa, K., 1982: 1053-1054). *Kitsune-bi* (foxes' fires) can be seen in the mountains in autumn (Tôyô Daigaku Minzoku Kenkyû-kai, 1973: 292). *Kitsune-bi* show up from spring to autumn, but never in winter. They look like rows of tiny lights, some brighter some dimmer (Hosokawa, O., Matsumoto, K., 1987: 527-528). The foxes shift their shape (*bakeru*) in autumn (Yakuchi, H., 1999: 757-758).

Winter

Winter is the coldest season of the year, when the days are shortest and the nights are longest. In Chinese astronomy and other East Asian calendars, winter is taken to commence around 7 November. The character for winter, 冬, is a pictograph of food tied to a cord wound about a peg + 氷 (ice), meaning winter is the season when stored food is consumed.

In winter the seasonal activities are quite limited and the life seems to flow in condensed sequences. In winter the outside world, hostile and unfriendly is replaced by the inside world of imagination, making room for fantastic creatures, some of them of lethal fascination. The tale of the snow wife is widely distributed throughout the northwestern part of Japan, where the snow remains on the ground up to six months of the year. The Snow Woman is generally pictured as though her only visible parts are long hair and facial features. The rest of her body blends with the whiteness of the snow until the time she takes on complete human form to live with mortals. One winter night, a young man heard somebody in the storm, and, when he opened the door, he saw a beautiful woman outside. The young man invited her in and soon they got married and lived happily till spring, when the woman gradually became thinner and thinner. One day the man's friends came for a party. As there was no sign of his wife, the young man went to the kitchen and saw in front of the stove his wife's *kimono* lying in a pool of water (Seki, K., 1963: 81-82).

In the 15th evening after New Year, people commemorated women who died in childbirth. That night, the head of the family would clean the snow from the yard, light a paper lantern and wait for the moon to rise on the horizon. People say that the spirit of a woman called Obome shows up that night and asks you to hold her baby for a while. If you hold it like an ordinary baby, its head grows bigger and bigger and is about to swallow you up, therefore you should hold the child upside down, placing a knife by its head so that the baby may get scared by the knife and its head may stop expanding. When Obome returns, he promises you a lot of money for taking good care of her baby, but actually nobody has ever received that money (Nomura, J., Ôsaku, T., 1983: 139). A variation of the same legend from Nishikawa town reports that on the 15th of January the toilet god drops by, so you would better clean the toilet and wait for his visit. If you peep through the toilet hole, you will see a white clad woman weaving on a loom. The person who sees her will die that year (*ibidem*).

In the Celtic tradition, a symbolic circle of time represents transitional points during the year: Samhain, winter solstice; Imbolc, spring equinox; Beltane, summer solstice; Lighnasada, autumn equinox. The wheel of the year describes the circles of death, birth, youth, maturity and renewal of life (O' Connel, M., Airey, R., 2007: 203).

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To Japanese, the most important seasonal rhythms are spring (as the time of seeding/planting) and autumn (as the time of harvest). A secondary prominence is assigned to summer (as the time of heat and drought) and to winter (when weird creatures such as Snow Woman, Obome etc. come forth).

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