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Cats & Japan

By Mohan Gopal

Some months ago, I saw an article in *The Japan News* daily newspaper, titled “Charming Cat-Themed Wooden Benches Unveiled in Onomichi, Hiroshima, Enhance City’s Feline-Friendly Image”. I was intrigued and reflected on the many cat-inspired aspects of Japan that had consistently aroused my interest. From the ubiquitous beckoning-cat figurines in shop and restaurant windows to famous anime characters, from pet cats on leash to cats as station masters and castle lords, the list went on. This was a nation that adored cats, and the cuter the *nyan-nyan*, the better the cat’s standing in Japanese society. The article thus triggered the idea of a piece on the subject in *Japan SPOTLIGHT*. When I proposed the topic, the editor initially looked bemused, but then accepted it as an interesting cultural topic.

The Beckoning-Cat (*Manekineko*)

The beckoning-cat figurine, typically made of porcelain – though it can be of any material, including wood and stone – is of a seated cat with one paw raised. Depending on which paw, the cat is either inviting good fortune or guests (including customers). It is a goody type of the *bakeneko* – a cat with magical prowess. While in the West, cats, especially black ones, are associated with misfortune, it is not so in Japan. There is indeed a mystique about cats and coupled with their independent “going-my-way” attitude, they become apt for mystical pursuits. Creating the figurines is an artist’s delight, and meanings are ascribed to the colors and motifs of the cat. I picked up a fine Kutani-ware porcelain piece – the shop owner said that particular beckoning-cat figurine brings wealth in the form of fortitude (*Photo 1*).

More fascinating than the *manekineko* itself, is one of the stories about its origin. During the Middle Ages, Lord Ii of Hikone Castle in present-day Shiga Prefecture in western Japan was visiting the great city of Edo (present-day Tokyo). While touring an area west of the capital (today’s Setagaya Ward) which had been gifted to him by the Shogun, he passed by the Gotokuji Temple. The head priest’s pet cat was seated at the doorway and with one paw raised it seemed to Lord Ii that the cat was beckoning him inside the temple. He went in to be warmly greeted and honored by the priest. At that moment, a bolt of lightning struck the surrounding area. The temple was safe but had the nobleman been outside he would have surely perished.



Author Mohan Gopal

Lord Ii was convinced that it was the priest’s cat that had mystically saved his life. In gratitude, he declared that the cat would be honored and the temple endowed suitably to ensure that the cat was well taken care of. Thus, the tradition of celebrating the *manekineko* as a harbinger of good fortune was born. Gotokuji Temple today is a popular spot for tourists and locals alike who buy *manekineko* charms to either carry with them or to be placed at one of the several altars reserved for this purpose in the temple precincts (*Photo 2*). Incidentally, the Ii family graves are also located at the same temple, surely assuring them of good fortune in their afterlife.

Meanwhile, 400 kilometers away, Hikone city which houses the headquarters of the erstwhile Ii nobility, foresaw an excellent economic opportunity and created a feline symbol to represent it. *Hikonyan*, the mascot of the city, is a popular attraction with young and old, tourists and locals, alike. *Hikonyan* even makes business visits to other parts of Japan for events that promote the city’s products and attractions.

Cat Anime & Literature

Japan is famous, especially among the young, for its contribution to animation. All-time cat greats are the lovable Doraemon and Hello Kitty. Many a little girl has grown adoring “Hello Kitty” (*Kittichan*), while youth and adults alike have been fascinated by the magical

Photo 1: author



A Kutani-ware porcelain
Manekineko

Photo 2: author



Gotokuji – *Manekineko* charms and altar

exploits of Doraemon and his dear friend, the young boy Nobuta and his companions. The list goes on. Several Ghibli creations have their cats – *Catbus* of *My Friendly Neighbour*, *Totoro* and *Jiji* the black cat in *Kiki's Delivery Service*, to name a couple – as also Makoto Shinkai's famous creation *Sparrow Closes the Door*, in which the cats *Daijin* and *Sadaijin* play key roles.

Famous poet and writer Kenji Miyazawa (1896-1933) featured cats in many of his stories, an animal he is supposed to have been fond of. While the wild cats in his *The Restaurant of Many Orders* may be infamous *bakeneko*, my interpretation is that Miyazawa was actually conveying his disappointment with human selfishness similar to his senior, the famous novelist and poet Natsume Soseki (1867-1916), whose magnum opus '*I am a Cat*' is a masterpiece of sarcasm where the protagonist is a cat which describes its life in the house of a schoolteacher with detailed and searing observations of human behavior in Meiji Japan.

Cat Art

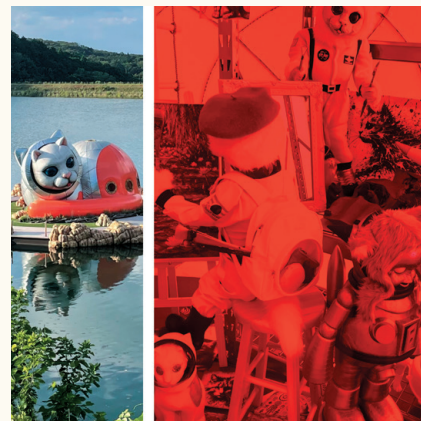
With my article in mind, I acquired a keenness to observe anything feline. I was therefore intrigued by posters advertising an exhibition titled "The Secret Island of Space Cats" by artist Kenji Yanobe at the Hyper Museum, Hanno, in Saitama Prefecture, northwest of Tokyo and I just had to go there. The museum is located inside a sprawling Finnish-themed park, complete with woods and lakes providing a miniature replica of that beautiful northern European country. Yanobe had created a complete fantasy of the earth having originally been populated by a group of cats who landed from space and proceeded to develop the planet as we know it today. He refers to these as Space Cats. In fact, human art has its historical beginnings in the artwork created by one of the Space Cats to keep the morale of its companions alive. It was the "Big Cat Bang"; it is a cute story, and I shall quote excerpts from it here.

The Origins of Art (a Hidden Art History by Cats)

The Big Cat Bang dispersed the ships' cats across the earth. One ship made an emergency landing in what is now Hanno. In the stranded spaceship, one creative cat took to painting and sculpting to ease the solitude, chronicling the story of itself and its fellow cats who had once travelled the cosmos to bring life to distant worlds. Over time, an immeasurable amount of artwork accumulated inside the vessel, marking the dawn of art history.

Yanobe's fantasy is replete with paintings and other artistic

creations portraying the cats' spaceship, the island on which the feline adventurers had landed, the type of life they led after arriving and the amazing artwork that they had generated. There was a replica of the island created on one of the parks' lakes, with access by way of a short boat ride (Photo 3).



Space Cat Isle and Space Cats inside their stranded spaceship

I mentioned about the Space Cat exhibition and *The Japan News* article to my friend Hiroki Ogata, who is a designer and craftsman of cat-themed silver accessories, himself usually sporting a self-crafted silver ear-cuff of a springing cat, a visible testimony to the animal he is totally passionate about. He invited me to an exhibition on cat art – indeed, these exhibitions abound in this cat-loving nation – in which he had displayed some of his creations, including paintings and pictures of a plethora of cats. He excitedly informed me that there were many cat islands across the country.

Cat Islands of the Seto Inland Sea

Research on the Internet indeed came up with several cat islands and a book that inspired me to visit one of these. The book, *Manabeshima Island Japan* by Florent Chavouet, was a sheer delight, filled with the author's amazing graphic artistry portrayed with humor of every aspect of his two-month stay on the island of Manabeshima in the Seto Inland Sea in Okayama Prefecture. The book included a quirky page on the cat gangs of Manabeshima. To reach the island, I took a boat for about 45 minutes from the tiny port at Kasaoka, an hour by train from Okayama. One of Chavouet's cat gangs was awaiting the arrival of the boat with anticipation for the treats that visitors may bring them. As my return boat was only after several hours, I had ample time to roam around the small island with Chavouet's book as my guide. I did not see the large number of cats I had been expecting to, but instead chanced upon one of Chavouet's friends, Hiroshi the fisherman. He explained that a lot had changed in the 15 years since Chavouet's visit. Many older residents had died, and younger ones had relocated to the big cities of the country. He sadly said that at this rate the island would become one

bereft of people in a few years, a typical uninhabited island – *mujinto* – of Japan. When I told him about the purpose of my visit, with a mischievous smile he showed me a photo he had caught on his smartphone of two male cats in a compromising position. Chavouet had indeed selected an island for his summer sojourn that would do full justice to his superb sense of humor.

I am not a big waffle fan, but instead of cats, one of my biggest finds on Manabeshima was the *Café Nagisa*. Their home-made waffles were delicious and to just savor these would be well worth a visit to the island. The owner was very knowledgeable and said that each group of cats on the island had its own territory and would follow a human visitor only within its territorial boundaries. He also said that the island of Sanagi a few kilometers away from Manabeshima just across the sea border between Okayama and Kagawa prefectures was a haven for cats, with the islanders receiving Kagawa Prefecture governmental support to use them as a tourist attraction. He further said that while Manabeshima's cats were slim, agile and independent (as cats are meant to be), Sanagishima's cats looked shampooed and behaved domesticated (Photos 4 & 5).

I was back in the region after a week, this time to visit Sanagishima Island, a 45-minute boat ride from the harbor of Tadatsu town in Kagawa Prefecture. The boat was filled with families, schoolchildren on an excursion, and cat enthusiasts. Nobody would

be disappointed, for the cats on Sanagishima seemed well acclimatized to the tourist influx and were eagerly awaiting the visitors and their treats. This time also, I had several hours to spend and walked from one end of the island to the other. Apart from the resident cats, the island was historically known for its shrine to Dai-Tengu, the mystical creature in Japanese tradition with magical powers, a human-like form with an overtly long and big red nose. I was going to visit the shrine on top of a hill affording excellent views of the surrounding sea but was stopped short by signboards warning of wild boar sightings. Favoring discretion over valor, I abandoned my proposed little hike and silently offered greetings to the Sanagishima Dai-Tengu from my spot of safety.

The body of water in Japan known as the Seto Inland Sea is sandwiched between Japan's main island and the island of Shikoku. Through history, it has been a major waterway for commercial and passenger traffic between eastern and western Japan, avoiding the turbulent waters of the Pacific Ocean, further to the east. The truly placid inland sea has been an excellent fishing ground and coupled with a milder climate and fertile flat lands, the thousands of islands that dot it became populated fishing villages. Many of these islands had become the cat islands of the Seto Inland Sea and I had visited just a meagre couple among them – unlike the many cat-enthusiasts I had met, who were dedicated to landing on as many of these islands as they could.

On the islands, it had undoubtedly been a synergetic relationship between the felines and humans. The cats would keep reptiles and rodents away from the food in boats, homes and fields, and with plenty of fish to go around, they were always well-fed. This would explain their burgeoning numbers. I was inclined to think that all the present-day cats of these islands were related and descendants of the cats who sailed into the sea centuries ago. On Sanagishima, I met Yuji Kuroda of the Seto Inland Sea Folk History Museum located in the prefectural capital Takamatsu. He mentioned that there is ongoing research in the subject area of the island cats, to trace their lineage. The findings of this research would shed interesting historical pointers to the ancient peoples who inhabited the islands.

Onomichi City, Hiroshima Prefecture

There are three land crossings over the inland sea. The easternmost of these connects Hyogo and Tokushima prefectures via the large island of Awajishima. Further west, is the grand Seto-Ohashi bridge connecting Okayama and Kagawa prefectures. Close to the western end is the idyllic Shimanami-Kaido bridge, a cyclist's paradise crossing over multiple lemon-friendly islands of Hiroshima

Photo 4: author



Manabeshima – Café Nagisa entrance and author with Hiroshi

Photo 5: author



Manabeshima black cat and Sanagishima's Nekonoshima Hostel cats

Prefecture, connecting Imabari city in Ehime Prefecture and Onomichi – a city which holds title of the largest lemon-producing region in Japan.

I just had to visit the city which had triggered this article. The tourist information office at the main station was well-versed in the matter and directed me to the old part of the town, a kilometer away. This was a hilly labyrinth of alleys and paths with lovely old temples nestling around them. I was imagining a place abounding in cats; I did see a few comfortably lounging on the narrow paths but was treated more to the sight of cat-themed artefacts – benches, manhole covers and pavement markings. Cat paws were etched on stone staircases and cobbled streets. Adjoining the 14th century Hodoji Temple was the quaint *Onomichi-komono Workshop*, a shop offering “lucky cat painting experiences” (*Photo 6*). As I made my way back to the station through the lively shopping arcade right opposite the cat locale, from restaurants to apparel stores, from bars to food stores, most purveyed cat-themed goods in addition to their regular ware. At many corners in the arcade and on the stone steps of this historical area were artists and painters – young and old – who were engaged in creative pursuits, trying to catch the unique atmosphere of the old town. It seemed to me that Onomichi had got the delicate mix of combining art with economic impact just right (*Photo 7*).

Lord Sanjuuro of Bitchu-Matsuyama Castle

At a cozy café in central Okayama where I had popped in for a dinner of camembert cheese omelet, the owner, intrigued by the reason for my visit, recommended visiting Matsuyama Castle – not to be confused with a castle of the same name in the capital of Ehime Prefecture – in the Bichu region of the prefecture. The castle had had a long history and despite ups and downs, had by and large managed to survive the numerous fires caused by both human strife and natural disasters. One of the reasons for this was its location. Built about half a kilometer above sea level on an inaccessible hill, it is the highest existing mountain castle in Japan and has earned the name of “castle in the sky”, for on many a day it can be seen majestically peeping through the clouds. From the nearest railhead at Bichu-Takahashi, it was a couple of hours of walking, mostly through hilly terrain. The current Lord of Bichu-Matsuyama castle is



Onomichi – cat lounging on a temple path and cat-memorabilia workshop



Cat-beer, cat sake-glass and coaster, cat-shochu

Sanjuuro, a calico cat.

I have heard of cats as nominal stationmasters in Japan. I had chanced upon a small unmanned wayside station, Kimigahama, near Choshi in Chiba Prefecture while doing research for an article for *Japan SPOTLIGHT* in 2023. The stationmaster had been the cat *Kimichan*, until its demise some years earlier. *Kimichan* had been fondly immortalized at the station by a memorial plaque. While working on this current article I came across a book titled *Abroad in Japan* by Chris Broad, a British filmmaker and vlogger whose YouTube channel of the same name as his book's title has a viewership of several hundred million. Broad writes about his meeting *Nitama* the cat – the second in a hereditary line of stationmasters – at Kishi, a small railway station in distant Wakayama Prefecture. Following the phenomenal boost this had had on an otherwise dying economy, many small towns in rural Japan followed suit with their own *nyan-nyan* stationmasters. Broad has dedicated a full chapter, “Cat Nation”, to Japan's fascination with cats, and writes about his cat-related experiences including, rather unhappily for him, the abysmal displeasure of having to taste “cat wine”.

However, this was the first time I had met the head of a samurai castle. Lord Sanjuuro gives audience to the visitors who come to see him, twice a day. The day I was at the castle was the last day of a sunny three-day weekend and His Lordship preferred to doze most of the time, possibly tired out by his continuous social commitments. He was a good-tempered cat and didn't mind a gentle pat on the head. On his birthday on 16 March every year Lord Sanjuuro descends to the restored samurai houses in Bichu-Takahashi to make a public appearance. His fiefdom historically

Photo 8: author



Lord Sanjuuro with his castle in the background

Photo 9: author



Pedestrian sign in Bichu-Takahashi

included this small town and his footprint is everywhere, including on pavement signs urging his human subjects to use the zebra-crossings for crossing the road (Photos 8 & 9).

Cat Town – Yanaka, Taito Ward, Tokyo

I was mentioning about my visits to cat islands in Japan to an acquaintance, when she remarked, “Oh, what about Tokyo’s own Cat Town – haven’t you been there?” I decided to conclude my little research with a visit to the old town of Yanaka. An otherwise quiet neighborhood suddenly gave way to an alley known as the Yanaka Ginza, crowded with small eateries, shops and people. Several of the shops carried cat memorabilia, though I must admit I had expected many more. I stopped by one shop and picked up a tiny *manekineko* with its right paw up, and with the shop’s name hanging from its neck. The shop lady said that this piece had a fortune written on a bit of paper tucked inside it. The paper was accessible by opening a tiny cap at the base of the doll. She further reassured me that all the fortunes were nice ones, so I had nothing to fear. While I am sure the reader is curious to know what that fortune was, with Christmas round the corner I have decided to gift it to a visiting niece. Adjoining this shop was the Career Café, with two-feet high dolls of two standing cats. I stepped in, not to find much to do with cats though. Instead, I savored their highly recommended ice-*daifuku*, a popular semi-soft frozen sweet. The shop lady said that Yanaka had been a feline paradise until several years ago with groups of them lounging in the narrow alleys and on the steps of surrounding temples. That’s how the place became synonymous with cats. However, in more recent times the cats have been discouraged from congregating,

Photo 10: author



Shops in Yanaka-Ginza

hence the decline in their presence. A pity, I think (Photo 10).

Closing Observation

A commonality across all the cat-inspired places I had visited was the tremendous amount of related merchandise which was being manufactured and either sold or symbolically showcased. From tiny *manekineko* figurines displayed in eateries near Gotokuji Temple to expensive cat-themed products sold in Onomichi, from Sanjuuro memorabilia to cat-themed labels on yoghurt packets and Christmas cookies, it is a winning strategy of delivering economic value while achieving human emotional appeal. While returning from my visit to Cat Town, at my transfer station, Ikebukuro (a place symbolized by owls), I was greeted by a pop-up store selling cat memorabilia for the oncoming winter holidays. Surely, this was a strong indicator of good fortune being showered. Hail the *Manekineko*! (Photo 11).

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Photo 11: author



Cat-calendar, cat-labelled yoghurt, cat pop-up store

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