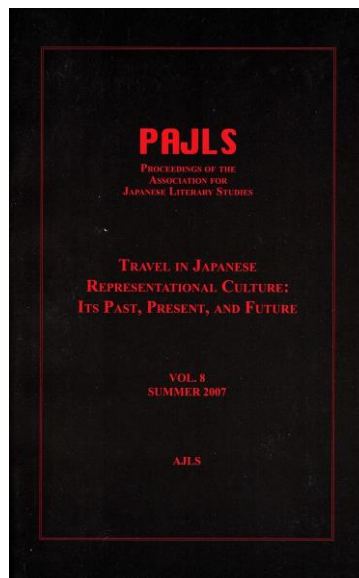


“Folklore, Propaganda, and Parody: The Adventures of Momotarō in the South Seas”

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## FOLKLORE, PROPAGANDA, AND PARODY: THE ADVENTURES OF MOMOTARŌ IN THE SOUTH SEAS

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Japanese political writers in the early 20th century often voiced the view that Japan should expand to the South. The historian Shimizu Kiyoshi notes that an “untiring spate of publications, stereotypes, and slogans” at this time led to the “emergence of a South Seas fever, an unmistakable mood for southern expansion.”<sup>1</sup> These “publications, stereotypes and slogans” did not grow in a vacuum: rather, they accompanied a major expansion of the Japanese empire into the South Seas. Japan occupied the islands of German-controlled Micronesia at the start of the First World War and subsequently ruled them under a mandate of the League of Nations; Japanese business firms took advantage of war-related trade disruption to expand commercial ties and economic investments throughout South East Asia.

At home, the 1914 Tokyo Taisho Exposition boosted public awareness of the South Seas. For the first time, this imperial exposition featured a South Seas Pavilion (*Nan'yōkan*), complete with displays of tropical products and human showcases featuring “cannibals of the Sakai tribe.” A reporter in the periodical *Jitsugyō no Nihon* noted that these cannibals were “mild and well-behaved when one actually met them” and that their “cannibalism was a thing of the past.”<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless the exhibit of live, albeit tamed, cannibals not only drew many spectators to the pavilion but also served to reinforce their stereotypes about primitive South Sea islanders.

Tsurumi Yūsuke’s lavishly illustrated *Nan'yō Yūki* (Travel Sketches of the South Seas) is a *summum* of southern expansionist writing. In his preface, Tsurumi argues that literary writers must do more to foster an emotional disposition for imperialism among the youth of Japan. The success of Japan’s imperial project in the South Seas, he contends, will depend ultimately “on the subjective attitude of the Japanese people.”<sup>3</sup>

Recently, more and more writers have raised their voices to call for our expansion ... to the rich and fertile lands of the South. I

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<sup>1</sup> Shimizu, 1987, p. 388.

<sup>2</sup> *Jitsugyō no Nihon*, 1914 cited in Tsuchiya, 2003, p. 257.

<sup>3</sup> Tsurumi, 1917, p. 5.

welcome this trend, but cannot believe that a southern expansion policy that only advocates expanded production or emigration suffices. People will not make up their minds to leave the land of their ancestors unless they are stimulated to feel fascination and longing for the South Seas. This longing arises most easily during boyhood and youth when our imaginations are most active and our perceptions sharpest. The foundation of the expansion of the Japanese race must be laid while our youth are still in their cradles: Imperialism must spark their desire for exotic lands and fire their dreams.<sup>4</sup>

Tsurumi concedes that ordinary Japanese are reluctant to forsake “the land of their ancestors,” and that intellectual arguments are unlikely to overcome their reluctance. To induce ordinary people to move overseas, one must stimulate in them an appetite for exotic lands and appeal to their imaginations.

To engage the imagination of young children, educators could not afford to neglect the rich storehouse of Japanese folk tales. Just as the Meiji state used imperial mythology to establish the government’s legitimacy in domestic politics and ideological struggle vis à vis other empires, educational institutions recycled folk tales to fashion a national constituency for imperial expansion. Like any other part of the national culture, folklore was a vital resource: it had to be channeled to discipline Japanese youth. Educators found in the tale of Momotarō a great vehicle for inculcating such awareness, one which was amply exploited throughout the imperial period.

Momotarō is *the* quintessential Japanese folk tale. In its standard schoolbook version, an old man and woman living in the countryside discover the tiny boy Momotarō inside a peach floating down a river and decide to raise him. When he grows up, he sets off to conquer the island of the ogres (*onigashima*) and recruits three animals to assist him: a dog, a monkey and a pheasant. Overcoming the defenses of the powerful ogres, Momotarō forces them to surrender, seizes their treasures and returns to his village in triumph.

Momotarō first appeared in elementary school readers in the 1880s;<sup>5</sup> through these readers, a standard version of his story was disseminated to

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> This standardized Momotarō is a fixture of Japanese textbooks until 1945 and came to be closely associated with emperor-centered ideology. For more on the ties between the textbook Momotarō and Japanese imperial expansionism, see Antoni, 1991, pp. 158–65.

every child in Japan. From as early as the 1890s, a number of writers began to locate the island of the ogres in the actual South Seas and to depict Momotarō as an imperialist adventurer. For example, the author of the 1893 “*Momotarō no Hanashi no Gūi*” (The Allegorical Sense of Momotarō) advises his readers to emulate Momotarō and “to cross the equator to the islands near Australia, attack and seize better places than ogres’ island, subjugate the blacks who look like ogres and bring back the many treasures of the south such as copra and pearls.”<sup>6</sup> In the 1895 “*Ima Momotarō*” (Momotarō Today), which appeared in the boys’ publication *Shōnen Sekai*, Momotarō is a Japanese general, the island of the ogres is the recently-won colony of Taiwan, and the ogres’ treasure is Taiwan’s sugar cane industry.<sup>7</sup>

In this paper, I look at two versions of Momotarō from the early 20th century: Nitobe Inazō’s 1907 lecture “Momotarō no mukashi banashi” (The Tale of Momotarō)<sup>8</sup> and Akutagawa Ryūnosuke’s 1924 short story “Momotarō.” Nitobe served as economic advisor to the colonial regime of Taiwan under Gotō Shinpei at the turn of the century and later became Japan’s first professor of colonial policy studies. Akutagawa is perhaps Japan’s finest satirist. Although these two writers offer very different interpretations of the folktale, they both treat the figure of Momotarō as an allegory for Japan’s expansion and set his tale in the South Seas. They also show how this simple folk tale could lend itself to imperialist propaganda—and how it could be turned to parody.

Nitobe Inazō delivered his lecture on Momotarō in 1907. Rather than retell the story, he teases out moral lessons for contemporary Japanese youth from the standard account. He notes first that educators must transmit “the abilities of our ancestors and the lessons they have handed down in tales from ancient times” particularly folklore traditions that can “increase national vigor.” Such traditions constitute a “genetic inheritance” that has sustained the Japanese people for millennia and “give the Japanese a spiritual motive” for their actions.<sup>9</sup>

Even though all Japanese are familiar with the story of Momotarō, Nitobe laments, adults and children fail to grasp its broader implications. He identifies multiple levels of meaning in the story—historical, moral, and economic—and seeks to show how this timeless tale has a special

<sup>6</sup> Namekawa, 1981, p. 236.

<sup>7</sup> *Kyō no Warabei* 1895, pp. 816–821.

<sup>8</sup> Nitobe titled his 1907 lecture *Momotarō no enseidan* (Momotarō’s Conquest), but changed this title when he published it in a collection of essays (*Zuisōroku*, 1907).

<sup>9</sup> Nitobe, NIZ Vol. 5, pp. 186–87.

relevance to 20th century Japan. The character of Momotarō is, according to one theory, based on Minamoto no Tametomo's exile to the Izu islands in the 12th century. However Nitobe argues that a historical reading cannot exhaust the latent importance of a folk tale. History, he writes, is "concrete and objective" while folk tales are "archetypal and subjective."<sup>10</sup> Treating Momotarō as an archetype, Nitobe claims to discover in the folktale nothing less than the pre-history of the Japanese race. Whereas Momotarō is thought of as the quintessentially *Japanese* folk hero, Nitobe paradoxically emphasizes his foreign origins. Just as the peach (*momo*) from which he takes his name is not a native fruit of Japan, Momotarō is the personification of the Malay adventurers who reached Japan in large numbers (*momo* also means multitudes) in pre-historic times. His three animal retainers, for their part, stand for archaic indigenous societies that he conquered and recruited along the way. Momotarō's foreign origin and his capacity to subjugate other racial groups pre-figure the multi-racial and assimilating prowess of the Japanese empire and provide a rationale for its colonial policies in modern times.

If Nitobe makes use of the "historical" meaning of Momotarō to define a racial flair for colonization, he turns next to the tale's "ethical" dimension. He notes approvingly that there is nothing even remotely erotic in the tale: "I believe that the old man and woman were selected precisely to eliminate "eros" from the tale and to reinforce its moral message."<sup>11</sup> Momotarō is "martial and manly" and manliness is an important colonial trope in Nitobe's other writings. In a lecture in 1919, Nitobe characterizes imperialism in explicitly gendered terms in an essay called "Japanese Colonization." "The merciless law of the Survival of the fittest... has only justified the expansion of virile nations," whereas "those (such as Korea), who like the Foolish Virgins of the parable, were not ready to respond to the exigencies of the times were bereft of their independence."<sup>12</sup> Nitobe treats colonization as an act of metaphorical rape that is ordained by the very "laws" of nature.

If Momotarō embodies manliness, his three animal helpers stand for the Confucian virtues (*santoku*) of wisdom, benevolence, and courage. The virile hero can defeat the ogres because he is endowed with these virtues. Nitobe compares Momotarō's subjugation of the ogres to the missionary endeavors of "soldiers" of the Salvation Army in the evil

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.

<sup>12</sup> Nitobe, NIZ Vol. 23, p. 111.

slums of Japan's modern cities.<sup>13</sup> Just as Christian social reformers in Japan viewed the lower classes as savages in need of taming, Nitobe's colonizer considers the "ogres" on Japan's periphery to be barbarians that must be domesticated. Indeed, one could argue that conquering domestic savages demonstrated the nation's self-mastery and thus proved its competence to rule others in an imperialist world system.

Nevertheless, for Nitobe, the main lesson of Momotarō is "economic."

I believe that the tale of Momotarō's overseas expedition undoubtedly expresses the interest the Japanese people feel toward the outside world and their expansionist drive. As for the land of the ogres, it is a general term for the islands of the South Seas. ... With each step we take southward, this island is displaced even further south... Until 1895, Taiwan was the island of the ogres. Now more than a decade later, many Japanese still regard it as the island of the ogres...because of our differences in language and customs. The Momotarō of today will expand and conquer islands of ogres much further south. As for the treasures of these islands, they are naturally the products of the tropical zone, the treasures of the earth. The war booty that Momotarō brings back to Japan—the magical cloak, the cape of invisibility and the lucky hammer—are the tropical products that he supplies to his home country.<sup>14</sup>

In this passage, Nitobe construes the Momotarō story as a metaphor for Japan's endless drive to expand ever further to the south, a drive that manifests itself in the conquest of new islands and the seizure of tropical products. The location of the island of the ogres is not fixed: it changes over time as the "ogres" flee further south to escape the encroachments of the Japanese. Momotarō's conquest becomes an allegory for the Japanese empire and its southward expansion.

While Nitobe reads Momotarō as an allegory for imperialism, he is well aware that the folktale suffers from limitations. Momotarō conquers the ogres, but afterwards he returns to his village and leaves them alone. In his later writings as a professor of colonial policy studies, Nitobe returns to Momotarō and retouches him to fit his own vision of the ideal

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<sup>13</sup> Nitobe, NIZ Vol. 5, p. 193–4.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 195.

colonizer: that is, the long-term settler who remains in the colony and develops its resources.

I love Momotarō and have frequently had occasion to refer to his story. Nevertheless, I believe that we need to revise this folktale to make it fit the new Japan. In this new version, Momotarō goes to the island of the ogres, settles down and does not return to his home country. Rather than bringing the treasures of the island back to Japan, he invites the old man and old woman to join him and plans to build a happy home in this new land.<sup>15</sup>

Besides supplementing the tale, Nitobe also displaces the significance of certain narrative elements, notably that of Momotarō's homecoming. In 1915, he writes. "For a long time, the Japanese have made their home on these small islands. As for their ancestors, while there were some who were born on the continent, the vast majority likely were people of Malay race who journeyed from the South Seas. Probably most of the blood flowing in our veins is the blood of the Malay race."<sup>16</sup> Claiming that the Japanese were originally Malay adventurers, Nitobe has his Momotarō retrace the path that these ancient people took when they migrated to Japan in prehistoric times. If the ancestors of the Japanese came from the South Seas, then the contemporary ogres living there must be distant blood relatives of the Japanese. Nitobe goes on: "Since the "ancestors of the Japanese probably came from the South Seas, our southern expansion today can be thought of as the homecoming of one, crowned with laurels, who long ago left his hometown, traveled to the north and carried out great deeds." Momotarō's homecoming takes place not when he returns to the village of the old man and woman—who have no blood relations to him—but rather when he first arrives in the island of ogres—who are his racial ancestors.<sup>17</sup> Since the ogres and the Japanese were originally the same race, Nitobe has incidentally provided a rationale for the policies of assimilation and Japanization that will later be applied to make them similar once again.

If folklore could be turned to propaganda, it also lent itself readily to parody. In his short story "Momotarō," published in the *Sunday Mainichi*

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<sup>15</sup> *Yamato Minzoku no Hatten* (The Development of the Yamato Race), 1916 cited in Nitobe, 2001, p. 276.

<sup>16</sup> Nitobe 1915, P 187.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

Newspaper on July 1, 1924, Akutagawa Ryūnosuke debunks the figure that Nitobe had held out as a model for young Japanese. In turning the tale into parody, Akutagawa follows the authors of some of the earliest written versions of Momotarō—which date back to the 17th century—but he directs his barbs at contemporary Japanese imperialism.

If Nitobe seeks to have Japanese identify with Momotarō as a model to be emulated, Akutagawa distances his reader from the figure by focalizing his narrative through the perspective of the ogres. Nitobe treats the folktale as an allegory for modern Japanese colonialism, whereas Akutagawa writes a parody that inverts basic elements of the story and deconstructs this colonial discourse. Rather than a hero, his Momotarō is a lazy good-for-nothing who sets off to conquer the island of ogres because “he had an aversion for the kind of life the old man and women led, going out to labor in the fields and streams.” Far from discouraging him from leaving, the old couple is anxious to be rid of him since they are “at their wits end in dealing with this spoiled brat.”<sup>18</sup>

Along the way, Momotarō entices three animals to join him by advertising his dumplings as “the best in Japan” even though he “naturally had no idea whether the dumplings were *really* the best in Japan.”<sup>19</sup> A shrewd businessman, Momotarō no sooner recruits these animals to join him than he slashes their salaries from one millet dumpling per retainer to half a dumpling. Instead of paragons of the Confucian virtues, these retainers are allegorical figures for the three poisons (*sandoku*) that, according to Buddhist teaching, cause all of our misfortunes: anger, greed and delusion. The stray dog stands not for benevolence but for anger, the clever monkey for greed, and the pheasant for delusion rather than courage. The animal retainers quarrel with one another on their way to the island, but they become brutal monsters when they arrive since “no one can be such a paragon of military courage as a starving animal.” The dog bites the ogre youth in half with his fangs, the pheasant pecks out the eyes of the children, and the monkey, perhaps because of his “close resemblance to man,” strangles the young ogre women to death “only after ravishing them to his heart’s delight.”<sup>20</sup> Nitobe treats colonization as a metaphorical rape, but there is nothing metaphorical about the rape in Akutagawa’s story. In this story, the villainous ogres are plainly Momotarō and his three animal retainers.

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<sup>18</sup> Akutagawa Ryūnosuke Zenshū (ARZ), Vol 11, 1996, p. 159.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 163–4.



By contrast, in the topsy-turvy world of this story, the ogres are humanized. Before Momotarō's invasion, they are portrayed as living happy lives in peace and harmony. Just as humans are taught to fear ogres, ogre children are warned about the evils of the mythical human realm. A white-haired nurse admonishes her charges. "You had better behave yourselves or I will have to send you off to the island of human beings. Humans are quite repulsive creatures... they are greedy, jealous and conceited liars." If colonial narratives tend to dehumanize the colonized other, Akutagawa overturns colonial stereotypes by looking at the colonizer through the eyes of the colonized.

Nevertheless, Akutagawa's Momotarō is not simply a story about universal human failings. Just as Nitobe interprets the folk tale as an allegory for contemporary Japan, Akutagawa makes his story a pointed satire on the Japanese imperialism of his time. If Momotarō stands for Japanese imperialism, his retainers represent social groups that backed it: the war-mongering military is represented by the violent dog, Japanese capitalists by the profit-minded monkey and deluded intellectuals by the pheasant.<sup>21</sup> This allegorical reading is especially evident if we consider the setting of the story.

The ogres lived on a solitary island in the far off sea. It was not a craggy, hilly place as people tend to think. In fact, it was a beautiful natural paradise in which palm trees soared and birds of paradise chirped. The so-called ogres seemed to be a much more pleasure-loving race than we humans... [The ogres] lived in peace and passed their time strumming the strings of the *koto*, dancing, and singing the verses of ancient poets. The daughters and wives of the ogres wove cloth, brewed sake, made bouquets of orchids and lived lives that were not in the least different from those of our human wives and daughters.<sup>22</sup>

Writing at a time of South Seas fever, Akutagawa sets his story on a tropical island in the South Seas. Just as Nitobe has recourse to stereotypes of the tropical islander as backward savages, Akutagawa sprinkles his narrative with another set of clichés to make his point: the conventional tropical decor of palm trees, birds of paradise, bananas and coconuts but also the trope of the tropical islander as the happy child of nature.

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<sup>21</sup> Yu, 1972, p. 52–53.

<sup>22</sup> ARZ, Vol. 11, 1996, p. 162.

If Nitobe conceives of colonization as the spread of civilization, Akutagawa views it as an exercise in futility. Ultimately the conquest of Onigashima brings few rewards to Momotarō and even fewer benefits to the islanders. Momotarō makes a triumphal return to his hometown with a treasure-laden cart drawn by ogre children, but he does not spend his later years in the peaceful retirement that a conquering hero expects. The captive ogre children kill the pheasant, Momotarō's personal bodyguard, and flee back to their island. Other survivors, in search of revenge, sail across the ocean to attack Momotarō's palace, set it on fire and kill the monkey. After their island utopia is destroyed, the peace-loving, hedonistic islanders become "revenge seeking ogres."

Akutagawa's satire also suggests that Momotarō unwittingly stimulates the national feeling of the colonized when he deprives them of their independence. By so doing, he sets in motion a cycle of violence that will eventually lead to the independence of the island. The colonized master the tactics of Momotarō but turn them against him in guerrilla warfare.

On the shores of the lonely island, under the beautiful light of the tropical moon, a group of young ogres were stuffing the coconuts with explosive materials in order to carry out their plan to win the independence for their island. Their eyeballs the size of tea saucers grew bright with happiness as they worked in silence, so committed to their cause that not even the charms of the lovely ogre girls could distract them.<sup>23</sup>

Akutagawa does not end his story with island men stuffing explosives into the hollowed-out shells of the coconuts. Rather, he returns to a description of the mythical peach tree that gives birth to a "genius" like Momotarō only once every ten thousand years. He speculates about other peaches ripening on the branches of this same tree. "In these mountain fastnesses unknown to human beings ...countless other fruits are still ripening and we have no idea how many future geniuses are still sleeping within them."<sup>24</sup> These sinister "geniuses" did not take thousands of years to be born. They were released in the flood of war time picture books, cartoons, *Takarazuka* plays, posters, songs and animation that followed within years of Akutagawa's story. By sounding an alarm regarding these later avatars of Momotarō, Akutagawa warns us

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 166.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 166.

about the misuse of this figure to promote invasions, empire and war. At the same time, his satire shows that a folk tale can be a double-edged sword: serving as a weapon for both the political propagandist and those who wish to lampoon his arguments.

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