

Manano-choja

This story is a tradition in Mie-machi, Oita Prefecture, and shows the origins of Uchiyama Kannon in Mie-machi and the Usuki Stone Buddhas.

About fourteen hundred years ago, in a mountain village in Mie, in the country of Bungo (present Oita Prefecture), there lived a young man named Toji. He had lost his father at the age of three, and his mother at the age of seven, and had become an orphan. He had been taken in and brought up by a charcoal burner, Matagoro, from Tamada of the same village.

Toji trusted Matagoro as his real father, and worked hard helping him make charcoal. But soon after Toji became eleven, Matagoro passed away at the age of eighty one. Toji succeeded his foster father in his job and worked even harder, and he began to be called Kogoro the Charcoal Burner.

At that time, in Nara, the capital of the country, there was an extremely beautiful princess called Princess Tamatsu, daughter of a noble man, Kuga. One day, for some reason, ugly moles had appeared on her beautiful face. Because of the moles, she had not been able to find a husband.

So she visited Miwa Shrine in the country of Yamato every night and prayed to be given a fiance. On the twenty first night, when her offering of prayers was completed, a torrential rain started to fall. It was such a heavy rain that she could not leave the shrine. While she was sheltering in the hall of worship, she fell asleep. In her dream, the god of Miwa appeared.

The god solemnly told her, "Princess, your future husband is in the village of Tamada, in Mie, in Bungo and his name is Kogoro the Charcoal Burner. If you marry him you will be happy for the rest of your life." Then the god left quickly.

Tamatsu woke up, went home quickly and started to prepare for the journey. The next morning, she stole out of the city of Nara by herself, and headed for Mie in Bungo. She was sixteen and it was February. Crossing the fields and mountains, the princess arrived at Mie after a long journey. But it was already dark, and there were no roads worthy of the name. When she was at her wit's end, a white-haired old man appeared in front of her from the dark.

She said to the man, "I'm from the capital and I've come here to visit a man called Kogoro the Charcoal Burner. Do you happen to know him?"

"Oh, I know him well. But it's already dark. You'd better stay at my house tonight. Tomorrow morning I'll take you to him," said the old man and took her to his mansion.

In his garden there were various flowers in full bloom, and beyond the garden stood his large house. The princess was welcomed by many maidservants and was ushered to her room, which was beautifully decorated and glittering with gold and silver. The servants were all very

kind to her. They said, "If you wash your face in the water of the Kinkigafuchi (meaning "golden tortoise's pool") your face will be as beautiful as before.

When she woke up in the morning, she was very surprised to find that the mansion had disappeared and she was lying at the foot of a pine tree on the mountain where she had met the old man the previous night. Beside her, the white-haired man was sleeping. "Well, I overslept a little. Now I'll show you the way to him." The man got up and started to lead her.

A little while later, they came to a poor-looking brushwood hut. "Soon the owner of this hut will come back. Wait here until then," he said. Then his figure suddenly disappeared into the air.

Princess Tamatsu did not have to wait very long in the hut when a young man in rags came back. His face and arms and legs were smudged with black.

"Excuse me, but are you Kogoro the Charcoal Burner?"

"Yes, I'm he, but whoever are you?" Kogoro asked, staring at her.

"Then it was god's guidance that brought me here, and the old man must have been the god," thought the princess. Filled with joy, she explained why she had come to him. "I'm from the capital. I've come to Mie to visit Kogoro, because the god of Miwa in Yamato told me to do so."

Naturally Kogoro was amazed and could not believe her story, so he tried to decline her offer.

"It is such an honor to me, but as you can see, I'm very poor and have no savings. I have great difficulty in supporting myself. It would be impossible to support you."

"I'm well aware that you are poor, but still I want to ask you a favor. Please let me live with you," she begged, her eyes full of tears. Kogoro could not say "No" to her any more, and they started to live together in the hut.

The princess and Kogoro had very little to eat or to wear. Tamatsu had brought some gold with her, so she took some out and said to him. "Please go and buy some food with this." Kogoro looked puzzled, but he left the hut as he was asked to do. A little while later, he came back without any food. Tamatsu was surprised and asked him what had happened.

"Well, I found many ducks on the pond below, so I threw at them the stones you gave me. Oh, it's very difficult to catch them. I missed them all," Kogoro said, and he seemed very sorry.

Tamatsu was astonished that he did not know the value of gold. She said to him, "They are not plain stones. They are called gold and are very precious. With gold, you can buy food, clothes and everything."

Hearing that, Kogoro started to laugh and said, "Those stones! You can find lots of them around my charcoal kiln and around the pond where the ducks live." She was more astonished and asked him to take her there.

The two of them went to the pond. There was lots of gold glittering there. When she was

looking at the pond, a whirl occurred and a golden tortoise came out of the water. It occurred to her that this pond might be the Kinkigafuchi, about which she had been told. She went down to the edge of the pond and washed her face. Suddenly, the ugly moles disappeared and she became so beautiful again that she looked as if she were another person.

Then they gathered the gold around the kiln and the pond, and they became very rich. Because of their wealth, they gradually came to be called Manano-choja or Millionaire of Mana.

After becoming a millionaire, Kogoro became a devoted believer of Buddhism. He donated thirty thousand gold coins to a temple in China, which was called Tendaizan, headquarters of the Tendai sect of Buddhism.

In return for his contribution, Tendaizan sent a Korean priest named Renjo to give him a set of Buddhist images of Yakushi and Kannon. Manano-choja welcomed Renjo and built a temple to venerate the images that Renjo had brought. This is the origin of the Renjo Temple in Uchiyama, Mie-machi, which is also called Uchiyama Kannon.

In the meantime, the millionaire couple had a baby. She was very beautiful, and looked as if she were a heavenly nymph. They named her Princess Hannya. She was said to have been sent by Kannon of Uchiyama. There still remains a tiny image of Kannon at the temple, which was believed to be the guardian of this girl.

As the years went by, the story about beautiful Princess Hannya reached as far as the Emperor's palace. The Crown Prince Toyohi was already sixteen years old, but was not married yet. Emperor Kinmei wanted to have Hannya for his son's wife, so he sent messengers to Mie to ask Manano-choja. He, however, could not agree to this because Princess Hannya had been sent by Kannon of Uchiyama.

When Prince Toyohi heard the result from the imperial messengers, he disguised himself and secretly left the palace to go to Mie. After arriving, he started to work for the millionaire as one of his servants.

The Crown Prince changed his name to Sanro. He worked very hard, doing such jobs as cutting the grass and taking care of the cows. Besides being a hard worker, he was very clever. In time, he had become Manano-choja's favorite. Princess Hannya came to love Sanro. Finally Choja decided to allow Sanro to marry his daughter.

Sanro and Hannya made a good couple. They young couple and Choja were very happy in their new life. One day they had a sudden visit of the imperial messengers. Naturally the millionaire couple and their daughter were very surprised. Sanro was very sorry that he had not told them who he really was.

"Now I have to tell you the truth. I'm Prince Toyohi. My father, the Emperor, wants me back at the palace urgently. I appreciate everything you have done for me."

Choja's family were even more surprised to hear what Sanro had to say. Before leaving them,

the Prince said to Hannya, who was expecting a baby, “Hannya, if the baby is a boy, please come to the palace with him. If it is a girl, leave her to your parents as their successor, and please come to the palace by yourself.”

In time, Princess Hannya had a baby girl. As she had promised the Prince, she left from the port of Usuki to go by herself to the palace. Manano-choja went up a nearby mountain to be able to watch his daughter’s departing ship for as long as possible. This mountain is now called Hime-dake, which means Mt. Princess.

But sadly, her ship was overtaken by a heavy storm. Princess Hannya disappeared into the Sea of Nada, never to return. She was only nineteen years old. The sorrow of Manano-choja and his wife who lost their only daughter was beyond description.

One day, Choja heard from the priest Renjo a story about a wonderful temple in India which was called Gionshoja. He thought, “Our lives are short. I want to build a Gionshoja in Bungo for the repose of Hannya’s sou.”

Wishing to carve Buddhist images on stone walls in Fukata village, Usuki, he first built a temple called Mangetsu-ji. Then they began to carve the images, but the walls were very hard. In addition, sad crying voices of a man and a woman seemed to be heard from the bottom of the walls, and the work did not go well. Then a strange priest appeared from the East. He practiced magic to help carve the images. After that, the work went rapidly.

This was the origin of the famous Buddhist images in Usuki.

Manano-choja passed away at the age of 97 and Princess Tamatsu at the age of 91, it was said. There are tombstones which were believed to be theirs at Uchiyama Kannon, and a pair of statues which were said to be of them near the stone Buddhas.

(Translated by R Simpson and K Wakamatsu)