



Column Kijimun's Monologue - Series of the Oriental Zodiac –

No.8: *Ne* (*Nezumi*=a mouse or a rat)

Keywords: The Oriental Zodiac, *Tō no Kuni*, A cat and a mouse, Ryukyu long-haired rat, 鼠(*Nezumi*)

Haisai&Haitai!! How are you doing? Do you know why the mouse is the first animal with the Oriental Zodiac? In this month, I'm going to introduce a folktale telling us the reason.

With the Oriental Zodiac, a year starts with a mouse. The mouse indicates the true north as a direction, and between 11 p.m. to 1 a.m. as a time. The Chinese character “子” means “a seed,” “increase” and “bear.”

●Why dose a year start with a mouse?

A long, long ago, a God in *Tō no Kuni* thought that he would make twelve animals of twelve gods for every twelve months, and summoned a mouse, then said, “You go and tell to all animals to drop by to give me New Year's greeting on New Year's day. I will make them gods on a first-come-first-served basis.”

The mouse said to a cat to come the day after New Year's day, and to a cow, “You'd better start to walk two or three days before because you walk lately.” Then, the mouse sneakily rode on a cow's back and headed towards the God. On the New Year's day, as soon as a gate of the house of the God opened, the mouse jumped down from the cow's back, and the mouse was the first to arrive. That is why the mouse is the first animal with the Oriental Zodiac.

And now, the cat who had been fooled by the mouse arrived one day late and could not be one of twelve gods. The cat got into a fury towards the mouse. From then, cats chase around mice!



*Image courtesy Ryukyu University Museum, Fajukan

●Where is *Tō no Kuni*?

“*Tō no Kuni*” where the God lives in this folktale is not Tang Dynasty (from 7 to 10 century) in ancient China (*Tō no Kuni* literally means “a country of Tang”,) but it means somewhere like “a paradise”. This expression is popular among the Ryukyuan folk stories and narratives.

●What is Ryukyu long-haired rat (Image ①)?

It is the biggest field rat in Japan, distributed only in the Nansei Islands. It is 20-30 centimeters long, the length of its tail reaches even 25-30 centimeters. It is nocturnal in habit and good tree climber! It is designated as a national natural treasure, but the number of the rat is decreasing due to a land development and other reasons. Unfortunately, it is now named to an endangered species.

●About a Chinese character of 鼠(*Nezumi*)

The Chinese character of 鼠(*Nezumi*) is seen in *Chūzan denshinroku* vol.6, Xu Bao Guang (J., Jo Hokō) (completed in 1721) in Iha Fuyū collection No.018 (6) with Digital Archive of the University of the Ryukyus Library.

