

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

No.11: U (=Usagi) (a rabbit)

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Amami no kuro usagi (Amami rabbit, *Pentalagus furnessi*)

Haisai&Haitai, Kijimun *yaibin!* (Hi, I'm Kijimun!) It has been cold these days, take care not to catch a cold!

In this month, I'm going to talk about "a rabbit" which is the 4th animal of the Oriental Zodiac. The *Kanji* (Chinese character) of "卯" indicates between 5 and 7 a.m., as a direction, it indicates East. This kanji is pronounced as "U" by *Kun-yomi* (Japanese reading of character), but it is pronounced as "Bou" by *On-yomi* (Chinese reading of character), and it shows the condition in which trees and grass grow densely. The *Kanji* of "兔" means an animal, a rabbit.

Well, do you know the famous story of a rabbit and a tortoise? The Okinawan version is a little bit different...

● A rabbit and a tortoise

One day, on a hilltop, a rabbit and a tortoise came to race with each other. The rabbit started hopping with the signal of "Ready, go!" On the other hand, the tortoise began to pull its head and limbs entirely into its shell; then it tumbled down a mountainside. The rabbit struggled for winning, but the rolling tortoise has finally defeated.

The rabbit, the loser said to the tortoise, the winner, "You are "*Mutsu kakushi mono* (*Mutsu* means six, *kakushi* means hide and *mono* means a person)," as you bury all your head, four limbs and the tail in your shell."

It is said that the Japanese word "*Mutsukashii*(=*Muzukashii*) *mono* (= a difficult person)" derived from this word, "*Mutsu kakushi mono*."



In Japan, the story of a rabbit and a tortoise is that a swift-footed rabbit lost its sharpness and was beaten by the tortoise which plugged away for winning. But, in Okinawa, a tortoise gets better of a rabbit in its wisdom.

You can find this Okinawan story in the picture book ①!



② Amami no kuro usagi, designated as a National nature treasure (a stuffed specimen)

● Amami no kuro usagi (Amami rabbit, *Pentalagus furnessi*) (②)

Amami no kuro usagi is an endemic species, there is only this species in the same genus. It is a very rare rabbit. It lives only in Amami Ōshima and Tokunoshima, and it is called "a living fossil."

It is characterized by its blackish brown hair and small ears. Its body length is about the same as a rabbit often kept in an elementary school, but its limbs are shorter than the standard rabbit, and its body is squab. Besides, its forefoot develops better than the ordinary rabbit, so it is good at digging a hole. It is nocturnal in habit.

Until about 2003, its population was counted up to 4,000 in both Amami Ōshima and Tokunoshima. But it has remarkably decreased due to predation by mongooses, dogs, and cats, as well as traffic accidents, and now it is designated as an endangered species.

That's all for this month! In the next month, I will tell you about a "Dragon," don't miss it!