

Published by the Okayama Insider Group
Paper and printing supplied by the Okayama Prefectural International Exchange Foundation
E-mail: OkayamaInsider@hotmail.co.jp

The Many Faces of Momotaro

by Joel Ward

If you are not familiar with the traditional legend of Momotaro and can't find anyone to tell you, read about it or view an animated English version on Okayama prefecture's webpage at <<http://www.pref.okayama.jp>>. (Click the "English" button, then click the picture of Momotaro.)

Visit Okayama and you can't help but notice Momotaro, (sometimes translated as "Peach Boy" or "Peach John") and it's easy to get sick of him. There are several statues of him and his animal companions at Okayama station (picture) and the main street in front of the station, called Momotaro Street, is littered with statues of dogs, pheasants, monkeys and naked boys. You will also find manholes and fire plugs decorated with Momotaro motifs along the way.



Many companies take their name from him and even more name their products after him. Even the Okayama police use a Momotaro-like caricature as their mascot, and the new stadium near Okayama University is called Momotaro Stadium. Okayama's largest festival is the Momotaro Festival, held in August (see p2.)

So what is this fascination for the boy who was "born" from a peach, and why Okayama?

Many Okayama people believe the story of Momotaro is an adaptation of the legend of Ura and Kibitsu-hiko. Kibitsu-hiko was a prince fought with an Ogre called Ura, who is said to have lived in Kinojo Castle in Soja City. Many of the shrines and place-names in the surrounding Kibi area take their name from this story. Kinojo castle literally means "ogre's castle," the river into which the bleeding Ogre fell is called the *Chisuigawa* (river of blood) and the Kibitsu-hiko Shrine is dedicated to the hero. Kagawa Prefecture (on the other side of the Seto Ohashi Bridge) has a slightly different version of the same story in which Kibitsu-hiko has a sister. The island where the ogres were said to have lived is Megi Island, (also known as Onigashima, or Ogre Island) off the coast of Takamatsu.

So why the peach? Well actually in early renditions of the story, the boy was not *found* in the peach, rather the childless couple used peaches as an aphrodisiac and a child was born. His birth was changed when the story was collated for publication.

And that is not the only adaptation Momotaro has made. Once used in Japanese language textbooks, Momotaro was banned from postwar texts because of his involvement in wartime propaganda.

In the Meiji era he represented Japan, being raised by the elderly couple (Britain and the USA) before going overseas to fight (Russia and China.) During the Second World War, President Roosevelt was the king of the Ogres, the pheasant was the Japanese air-force, the monkey the army and the sea-dog the navy.

The communist party also used Momotaro; he represented the bourgeois who took all the glory and rewards without acknowledging his hard-working comrades. Then there was "Peach Girl" in protest at male domination of children's stories. Okayama prefecture's new mascot is the 2005 National Sports Festival mascot Momochi, but now he's accompanied by a dog, a monkey and a pheasant. Clearly there is more to this than just a simple "fairy-tale!"



Momotaro look-alikes: Okayama Police mascot, *Momokun*, (left) and Okayama Prefecture mascot from April 2006, *Momochi* (right.)

For more information visit the "Okayama Momotaro Museum" inside the Akazu Gate of Okayama Castle between 09:00 and 17:00, but do so before September 30th because it's only a temporary display! Adult entry costs ¥200 and guidance is all in Japanese, but the pictures alone show Momotaro changing through the ages. (They even have propaganda posters from WWII!)