

# THE FOUR-EYED DOG<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** *The first domesticated animal, the dog has always held an important role in human culture, the beliefs and traditions associated with its presence being as old as the first dog that started living with humans. The present paper focuses on the symbolism of the dog in Japanese culture from a comparative perspective. Four types of mythical dogs are analyzed here. First, the hellhound (or the watchdog from hell), a legendary creature that has been perceived as dual and thus endowed with special powers that allow it to guard the border between the realm of the living and that of the dead, at the same time acting as a guide for the souls. Second, the four-eyed dog, a motif related to that of the watchdog from hell, due again to its dual characteristic. Third, the spotted dog, an animal of ambiguous color used for rituals and as a sacrifice. Fourth, the ancestor dog, a widespread motif in the world cultures: a human female and a male dog have offspring together, their children becoming heroes or the founders of great tribes.*

**Keywords:** *Four-eyed dog, watchdog, hellhound, Cerberus, spotted dog, Hososhi.*

## 1) The Taboo Dog

Though almost extinct in contemporary culture, until a few decades ago there was a superstition in Japan that four-eyed dogs should not be kept around the house, as they could bring misfortune to their owners. The dog in question is brown, with short hair and a whitish speck on each of its eyebrows, the most popular traditional breed being *Shiba* (bush), thus named because it brings to mind the bushes which have lost their leaves in winter. A similar belief stated that dogs with white paws (called “dogs in white socks”) should not be kept around the house either, while in some regions the taboo dog had a white tail tip. My paper is an attempt to look into the origins of these beliefs by analyzing various Eurasian cultures.

## 2) The Watchdog from Hell

The first record of a four-eyed dog appears in ancient Indo-Iranian culture; it is mentioned in *Rig-Veda*, the ancient Indian sacred text composed about the first millennium BC. Its Book 10, Hymn XIV: *Yama*, 10~11 refers to the four-eyed dog as follows:

10) Run and outspeed the two dogs, Saramā's offspring, brindled, four-eyed, upon thy happy pathway.

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Draw nigh then to the gracious-minded Fathers where they rejoice in company with Yama.

11) And those two dogs of thine, Yama, the watchers, four-eyed, who look on men and guard the pathway,— Entrust this man, O King, to their protection, and with prosperity and health endow him<sup>2</sup>.

*Yama*, son of *Vivasvat*, a solar deity, gave birth to the human race with Yami, his sister, and being the first creature to die, he became King of the Land of the Dead. His watchdog is four-eyed and variegated and guides the dead in the Underworld. This Yama appears as judge of the dead in Buddhist mythology and is called *yemma* in Japanese.

The two dogs mentioned in this English translation are actually a double in the original text; ancient Indo-European nouns had three forms in number: singular, plural and dual. The dual form means not simply two in number, but a multiple of two, such as pair, couple, twin, double, etc. So the four-eyed dogs were not necessarily two separate animals, but possibly one two-headed dog like Cerberus in Greek mythology, or a double entity, or a pair of substance and its shadow, or the original and its alter ego, the intended meaning of the text having been lost across the centuries.

In *Avesta*, the Zoroastrian sacred texts composed several centuries BC, the two dogs stand guard at Cinvad (=Kinvad) Bridge to the other world. The *Widêwdâd* (= *Vendîdâd*), i.e. *Codes for Averting Demons*, 13: 9 explains about the fate of a dead person who killed a sheepdog or a watchdog as follows:

No soul will come and meet his departing soul and help it through the howls and pursuit in the other world; nor will the dogs that keep the Kinvad bridge help his departing soul through the howls and pursuit in the other world<sup>3</sup>.

In Zoroastrian mythology, a dead person is to meet his alter ego, namely the departing soul at Kinvad Bridge, between this World and the other. If he was good in deed, speech, and thought before death, his alter ego will appear in the form of a beautiful girl of fifteen with a fragrant wind blowing from the south. If he was bad, however, it will show up in the form of an ugly woman of old age with a foul wind blowing from the north. The dead have to cross the Bridge over an abyss, which changes its width according to the dead person's behavior and thought.

In the original text the dogs are dual, so they should resemble the four-eyed dogs at the entrance to the Underworld in Rig-Veda. In the *Widêwdâd* 8: 16, Ahura Mazda, the Supreme Deity, being inquired as to how to purify a road polluted by the passage of a human or canine corpse, replies to Zoroaster follows:

You shall therefore cause the yellow dog with four eyes, or the white dog with yellow ears, to go three times through that way<sup>4</sup>.

In the original text, the singular form of the noun “dog” is used, most likely because it indicates the animal that was actually used during the ritual. This suggests that “dual” does not represent two dogs, but a symbolic concept. As

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<sup>2</sup> Griffith, Ralph T.H. (trans.) *The Rig-Veda*, 2nd ed., Benares : Lazarus, 1897.

<sup>3</sup> Darmesteter, J. (trans.) *The Vendîdâd* (The Sacred Books of the East; vol. 4. *The Zend-Avesta*; pt. 1) Oxford; Clarendon Press, 1880.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

mentioned above, the dog that was dragged along a polluted road was either yellow or white with yellow ears (although a combination of the two characteristics was sometimes encountered as well). In Zoroastrianism death represents the utter form of pollution, so contact with it must be avoided at all costs. Should such contamination happen, a cleansing ritual must be performed by allowing a four-eyed dog to run along the road polluted by death, a ritual clearly originating in the legend that the dead were guided by a dog on their way to the Underworld.

There is also evidence that the legend of the four-eyed dog was transmitted to the Western territories of China. *The Sutra of the Ten Kings of Hell*, excavated at Dunhuang and currently stored at the British Museum, contains a picture of the gateposts of Hell guarded by a dog in a squatting position. While most Buddhist texts were translated from the Indian original, this sutra was composed originally in Chinese, explaining a theory that appears in syncretic Buddhism, namely that a dead person is to be judged ten times by ten different kings in the Underworld. This, as well as the *Ullambana Sutra*, shows clear influences of Iranian culture. Some argue that the image in question actually depicts a prison house in ancient China, where dog statues were placed at the gatepost. Not matter which interpretation we choose, the relationship with the four-eyed dog mentioned in *Rig-Veda* is obvious. The Chinese character used in the word “prison”, 獄, has two components that mean “dog” (犭 and 犬), suggesting that two dogs are guarding prisons in the real world and dead souls in the imaginary Underworld. Dr. Shizuka Shirakawa insists that the components meaning “dog” represent sacrificial dogs, but he does not offer any interpretation as to why there are two. The time difference between the age when the Chinese characters were created and the age when the sutra was written does not come into question. As I shall argue later, the beliefs and folklore tradition concerning the dog began in ancient times and continued to exist despite partial changes brought about by the development of society.

### 3) The Four-Eyed Dog

Our next question addresses the symbolism of the four eyes. In East Asia there is a character named Hōsōshi (Fangxiang in Chinese), who wears a four-eyed mask and performs the *tsuina* ritual during *Setsubun* at shrines all over Japan. For example, the *Winter Scroll* of a manuscript called *Tōsa Saijiki* mentions that during the *tsuina* ritual from Kameido Tenmangū Shrine, two demons appeared, one red and one blue, both having two horns and four eyes. Images that support the text have also been preserved. In pre-war Korea, Hōsōshi wearing a round mask with four eyes used to lead funeral processions.

Hōsōshi is also mentioned in Chinese records such as *Zhouguan* (*The Rites of Zhou*) or *Sima Zhengguan*, as a character who wears a bearskin on his head, a mask with four golden eyes, a black cape and red belt, holding a cane and leading a procession of one hundred retainers. He is depicted as the person who performs purification rituals at Court at the end of the year, in order to ward off evil spirits. Moreover, during an imperial funeral, he would walk ahead of the coffin and purify the grave. Regarding the actual aspect of the mask with four golden eyes,

written information is not enough to give us a clear idea of how it actually looked like. Kobayashi Shitarō<sup>5</sup> refers to a wall painting from the Wu Liang Shrine constructed in the Han Dynasty and to a Hōsōshi statue kept in the Cernuschi Museum from Paris: in both cases, the mask worn by Hōsōshi covers his head entirely, back and front. Moreover, in 1968, a bronze figure wearing a gilt mask was discovered at Sanxingdui, while in 2001 at the Jinsha site from Chengdu a golden mask was dug up, thus proving the fact that such objects existed and were used in ancient China. Also, in 1989, in Xing'an a bronze head representing a Janus type figure was discovered; the figure, dated back to the Yin Dynasty, is about fifty centimeters tall, with masks on both sides of the head, and is now on display at Jiangxi Museum.

In China, the use of Hōsōshi in purification rituals was interrupted before the Tang Dynasty, while in Japan we do not have explicit information regarding the actual performance of funeral rites. According to the *Code of Taihō, Funeral Code No. 26*, members of the Imperial Family (First Rank) had the privilege of a Hōsō Hearse, in other words, a procession where Hōsōshi would walk ahead the coffin; however, it is unclear what kind of character Hōsōshi really was. We can assume that his traits had been borrowed from Chinese traditions; however, since there is an informational gap in Japanese history between Heian Era and the period preceding it, the original form of Hōsōshi may have been lost and only the characteristics described above remain. Nevertheless, since the four-eyed dog appears in the Underworld, we can assume that a similarly abstract tradition of a four-eyed presence during funerals existed as well. In 2006, a two-faced clay figure was excavated from a burial mound in Iwase, Wakayama Prefecture.

The two faces (or two heads) are a symbol of the border between worlds. In this respect, the most famous image is Janus from Roman mythology. Janus was the guardian deity of doors, as well as the god of the beginning and end of the year, being depicted with two faces (one on the back of his head). In ancient Greece, a pillar named Herma was erected at crossroads, as a symbol of the separation between worlds; on top of a pillar there was usually a bust of Hermes, in many cases two-faced as well. The examples of such deities guarding the borders could go on and on; in Japan, there is the boundary god, Sai no Kami. The word *sai* is actually a euphony of *saki* (edge), and has the same root as the words *saka* (slope) and *sakai* (border), thus indicating a frontier between realms, but its symbol often takes the form of its subject. Sometimes, there is more than one subject, in which case the subjects tend to connect to each other, the result being called *gattai-butsumi*, a unified deity who is, like Janus, a symbol of the border between worlds. Similar examples date from the Paleolithic, as in the case of the stone relief discovered at Laussel in France, which depicts a woman giving birth. The body of the woman and that of the child have the same size, thus suggesting a dual body.

Double-headed or double-faced images that guard the borders are not unusual, but nowadays they tend to appear less frequently in rituals. One of the few examples is that of Bobo (the Idiot), who appears during the *Muskilda*, a

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<sup>5</sup> Kobayashi, pp.117-204.

festival held in September allegedly for Holy Mary, in Ochagavía, northeast Spain. Not much research has been done on this particular festival, but its origins date back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century and it includes many pre-Christian elements. Bobo wears a two-faced cloth masked and is wrapped in a garment with red and green dots, clearly suggesting the buffoon who stands between realms. In Japan, we encounter similar characters within *Shiromi Kagura*, a tradition that has preserved ancient elements of Japanese culture: during the last part of the ritual, called *Kami-okuri* (sending back the gods), three dancers wearing double-faced masks appear on stage, to send the visiting gods back to the realm where they came from.

In the Romanian village Nereju<sup>6</sup>, where the sociologist H.H. Stahl conducted fieldwork in the 1920's, many elements of pre-Christian culture are still preserved. During wakes, men wearing masks and dressed in animal skins (called "unchieși") make an appearance and dance around a bonfire, and the leader holds a cane with a Janus-like figure attached to the top. These masked men appear without fail, be it at the turning point represented by the death of an individual, or at the turn of years.

According to Nagao Ryūzō<sup>7</sup>, in pre-war China pregnant women were called "four-eyed creatures", "four-eyed women" or "four-eyed bodies", and their gazes were avoided. "Four-eyed" did not mean that a pregnant woman actually had four eyes; rather, it referred to the fact that, by having a fetus inside her womb, the woman becomes a dual creature who, until separated by the child through birth, lived at the boundary between worlds. It is my opinion that the expression "four-eyed" indicated the true nature of something.

#### 4) The Spotted Dog

In *Rig-Veda*, the guardian dog from hell is described as having spots. The original word for that is *śabāla*, also spelled *śavāla*, which means "of various colors". A variant (or synonym) for it would be *kavara* or *kabara*, a word that applies to the dog guarding Hades in Greek mythology, Cerberus (Kérberos). Cerberus watches the shores of the River Styx, to prevent the souls of the departed from escaping or the living from intruding upon the world of the dead. It is generally depicted as having three heads, the tail of a dragon and numerous snakes on his back, but there are also records of Cerberus having only two heads.

In the Louvre Museum in Paris there is an amphora painted by Andokides (530-520 BC) known as "Herakles and Cerberus" (F204), where Hercules drags a two-headed Cerberus in front of the goddess Athena. On the other hand, an image by Eagle-painter (510 BC, E701) depicts Hercules with a dog having one white, one red and one black head.

Whether we talk about spots or stripes, the two colors are not precisely known; rather, the idea is that the color of the body and that of the extremities are different. There are many examples where spotted or striped creatures are found between two worlds. Many of the animals that appear in cave paintings

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<sup>6</sup> Fieldwork conducted in September 2011.

<sup>7</sup> *Shina Minzoku Shi* pp. 276-277.

dating from the Stone Age are spotted, while such patterns were used to designate the court buffoon, the circus clown or prisoners, namely, people who were taboo. The episode from Japanese myth where the god Susano-wo kills a spotted horse (ame-no-fuchi-koma) suggests more than the simple slaying of a horse: it is actually one of the examples indicating that the objects of sacrifice were always characterized by a special color. In contemporary Japanese, the term *busshoku* (*wuse*) simply indicates the search for something of a special color, but originally it was used to designate the color of sacrificial animals, which needed to be of a particular color in order to be deemed suitable for sacrifice.

The word *fuchi* (“spotted”) itself means “multicolored”, to be more precise, something whose color is impossible to distinguish. In his book *The Golden Ass*, Apuleius thus describes Anubis, the dog/jackal-headed God of the Underworld in Ancient Egypt:

Immediately behind marched gods who deigned to advance on human feet. Here was Anubis, the awesome go-between of gods above and subterranean dwellers; with face part-black, part-golden, tall and holding his dog’s neck high, he carried a herald’s staff in his left hand, and brandished a green palm-branch in his right<sup>8</sup>.

The part translated here as “part-black, part-golden” appears in the original as “nunc atra, nunc aurea”, which in a more precise translation does not indicate a distinction between black and gold, but rather the fact that the god’s face was now black, now golden, or, in other words, iridescent.

In *Rig-Veda*, the four-eyed dog was called Śabála or Śyāma; as we have already indicated, Śabála means “spotted” or “multicolored”, while Śyāma is generally translated as “black”. However, if we analyze this word and the usage of words related to it, we can come to the conclusion that we cannot talk about a certain distinct color, but rather about a dull, indefinite shade. The situation becomes more complicated when we refer to *Avesta*, where the term “golden” (*zairi*, the origin of the Indo-European *ghel*—to shine) appears. Nonetheless, since no golden dogs actually existed, we can safely assume that the term indicated a shade of brown, similar to the Japanese word *ki-iro* (“yellow” in contemporary language, but actually referring to the color of tree bark), an assumption supported by the existence of the “red” (actually brown) dog concept in Japanese tradition. When we look at various linguistic and cultural examples, we encounter numerous terms, yet if we consider the ambiguity of the colors of Anubis’ face (black, gold, iridescent), or the later Mongol legend about the ancestor who climbed on moonlight and who was a pale gold color, we may infer that the Watchdog from Hell also shone in more than one shade. Moreover, considering the symbolism of the color yellow, the color of shadows, of the ruler of the Underworld, of the ceremonial clothes, of the gate to the Underworld and so on, it becomes clear that the importance assigned to the color yellow is neither arbitrary, nor coincidental.

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<sup>8</sup> Apuleius 20:20, trans. by Walsh.

## 5) The Dog as Ancestor

Within Zoroastrianism, the funeral ceremony implied taking the bodies to the top of a mountain and placing them in a specially designed place called “The Tower of Silence” (Dakhma), where they were left as food for the vultures. However, there are records that the practice preceding this was to have the corpses devoured by dogs. In the sacred book *Avesta* (8:2) it is mentioned that the dead bodies were stripped of their clothes and left on an elevated place, to be eaten by dogs and birds. There remains the tradition in Zoroastrianism to have a dog ritually look at a corpse (*Sag-dī d*=Dog’s Stare), most likely a trace of the ancient practices when dogs actually ate the bodies of the deceased. Thus, the Hellhound, whether it was a watchdog in the other world, or whether it fulfilled the role of guide to the other realm, was ad literam an animal that dealt with death. Its having two bodies or two heads was more than a mere suggestion of its existence at the border between worlds; it also indicates that it was a harbinger of both life and death. In *Rig-Veda*, Yama was the King of the Underworld, but at the same time, he was the creator of the human race, together with his wife Yami, while Yama’s hellhounds were the object of prayers for rebirth.

Dark-hued, insatiate, with distended nostrils, Yama's two envoys roam among the People; May they restore to us a fair existence here and to-day, that we may see the sunlight<sup>9</sup>.

In Norse mythology, Odin, the god of the dead, was always accompanied by two wolves, Geri and Freki, and he was also the ancestor of the human race. Diana, the goddess of the forest in Roman mythology, is described by Apuleius as always in the company of two dogs, and she was also the goddess of fertility. Similarly, the Greek goddesses Artemis and Hekate are often seen as two representations of the same divinity, embodying life and death at the same time.

Cyrus the Great, whom tradition names as the ancestor of the Iranian people, had a close encounter with death as a child and escaped thanks to the wits of one of his followers, being afterwards raised by the wife of a shepherd. Herodotus writes that the name of this woman was Spako (meaning “dog), which brings to mind the legend of the founders of Rome, brought up not by a dog, but by a wolf. Of course, in the case of Cyrus, history and legend intermingle, yet if we were to see this as a myth, we could view the dog as the actual birth mother of the hero.

*The Story of Panpiao* (one of the stories within the story recorded in *The Chronicles of the Eight Dog Heroes of the Satomi Clan of Nansō* by Kyokutei Bakin) relates how a Dog of Shadows receives a human princess as a reward for avenging the death of a general. The origin of this tale can be found in the *Book of the Latter Han*, where the dog is described as having “five-color hairs”, another example of colors not being indicated precisely, but rather mixed together and left at a certain level of ambiguity.

*The Story of Panpiao* can also be seen as an origin legend for the Yao ethnic group, a similar story having been recorded in *Special License of Yao Issued by*

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<sup>9</sup> *Rig-Veda*, Book 10, Hymn XIV: 12, transl. by Ralph Th. E. Griffith.

*the Chinese Emperor*<sup>10</sup>, a 13<sup>th</sup> century chronicle of the Yao, an ethnic minority living in Thailand. The dog in the above-mentioned story also receives a human princess as a wife, his reward for helping another human with his vengeance, and together they have six sons and six daughters. These twelve children become the ancestors of the twelve Yao clans, while the dog is described as the “spotted Dragon-Dog”, an association of terms that indicates a relationship with a water beast. We shall see later that in the Uriankhai tradition, the ancestor dog appears from water. Also, in *Avesta* (13: 51), the spirit of the dead dog reveals itself thus:

It passes to the spring the waters, Spitama Zarathustra! and there out of every thousand dogs and every thousand she-dogs, two water dogs are formed, a water dog and a water she-dog. (trans. by Darmesteter)

In other words, after it died, the dog was reborn as a water-dog, the origin of the word being *udra-*/ otter, implying that the dog visits from the realm of water. Further proof, in a 9<sup>th</sup> century Persian encyclopedia, *The Book of Creation*, the otter is listed together with the shepherd dog and the watchdog among the six kinds of dogs<sup>11</sup>.

The motif of the marriage between a woman and a dog appears in Japanese tradition as well. Hata Awakimaru, a writer from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, writes in his book *Ezotō Kikan (A Splendid View of the Ezo Island)* about a princess who drifts upon a deserted island, where she encounters a male dog who brings her food. The dog and the princess live together in cave on the island and after a while, the princess gives birth to a baby boy who becomes the ancestor of the Ainu. However, it is unclear whether this legend was spread among the Ainu population, but in the old times the word *Ainu* was seen as including the word “dog” (*inu*), and thus the Ainu were regarded as the children of the dog. Unfortunately, although we have proof related to the existence of such a legend in Japanese culture, the color of the dog is unknown.

Similar legends that point to the fact that the ancestor dog was of a spotted golden color, and a four-eyed beast can be found in India and Iran. In the first chapter of *The Secret History of the Mongols*, the king’s widow Alan Qo’a gives birth to three children after her husband’s death. When the children demand to know the truth regarding their conception, she tells them the following story:

Every night, a bright yellow man entered by the light of the hole at the top or [by that] of the door top of the tent and rubbed my belly. His light was wont to sink into my belly. When he went out, like a yellow dog he was wont to crawl out by the beams of the sun or moon<sup>12</sup>.

The children are convinced by her story and they become the ancestors of the three Mongol clans. This chapter is recorded in an ancient language, a fact which indicates that the legend is even older than the legend of the Blue Wolf. Vernadsky suggests that Alan Qo’a (Alan the Beautiful) is a name originating in the old name for the Ossetians, an Iranian ethnic group. The Ossetians can

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<sup>10</sup> Yao Documents, pp. 14-16.

<sup>11</sup> *Bundahišnī, The Book of Creation* (14: 19).

<sup>12</sup> Cleaves, Francis Woodman (trans.) *The Secret History of the Mongols; For the First Time Done into English out of the Original Tongue and Provided with an Exegetical Commentary*, 1. (Trans., Harvard-Yenching Institute.) Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982.

currently be found in the northern part of Caucasia, under the names of Iron and Digor, and are considered to be descendants of a Scythian group that moved around central Asia.

The ancestor dog also appears in a legend of the Uriankhai (a Tungus ethnic group) recorded by Imanishi Ryū in pre-war Korea. A girl goes to do laundry at the river and is frightened by the sudden appearance of a dog from the water, losing consciousness. When she comes to her senses, she finds the corpse of a big dog by her side. She thinks it was fate and buries the dog's body, but after a while she gives birth to a child whose head was covered in golden dog hair.

Tales and legends of the "Girl Who Married a Dog" type appear in various cultures, and the tradition that indicates the dog as the ancestor of a human tribe is spread all over Eurasia; moreover, we have enough proof to establish significant similarities between the dogs in these stories. These elements are too important to dismiss as mere coincidences, and traces can still be found in Japanese tradition: the custom of wrapping a pregnant woman's waist with a special girdle on her fifth month of pregnancy, on the day of the Dog (*iwata-obi*), the dog-shaped amulets that ensure a safe birth and many others.

## **6) The Dwelling of the Four-Eyed Dog**

The dog was the first domesticated animal and the folklore surrounding this animal is as old as the first dog that started living with humans. Proof can be found in the fact that the words for "dog", for example, *k'uan* or *kug* in Chinese, *ke* in Korean, *ko-* in the Fino-Ugric languages, *kwon-/kun-* in Indo-European, *köpek* in Turkish, *kalb* in Semitic languages, all seem to have a common root. However, the traditions related to the four-eyed dog taboo and the watchdog guarding the river between worlds have only recently been discovered on the New Continent.

The discoveries in the field of genetics have shed new light on the history of humankind. In 2002, Savoleinen asserts that the dog had been domesticated in East Asia. In 2010, however, von Holdt states that the origin of the domestic dog is actually West Asia. The oldest dog remains were discovered in 1978, in a cave in Ein Mallaha, Israel: the 12,000 year-old bones of a dog that had been buried together with an old woman, which suggests that the legend of the ancestor dog and the woman may be a representation of the ritual burial of a "red" dog with a shaman woman.

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