

# Japan's Mermaids

by Michael A. Souza



"...tucked between a gas station and a nondescript office building."

Fukuoka, Japan, is a pleasant seaside city that sits on the northern end of Kyushu, the last large island of the Japanese archipelago before it begins to trail off into the smaller Ryuku island chain. Kyushu is full of interesting places to visit. Only an hour and a half by train to the west of Fukuoka is Nagasaki, where the atomic bomb "Fat Man" was dropped in the latter days of World War II. Going south from Fukuoka leads to the city of Kumamoto, where the

great Japanese swordsman Miyamoto Musashi lived for some time and where he wrote the now classic *Book of Five Rings*. Near the center of Kyushu island is Mount Aso, an active volcano that is one of the most beautiful mountains in Japan. These reasons alone are more than enough for one to add Kyushu to any itinerary of Japan, but there is another attraction that is often overlooked. In the heart of Fukuoka is a small, inconspicuous temple.

I have visited the Temple of the Mermaid on three separate occasions, and each time I have been there I learned a little more about the connection between Fukuoka and mermaids, which, according to some residents, may still live in the waters of the Korean Strait that separates Japan and Korea.

## The Mermaid Temple

My first encounter with the Mermaid Temple, more properly called Ryuguji Temple, came in 1999 when I visited Fukuoka in order to renew my Korean work visa. I live and work in Korea, and, like many other expatriates, must occasionally go to Japan to renew my visa, which must be done at a Korean consulate abroad. Japan is only an hour or so by air, so many foreign workers who live in Korea go to Japan regularly for visas or just whenever they have a long weekend.

I had been in Fukuoka for a couple of days, and, having completed my business with the Korean Consulate, decided to see the city. Fukuoka is a fairly small city and very easy to navigate. With a good public transportation system, almost any part of the city is accessible by bus, subway, or just one's own feet. I decided to visit Tochoji Temple, home to a beautifully carved wooden image of Kannon, the goddess of mercy, and the largest wooden statue in

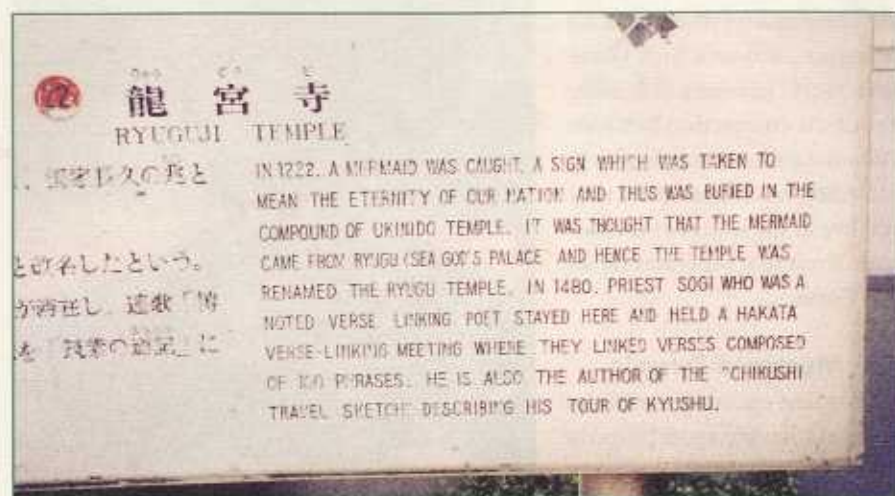


The Mermaid Temple in Fukuoka.

Japan. Tochoji Temple is just outside the Gion subway station, one stop from Kyushu train station. It was a beautiful day, and as I sat on the steps of the temple and looked across the street, I noticed another, smaller temple about the size of a one-car garage tucked between a gas station and a medium-sized, nondescript office building. There was a little white signboard in the front, so I decided to go see what this little building was all about.

The signboard was in both Japanese





The sign on the Mermaid Temple.

and English, and this is what the English part read: "In 1222, a mermaid was caught, a sign which was taken to mean the eternity of our nation, and thus was buried in the compound of Ukinido Temple. It was thought that the mermaid came from Ryugu (Sea God's Palace) and hence the temple was renamed the Ryugu Temple. In 1480, Priest Sogi, who was a noted verse linking poet, stayed here and held a Hakata verse linking meeting where they linked verses composed of 100 phrases. He is also the author of the 'Chikushi Travel Sketch' describing his tour of Kyushu."

### The Mysterious Box

I had a hard time believing what I had read and approached the temple to see if it was open. It was locked, but I could see inside through the wooden window slats.

The temple was very plain, except for several small wall hangings of female mermaids. The women were painted in the typical mermaid genre; the upper half was that of a young maiden with long, flowing black hair, while the lower half was that of a fish. Against the back wall of the temple was an altar with a locked wooden box about the size of a small file cabinet. There were no attendants. I stood there for a while with my curiosity piqued and finally went back to my hotel.

I didn't think too much more about the temple, or mermaids for that matter, for about eight months. Then, with a five-day weekend approaching, I decided to visit Japan again, and I planned to go to Nagasaki, taking the train from Fukuoka. I had some time before my train left, so, rather than sit in the train station, I de-

cided to walk back to my new favorite attraction, the Temple of the Mermaid.

The walk from the train station took about 15 minutes. As I approached the temple I noticed quite a commotion in the vicinity. Because of the office building next door, I assumed that it was a group of office workers either going to or returning from lunch, but as I approached, it became apparent that the commotion was coming from the little temple itself. The Mermaid Temple was open, and there was a crowd easily in excess of 100 people milling about in front of it. There were so many people that they were blocking the entrance to the gas station and the sidewalk as well. I noticed that some people were going into the temple, so I decided to follow.

Imagine packing 60 or 70 people into an average-sized bedroom—that's what it was like inside the temple. The first thing that I noticed were the walls. Where once before there had been only three small mermaid paintings, there were now dozens. Most seemed to have been drawn and colored by schoolchildren, but a few looked like they had been done by professional artists. There were paintings and pen-and-ink drawings, as well as Japanese brush calligraphy. The crowd, as thick as it was, was slowly working its way



Mermaid bones?

to the front of the temple where the altar with the wooden box had been. I moved along with the crowd, and when I was finally able to get to the front I saw why there had been such a big commotion. The wooden box on the altar was open.

### Mermaid Bones

There appeared to be six bones inside the box. Three looked rather small, similar to those of a medium-sized dog, while the other three were larger, like femurs.



One long bone was quite big. I took out my camera and was able to squeeze off a picture before being pushed out of the way by the swell of people. I turned and walked outside.

"Where are you from?" I heard someone ask me. I turned around to see a young man in his 20s.

"From California," I replied, "but now I live in Korea."

He smiled at me and pointed to the temple. "Did you come for the festival?" he inquired. I had to admit to him that I had just decided to visit the temple by accident because I had time to spare before my train to Nagasaki.

"You're very lucky," he said. "These bones are not taken out too often. Today is a very special day. Several representatives of the temple will be traveling to different countries with the mermaid bones, to share them with the world." He seemed sincere, and his English was pretty good, so we shared a can of coffee from the vending machine in front of the temple and I asked him a bit more about the bones. As it turned out, he was one of the people who would be traveling with the mermaid bones.

### The Captured Mermaid

When I asked him what he thought the bones were, he responded that they were from a mermaid. He said that according to the legend, a mermaid was accidentally caught by fishermen and appeared to be injured. The fishermen brought the

creature to this temple, then just an ordinary shrine, where it died. It was buried on this spot and the name of the temple was changed to "The Temple of the Sea-God." My informant said that most of the mermaid's remains had been lost over the years, especially during the war, when no one placed much emphasis on the security of a few "fish bones."

We chatted for a while longer, and I went to catch my train. I thought about the bones and the story and concluded that the bones were probably from a dog or a cat, and the story was fodder for a gullible foreigner.

About a year later I found myself planning a return trip to Kyushu, this time to visit the cave where the famous swordsman Musashi lived for several years in seclusion and wrote the *Book of Five Rings*. The cave, as well as many other Musashi-related sights, is in Kumamoto, in central Kyushu. Again I ended up in Fukuoka, again I found myself waiting for the train, and again I decided to visit the "Temple of the Little Mermaid," as I now called it.

This time there were no throngs of people. The temple was as I remembered it the first time; quiet and all locked up. I went up to the wooden doors and peered inside. This time the walls were bare: no pictures, no paintings, no calligraphy, nothing. I walked back out to the front of the temple to the coffee machine and got a cup of coffee.

As I sat next to the gas station drink-



Painted mermaid hanging in the temple.

ing my coffee, I noticed a pair of shoes in front of me. These shoes were attached to a pair of legs, which were attached to a man. He appeared to be in his 70s and he looked down at me. "Hello," he said in a hoarse voice. "The temple is closed today." He smiled. I introduced myself and told him how this temple was one of my favorite places to visit in Japan. Though it was small and simple, I felt an affinity to it.

He bought himself a coffee and asked, "Do you believe that a mermaid is buried here?" I told him that I did not know what to believe. As he drank his coffee, he shared a story that impressed me more than the bones I had seen on my last visit to the temple.

### Nakamura's Tale

He said that his name was Saburo Nakamura, and when he was a young man he worked odd jobs on fishing boats that trawled the waters off Fukuoka. He said that sometimes the boats would go far out into the straits of Korea to fish, and on several occasions he saw mermaids. One had even gotten tangled up in a fishing net and died because the fishermen were too afraid to go near it to cut it loose.

As he spoke, I smiled politely and rather naively asked him, "Are you sure that it just wasn't some kind of large, deformed fish?"

He looked a little taken aback and said "No." He told me how his family had



grown up on the water. Many years ago, Fukuoka was a small fishing community where people knew all the varieties of fish and sea life in the waters off their town. He acted a bit slighted, as if I had insulted him a bit, and asked me, "Could you confuse a rabbit and a dog at two meters on a clear day?"

"No, I couldn't," I sheepishly responded. He went on to say that the mermaids that he saw did not look anything at all like a half woman-half fish. He said that they were about the size of a small person, a little over a meter and a half, with faces that resembled sheep more than human beings. He said that the only thing about them that had any real resemblance to humans was the fact that they had arms with fully developed hands. He said that if it weren't for the arms, no one would have considered the creatures part human.

According to Nakamura, they were hairless and made "noises like birds" when they inhaled. At this point I began to think of P. T. Barnum's Feejee Mermaid hoax and asked him about the lower portion of the animal, wondering if it, like Barnum's creation, would be scaly and trout-like. His answer was quite interesting. He said that, in fact, it did not have a fish fin; it only appeared that it did because the creature swam with both legs held tightly together. He remembered the creature to have had

two distinct "legs" and said that it could part its legs to defecate, and, presumably, to reveal its sex organs, which he said were not visible directly. Nakamura was adamant that the creature did not have actual fins, though it used its legs like fins when they were pressed together.

He said that the creature was reddish in color. I was intrigued by his description of its legs, so I pressed him on this detail.

"If the mermaids had legs, then did they ever come onto dry land?"

**...the creature did not have actual fins, though it used its legs like fins when they were pressed together.**

Nakamura said no, that the legs were not "strong legs" like those of humans, but rather thin and crooked, adapted for making the motions necessary for swimming but not for walking. He added that the creature that he saw on the boat in the fishing net was unable to stand up, not because of being badly tangled in the net, but because its legs "weren't made for that."

I didn't know what to say at this point, and I guess my befuddlement showed on my face. Nakamura asked if I wanted another coffee. I said no and told him that I had to go catch my train.

### "Too Noisy and Smelly"

As I got up to leave, I asked him why there have not been any reports of mermaids or any other strange sea creatures in the news these days. He told me, quite matter of factly, that there still are mermaids

in the waters of the straits of Korea, but that they don't go near big boats.

"Too noisy and smelly," he said. There are a few small islands between Japan and Korea, and he said that local fishermen, who go out to these islands in small boats to fish for weeks at a time, still sometimes report seeing these creatures in the water.

I wished Nakamura a good day and went back to the train station where I thought about the things he had told me. Was it the truth or a fish tale? All I can be sure of is that there is an actual temple for a mermaid in downtown Fukuoka, that I saw some strange-looking bones, and that I talked to two people, on two different occasions, who firmly believed in the existence of mermaids—one of whom claims to have seen them himself.

Over the months that followed, as I thought about the "Mermaids of Japan," these are the conclusions that I came to. The Ryuguji, or Sea God's Temple, may also benefit from another name—the temple of cryptozoology. It is possible that within the confines of this little wooden building are the physical remains of an as yet unidentified sea creature.

From the description given to me by Saburo Nakamura, the mermaid seems to be more of a mammal than a fish and seems to live primarily in the fairly calm, relatively shallow waters that separate Korea and Japan where it would have an abundant supply of food. The animal has arms, but does not have a rear fin; rather

it has leg-like appendages that have evolved more for swimming than for walking. As a result, the creature cannot support its own weight out of the water. The "bird-like" noises that it made when it was brought aboard the fishing ship may have been gasps, suggesting that it cannot breathe air directly; or it may have been able to breathe air directly and the sounds were in no way related to its breathing. And finally, the creature's aversion to modern ships may be the result of a hypersensitivity to the sound of combustion motors in the water or an aversion to the smell of the fuels used by larger fishing vessels.

### No Doubts

It is interesting to note that the doubts about the existence of the mermaid creature came from me, a person with no connection to fishing or the sea. Nakamura, who had grown up on the sea, had no doubts about what the creature was. It was the same animal that is buried in the Ryuguji Temple, the same animal that may still be living in the waters that run between Japan and Korea.

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# Strange Universe

## Mermaids and the Fashions of Belief

There is a modern mythology that holds sway over those who research and investigate strange phenomena. There are certain subjects that have been deemed acceptable while others are given the cold shoulder.

Bigfoot, alien abductions, telekinesis, lake monsters, ghosts... There are only so many topics that those who claim to study the unexplained are willing to let into their belief systems.

Time has shown that these beliefs come and go—that they are fashions. Their stock rises and falls as we learn more about their origin and growth. In the 18th and 19th centuries, there was a widespread belief in mermaids and mermen. Today, mermaids are out. Way out. At least in the West. Some years ago I wrote about a southeast Asian mermaid sighting that was taken completely seriously by the populace. Mermaid belief is very strong in Asia, particularly along the coasts. Many people in Hong Kong believe in mermaids as fervently as many Americans believe in Bigfoot. In fact, there are serious sightings of mermaids that predate recorded Bigfoot sightings, and with a lesser degree of ambiguity than the early recorded Bigfoot accounts.

Horace Beck, in his excellent volume *Folklore and the Sea* (Mystic Seaport Mu-

seum: Mystic, Connecticut, 1985), suggests that most rational people today, particularly scientists, hold the belief that “there are no such creatures [as mermaids] and those who attest to having seen them are either mad or liars.” Beck, an expert in mermaid folklore, feels that the belief that all mermaid accounts are the result of lies and insanity may be a convenient attitude but that it “hardly jibes with the facts, for many people of considerable stature, including Henry Hudson and several bishops, have reported seeing merfolk.”

## Sightings by Credible Witnesses

Beck wonders what we are to make of the provincial governor who housed what he called a “sea-wyfe,” which was described in some detail. The governor wrote that his unusual house guest stayed in a tub of water for four days, seven hours. She was 59 inches long, cried like a mouse, refused shellfish, and had excrement like a cat.

The Henry Hudson case that Beck mentions occurred during the great explorer's attempt to find a northern passage to the East Indies. On June 15, 1608, Hudson recorded in his log that two of his company, Thomas Hill and Robert Raynor, said that they had seen a mermaid: “From the Navill upward, her backe and breasts were like a womans. . . her skin was very white;

and long haire hanging down behinde, of colour blacke; in her going downe they saw her tayle, which was like the tayle of a Porposse, and speckled like a Macrell.”

On September 8, 1809, William Munro, a schoolmaster in Caithness, wrote a most unusual letter to *The Times* of London, England, stating that 12 years earlier he had been walking along a Sandside Bay shore when he saw what he first thought was a naked woman sitting on a rock and combing her light brown hair. After a few minutes it dropped into the sea and swam away into waters considered too dangerous for any normal person to swim in.

In Munro's letter to *The Times*, he wrote that, “It may be necessary to remark, that previous to the period I beheld this object, I had heard it frequently reported by several persons, and some of them persons whose veracity I have never disputed, that they had seen such a phenomenon as I have described, though then, like many others, I was not disposed to credit their testimony on the subject. I can say of a truth, that it was only by seeing this phenomenon, I was perfectly convinced of its existence. If the above narrative can in any degree be subservient towards establishing the existence of a phenomenon hitherto almost incredible to naturalists, or to remove the skepticism of others, who are ready to dispute everything which they cannot fully comprehend, you are welcome to

[it]. Your most obliged, and most humble servant, William Munro.”

## Of Seals and Strangeness

Horace Beck notes that a “very popular theory is that the mermaid is a poorly identified seal. This is credible when we consider that seals do have breasts and reasonably human faces, live in both warm and cold water and in many ways resemble the picture-book mermaid.

“Furthermore,” Beck continues, “in relatively recent times mermaid stories were told almost interchangeably about seals.” The downside of the seal theory is that it does not satisfactorily explain mermaid cases in which the entity was seen at very close range. Also, mermaid sightings have been most common among fishermen in northern locales, and these men live close to thousands of seals. Since seals are a normal part of their daily lives, it would be highly unlikely that weather conditions or too much to drink would cause these old salts to mistake a seal for a mermaid at close range.

For example, in one undated case on the Isle of Man, it was reported that a crew affirmed that they had found a mermaid in their herring net: “On examining their captive, by the largeness of her breasts and the beauty of her complexion, it was found to be female, nothing...could be more lovely, more exactly

Mark Chorvinsky





formed, in all parts above the waist resembling a complete young woman, but below that, all fish, with fins, and a huge spreading tail." She was taken ashore, but they could not get her to eat or drink, and at the end of the third day when "she began to look very ill with fasting," they opened the door of the house. She then slid on her tail to the beach and plunged into the sea, where she swam away.

In 1830, the Outer Hebrides island of Benbecula was the site of one of history's stranger mermaid accounts. Women cutting seaweed reported that they had met a creature of "female form playing happily off the shore." Several days later, the mermaid's dead body was found two miles from where she had first been seen. The description of the female unknown was detailed and quite strange: "The upper part of the creature was about the size of a well-fed child of three or four years of age, with an abnormally developed breast. The hair was long, dark and glossy; the skin was white, soft and tender. The lower part of the body was like a salmon, but without scales."

In 1833, off the Isle of Yell, six fishermen reported that their fishing line had become entangled with a mermaid. They said they had kept her on board their boat for three hours and that she was about three feet long. She had neither gill nor fins, and there were no scales on her body. The fishermen, who were very superstitious, threw her overboard eventually and said that she dived in a perpendicular fashion.

A natural history professor who was familiar with the case wrote that, "The usual resources of skepticism that the seals and other sea-animals appearing under certain circumstances operating upon an excited imagination and so producing ocular illusion, cannot avail here. It is quite impossible that six Shetland fishermen could commit such a mistake."

### Muck, Mire, and Mermaids

In 1947, an 80-year-old fisherman on the island of Muck reported that he had seen a mermaid "in the sea about twenty yards from the shore, sitting combing her hair on a floating herringbox used to preserve live lobsters." Unfortunately, the mermaid looked around and realized that she was being watched. She then dived into the sea. The old fisherman was adamant that he had seen a mermaid. We have dozens of such cases in our files.

Why is this case any less convincing than the sightings of strange entities reported by the modern populace? What more do we have than sightings of most of the more popular phenomena? Tracks have proven easy to fake, despite the contentions of self-proclaimed experts. The "best" photographs and films of strange phenomena have either been shown to be fakes or are seriously questioned by objective researchers without an agenda.

We might think of mermaids and mermen as the antiquated beliefs of the superstitious and uninformed, but how different is it when a Bigfoot believer as-

sociated with a university declares that hairy man monsters live throughout the United States, despite the lack of any evidence unencumbered by ambiguity? We might not have any mermaid carcasses, but we don't have any Bigfoot, alien, or angel carcasses either, despite the widespread belief in each of these entities.

We know of only one case in which a mermaid or merman was a certain hoax. Gwen Benwell and Arthur Waugh, in *Sea Enchantress* (New York, 1965), write of Robert Hawkes who, before becoming a priest, used to put on a mermaid disguise and sit



singing on a rock in the moonlight. On the other hand, we are aware of a tremendous number of Bigfoot, Loch Ness, UFO, and ghost hoaxes.

The almost universally accepted explanation for mermaid and merman sightings is that manatees were misidentified. Those of us who have seen these sea mammals in their environment may be hard pressed to understand how some of the classic mermaid descriptions had anything to do with these homely hulks. The *Shipping Gazette* of June 4, 1857, reported that a Scottish seaman off the coast of Britain had seen a creature "in the shape of a woman with full breasts, dark complexion, and comely face." Certainly no one ever accused

a manatee of having a comely face. Or was it imagination, spirits (the drinking kind), or perception colored by belief?

Nevertheless, the notion of a person who is half human and half fish is antiquated in the West and placed firmly by

most in the realm of the fairy tale. And it may be that this is as it should be. Reading over the historical sightings of mermaids and mermen, though, one has to wonder why the notion of a plesiosaur in Loch Ness or a Bigfoot in the Pacific Northwest, an alien abduction in Los Angeles, or a communication with the dead in a TV studio in Manhat-

tan is any more likely than the existence of a sea mammal with the tail of a porpoise or manatee and the upper body of something more humanoid. II

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Drawing by Gunter Hofer

# A Mermaid or a Mere Maid?

*Do human fish  
really exist?*

by Cynthia Hind

**M**y friends used to tell me there were no such things as mermaids. As a matter of fact, it was mostly believed that they were either dugongs or manatees, mistaken for half-women, half-fish by sex-starved sailors.

I believed them, of course, until one beautiful morning on the shores of Magnetic Island, off the Western Australian coast near Townsend, I saw one.

It was lying on the beach, and it was dead, its huge gray-white body scarred by deep cuts. At the time I didn't know what it was, so I called the caretaker of the time-share cottage where I was staying with friends. He identified it immediately.

"It's a dugong," he said. "Poor thing, it must have been caught in the shark nets and drowned."

He pointed out that it was a male because there were no breasts, but apart from that, it had absolutely no resemblance

whatsoever to a human being. So, after a lifetime of sure belief, I was totally disillusioned.

And now, living in Harare, Zimbabwe, a land-locked country, I have encountered mermen and mermaids again, along with a merman-god who is part of African folklore, and visual witnesses.

## Merfolk in Zimbabwe

Nzuzu is quite an angry god. He lives in the pools at the highest point of Mount Inyangani, 8,000 feet up in the Nyanga Highlands. Mount Inyangani has been labeled by American psychic Pat Price as one of four points on Earth where a UFO base is situated. With all due respect for Price's remote viewing abilities, and accepting that this is a proven psychic domain, his pronouncement came as a surprise to me.

I have visited this mountain often, although with my advancing years, I have left climbing to the top to others. But al-

though Nzuzu is accepted by the people who live in this area as half-man, half-fish, and although I know also that he has a penchant for children (three have disappeared on the mountain without trace in the last 20 years), I have yet to see or hear about UFOs coming in and out at any entrance.

That the mountain is mystical, I have no doubt. Too many people, including the Deputy Minister of Mines in Zimbabwe's government, have climbed the mountain and only returned to base days later, to find national parks men and the police searching for them.

"But we've only been gone for an afternoon," they say, remembering that they had felt drowsy and in a state of *chidzimirira* (confusion), recalling no more until they came down.

Tradition says one must never swear in the vicinity of Mount Inyangani, or throw stones at it, and my friends and I make absolutely certain we do neither, although sometimes, stumbling on the rough ground, it is difficult to refrain from a few choice epithets.



## The Teacher's Vision

William Corliss, in his book *Incredible Life: a Handbook of Biological Mysteries*, reports on a letter to the *Times* in July 1957 from William Munro, who saw a mermaid sitting on a rock jutting into the sea. Munro wrote that he was a schoolmaster from Thurso, Scotland. When he was teaching in Reay, he was walking along the shore of Sandside Bay on a fine summer's day. He had reached Sandside Head when he saw a naked woman on the rock, combing the light brown hair that "flowed around her shoulders."

Her forehead was round, her face plump, her eyes blue. He could see her quite clearly and observed her for three or four minutes before she dropped into the sea and did not reappear.

Earlier that year, a Miss Mackay and a friend saw a similar figure in rough seas off the coast of Caithness. Every so often, this creature would lift a slim, white arm above the waves and toss back her long, green hair.

Neither report speaks of a fish's tail; nevertheless, the witnesses waited awhile for the creatures to rise again, but in neither case did they do so.

Only recently, I have had a further report here in Zimbabwe from Marko Batau through a teacher, Dennies Kazakaza, who is assisting me with African lore regarding spirits and ghosts.

One Wednesday recently, in the late afternoon, Marko was walking from Chawarura Shopping Centre to Charmwood, where he lives. As he approached the Hunyani River, he saw what appeared to be a white woman basking in the sun and sitting on a rock, half immersed in a pool of water.

The woman was naked and Marko was surprised at this. Then he noticed that what he initially thought to be her leg, drawn up on the rock, was actually a scaled fish tail.

The woman did not notice him at first, until he deliberately made a noise while walking on the gravel to get closer, and in an instant she disappeared into the water.

A few days later, his curiosity aroused, Marko took the same route home. To his amazement, the woman was there, basking on the rock again. But not only that: this time there was laundry laid out on



Dugong on the beach at Magnetic Island in the Great Barrier Reef, Australia

some stones to dry, with some draped over the bushes nearby.

Unfortunately, in his astonishment and perhaps some fear, he did not see what type of washing it was, whether clothing or merely pieces of cloth.

Again Marko drew nearer to get a closer view. Suddenly, the woman became aware of him and looked at him as though admonishing him. The next thing, she had disappeared into the water.

The following week, Marko deliberately took this rather isolated shortcut home. Immediately when he reached the pool on the river, he saw the same creature there. Only this time, she was holding a baby in her arms and giving it a bath. Still

puzzled by what he was seeing, Marko tried to draw closer to verify what he was viewing, but the moment the woman heard his footsteps on the gravel, she and the baby disappeared into the water together.

The laundry put out to dry seems an almost prosaic detail, with obviously very down-to-earth implications. And finally, not only did he see the woman, but her baby too. Above all, the lower portion which looked to Marko like a scaled leg was presumably the tail of an aquatic creature.

And what influence was brought to bear on Marko to induce such a strange vision, if vision it was? He is of a different tribe from those who accept Nzuzu, the merman-god of Mount Inyangani, so he



# SIRENAS



Ministry of Information, Zimbabwe



Mount Inyangani, 8,000 feet high—isolated, mysterious, feared by local tribespeople

would not be influenced by that culture. What then, was he actually seeing?

## Cleo's Tale

The second interview I had was with Cleo Rosin. She is now in her 60s; what she told me about happened when she was only 15 or 16, so one wonders how completely accurate the sequence of events is.

Nevertheless, the incident left a very deep impression on her and, as I know her quite well (her grandson is one of the investigators with whom I work), I'm sure of her reliability.

One year there was a particularly debilitating drought in the area where her father's small farm was situated, in Chirundu in Northern Zimbabwe, on the border with Zambia. Her mother told her to come along with her to the Zambezi River to collect some drinking water.

When they arrived at the river, there was a canoe anchored along the bank, and Cleo climbed inside in an adventurous way. When she sat down, she noticed there was a small, round island in the middle of the river, which was especially wide at this point. And sitting on the island, near its edge, with her lower body partially in the water, was a particularly beautiful woman with long black hair. To Cleo's surprise, the woman was naked and she was white.

At this stage, Cleo's mother was still filling the buckets with water. She called out to her mother: "Mommy, just look at that woman over there."

Her mother looked up and said, "Sh...Sh...you'd better keep quiet." And then she added, "Look away."

"But," Cleo said, "I had already seen her and the bottom part of her body was like a fish—just like a fish."

Cleo added, "I also knew she had seen

"Why would she take me?"

"If you were here alone, she would take you, but there are two of us."

According to their cultural background, her mother told Cleo that this mermaid was looking for men, but that she also took women.

Cleo said she never told any members of her family about the incident at the time; she was too afraid.

She added, "I will never forget her face. She was so beautiful. She was young, only about 17 years old. She looked so relaxed, although she didn't smile at us. She just kept on looking."

The woman was too far away for Cleo to see the color of her eyes. She also could not recall if the fish scales were silvery. She merely reiterated that she could clearly see the fish's tail on the woman's body. The island was small, with tall reeds on one side and some river sand, but where the woman was sitting, the water was deep.

On reflection, it seems strange to me



Zambezi River in Zimbabwe, where Cleo Rosin saw the mermaid

us—she was looking directly at us."

But as her mother advised, Cleo looked away, and when she looked up again, the woman was gone.

Excited, Cleo said, "When we get home I'm going to tell everyone about what we saw."

Her mother admonished, "No, you must not do that; otherwise she will take you."

that in the two recorded incidents, both from residents in unsophisticated rural areas, the women they saw should be white.

If this is indeed an illusion, what could possibly influence these witnesses to report a story about women who were not only half-fish, but were resident in a land-locked country?

After all, mermaids are surely known to be sea creatures?

Ministry of Information, Zimbabwe



# HUMANOIDS



Munchkins = childhood tribe  
Emerald City = adult tribe  
Dorothy = soul  
Ruby Slippers = spiritual inheritance  
Glinda = spirit of guidance  
Wicked Witch = ego  
Scarecrow = intellect  
Tin Woodman = heart  
The Wizard = religion

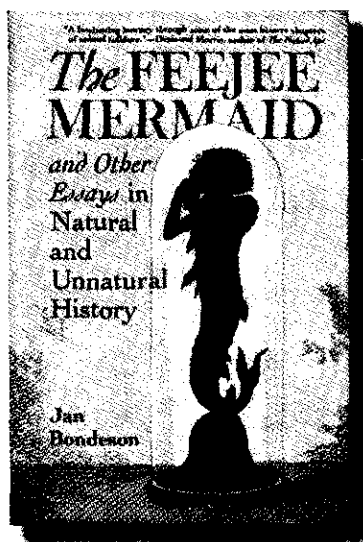
As you can see, some of these analogies are obvious while others are interesting and original. The Wizard as an allegory of mainstream religion is particularly telling.

My primary difficulty with *Spiritual Journeys* is that Main felt compelled, because of the popularity of the MGM film, to base his interpretations on the movie rather than the book—much less the entire series of Baum's Oz books. Thus he states that Kansas is the ultimate reality that we are all trying to get back to, whereas Oz represents the illusory and ephemeral world of our experience.

This does very well for an interpretation of the film, where Oz is nothing but a dream, but it grates rather harshly against the overall theme of the Oz canon seen in a larger perspective. In the books, Oz is very real, and Dorothy, Toto, Uncle Henry, and Aunt Em all eventually take up permanent residence there. Under Main's interpretation, that would represent a real tragedy, a surrender to the dream world of material reality. In the books, it soon becomes obvious that Oz, not Kansas, is the true home for which we are all longing. Even the film hints at this when it suddenly switches from the black and white of Kansas to the Technicolor of Oz.

Looking at *The Wizard* alone, it is difficult to avoid the opposite interpretation—despite the dull drabness of gray, gray Kansas—but the larger view we gain from the Baum canon of 14 Oz books is that Dorothy visited the Other World (i.e., the Real World) in *Wizard* and then returned to show others how to get there—Dorothy Gale as *bodhisattva*.

Main does not address this interpretation, but his book nevertheless remains a valuable and solid contribution to the growing body of literature on Oz-as-spiritual-allegory.—David F. Godwin



## The Feejee Mermaid and Other Essays in Natural and Unnatural History

by Jan Bondeson

Cornell University Press, 1999, hardbound, 315 pp., \$29.95

We human beings have a strange relationship with animals. We are animals ourselves, yet we regard ourselves as separate and above the rest of the animal kingdom. Alternately worshipping or slaughtering them, adopting them as our children or condemning them as devils incarnate, we project on animals all the best and worst features of humanity.

Nowhere is this peculiar dichotomy more apparent than in Jan Bondeson's new book, *The Feejee Mermaid and Other Essays in Natural and Unnatural History*. Dr. Bondeson, a specialist in rheumatology and internal medicine practicing in London, offers ten essays on bizarre, pathetic, and strange animal cases down through the centuries. As with his earlier work, *A Cabinet of Medical Curiosities* (Cornell, 1997), Bondeson writes with entertaining erudition and thoroughness on his chosen topics. Besides the celebrated Feejee mermaid herself, he also discusses reputedly intelligent animals (Marocco the Dancing Horse, Toby the Learned Pig); the tragic career of Chune the elephant, who lived in a London menagerie in the early nineteenth century; Jumbo, the most famous elephant of all time; the peculiar habit of medieval law courts of putting animals on trial for breaking human laws; the legend of the

basilisk; long-standing theories of spontaneous generation; and of greatest interest to FATE readers, two chapters on showers of animals from the sky and the persistent phenomenon of live toads being found entombed in solid rock.

Dr. Bondeson brings a wealth of scientific and historical research to bear on all these topics. He repeats the method of his earlier work, relying on original sources instead of third-hand hearsay (very refreshing), and applying the latest scientific knowledge to famous conundrums of the past. You learn a lot when you read Bondeson. For example, I didn't realize the Japanese had a long history of manufacturing monsters out of bits of other animals—the Feejee mermaid herself being formed from an orangutan, a baboon, and a salmon—but the Japanese made their monsters for artistic and religious reasons, not as sideshow attractions. When these skillfully made chimeras began appearing in the West, they were hailed as remarkable specimens until detailed examinations revealed the truth.

Despite his fascination with bizarre beliefs and strange phenomena, Bondeson is no Fortean. He's quite critical of Fort himself, and credulous writers don't fare well under his scathing eye. This is not to say Bondeson is a hardcore debunker. He falls more closely into the camp of scientists who delve into mysteries for the intellectual fun of it. His style reminds me of Rupert T. Gould, only his research is much more rigorous than the old Stargazer's.

*The Feejee Mermaid* is less gruesome than *Cabinet*, but just as bizarre. One has only to read about the hunting dog Fidele, who won a duel against an armed human opponent, the persistent legend of the "vegetable lamb," or the perambulations of the wayward artifact known as the Feejee mermaid to realize the strangest creatures on earth are humans themselves. And if those lengthy essays don't convince you, reflect on the fate of King Louis XIV of France's heart—one of the oddest and most disturbing bits of historical trivia I've ever read.

This may be the true message of *The Feejee Mermaid*—humans are the strangest creatures of all.—Paul B. Thompson