

Language Lab - Devils and Demons in Japanese life and thought

わた せけん おに
「渡る世間に鬼はなし(な
い)」

せけん みち
「世間の未知の人はこわく見
えるが、皆困った人を助けるよ
うなやさしい心を持っている
という意味。」

This is translated in the Kenkyusha Japanese/English dictionary as ‘there is kindness to be found everywhere.’ I first became aware of this expression while watching the Christian TV program ‘Lifeline’ one Saturday morning when the speaker said it would be more true to life to say

「渡る世間は鬼ばかり」.

I.e. the world is full of devils or evil but as Christians we have no need to fear the world because of Jesus’ promise of John 16:33 ‘I have overcome the world.’ It is also interesting to note that 「渡る世間は鬼ばかり」 is the title of a popular Tachida Sukako TV drama running at the time of writing.

Using my electronic dictionary to look up the above expression led to the discovery of many other phrases using ‘oni’ and to curiosity about how Japanese understand the concept of ‘oni’. Obunsha’s ‘The Japanese-English Dictionary for Conversation about Japan’ explains it as follows. ‘Oni’

are the most common imaginary beings appearing in folklore and children’s stories. (e.g. In the story of Momotaro, Momotaro, born from a peach, successfully subdues red and blue demons on the Isle of Demons.) Usually ‘oni’ have horns on their heads, fangs, a tiger-skin loincloth and carry metal clubs. They devour people and are primarily thought of as symbols of evil. They are found as early as the eighth century chronicles ‘Kojiki’ and ‘Nihonshiki’ where ferocious demons appear in the land of the dead. There are also examples of humorous demons and demons who bring good fortune to humans.

Here are some ways in which the word ‘oni’ is used in everyday conversation..

鬼のような(人)

a cruel, pitiless (person)

仕事の鬼

a fiend for work

鬼ごっこの鬼

the ‘it’ in the game of tag

Idiomatic expressions:

「鬼に金棒」

つよ なに え
「強いものが、何かを得るこ

とによって、さらにその強さ

ま い
を増すことを言う。」 Literally,

‘to arm a demon with an iron rod’ which comes to mean ‘doubly powerful or effective’.

「鬼が笑う」

じつげん
「実現しそうにないことや

よそ
予想のつかないことを言った

とき
時にかからかう言葉。 E.g.

らいねん
来年のことを言う」と。

「鬼のいぬ間に洗濯」

えんりよ
「遠慮する人のいない間に、い

のちの洗濯をする。思う存分

くつろぐことを言う。」 English equivalent – ‘When the cat’s away, the mice will play.’

「鬼の目にも涙」

むじひ
「無慈悲(merciless)な人にも、

時には慈悲の心が生ずること

のたとえ。」

「心を鬼にする」

あいて どうじょう きもち
「相手に同情しがちな気持ち

を抑えて厳しい態度で接する

ことを言う。」

For e.g. Teachers or parents being strict with pupils or children for their own good.