

A Harsh Mountain and A Clever Woman

There is a legend that tells, once upon a time, of a cruel lord. The lord was very proud and strong, but he was also afraid of his neighboring countries. The neighboring countries were also very strong, and very quick to go to war. They also desired the lands and the wealth of this cruel lord. So, the cruel lord sought to make his country the strongest of all.

To make his country strong, the cruel lord wanted to get rid of any weakness. Travelling the country, and seeing many elderly people, the lord looked down on them and saw them as useless. As weak. The lord then issued a cruel edict; any person who reached *kanreki* was to be taken up the local mountain, called *Kamuriki*, where they would be left to starve and die.

In this lord's country was a young man and his aging mother. The young man's father had passed away at a young age, which made life difficult for the young man, and although he worked very hard, he was very poor. But, the two were happy. The young man loved his mother, a wise woman who had taught him many things. The mother loved her son, who had grown up to be a kind and honest man.

But then, the day came. The young man's mother celebrated her *kanreki*. Being poor, and with no power of his own, the young man was afraid of breaking the cruel lord's edict. But, he couldn't obey. One day, his mother came to him, prepared with gear to travel into the mountains. "It is time, son," she said to the young man, "do not regret this, I have lived a long and happy life. But my legs are weak, you will need to carry me."

So, the two set off. The young man, trying his best to hold back his tears, carried his mother on his back. The mountain path wound through thick woods, which were very easy to get lost in. The young man's mother, always thinking about her son, reached out to the trees they passed and broke off many of their branches, so that the son could follow the broken trees to find his way home.

After leaving his mother near the peak of *Kamuriki*, the young man began his journey home, alone. However, he quickly found what his mother had done. Overwhelmed by her kindness, he cried out. Realizing he could not abandon his mother, he hurried back to her, and took her home. The young man secretly made a hidden room under the floor of his house, in which his mother could hide if anyone came looking.

One day, the cruel lord's fears came true. A neighboring country, who had recently become much stronger, sent an emissary to the lord. The emissary made a scary proposal: "Make a drum that sounds without being stuck, or we will invade." The cruel lord, not knowing how to accomplish such a task, sent a message to the whole country for advice.

The young man, upon hearing the news, asked his mother. She suggested to him, "take the skin off a drum, and fill it with live bees. Then, seal the drum again." The young man did this, and presented to the cruel lord a drum that sounded all on its own. The cruel lord was happy, and gave the young man a large reward. However, the emissary came again with more demands. One after another, the young man brought his mother's solutions to the lord. He received many rewards, and quickly became a hero of the country.

Finally, the emissary admitted the cruel lord's wisdom, and that their country would not invade. The cruel lord, relieved, finally asked the young man how he had become so wise. The young man, now very wealthy and respected, told the lord that he had defied his edict. He brought his mother before the cruel lord, who, realizing the folly of his cruel order, abandoned it, and pledged to honor the elderly in his country.

Questions, Answers and Hints:

1. What legend is this narrative based upon?

Answer: *Ubasuteyama* (姥捨て山).

Hints/Clues: Although expanded upon, the story is based upon legends of *Ubasuteyama*,

including the clear details of the story itself (abandoning the elderly to die in the mountains), as well as the challenges of the emissary, including making ‘a drum that sounds without being stuck.’ Given also that the mountain of *Kamuriki* (冠義山 in Nagano Prefecture), these details should be enough for the students to find the answer through a Google search.

2. In which prefecture of modern Japan is the story set?

Answer: Nagano.

Hints/Clues: Also a clue to Question 1, the name of the mountain, *Kamuriki* will help unfamiliar students to locate the prefecture through a Google search. Otherwise, if they have noticed that it is a retelling of the *Ubasuteyama* legend, this can also lead them to Nagano (both the Japanese and English Wikipedia pages reference Nagano prefecture).

3. At what age were the elderly to be abandoned to die?

Answer: 60 or 61.

Hints/Clues: The Japanese term *kanreki* (還暦) is referenced. *Kanreki* refers to 60 years after one’s birth (in Japanese, *kazoedoshi* [数え年]), which means the individual may be either 60 or 61 years old.

4. Why couldn’t the narrator abandon his mother?

Answer: He was overwhelmed by her kindness.

Hints/Clues: Unusually (for this class), the answer is clearly stated: Overwhelmed by her kindness, he cried out.

5. Why did the lord abandon his cruel edict?

Answer: He realized the worth of age and wisdom.

Hints/Clues: The only explicit reference is that the cruel lord ‘realized the folly of his cruel order,’ but given that he had finally discovered that the wisdom that had saved his country came from one of the elderly that he had regarded as ‘useless’ and ‘weak,’ it can be inferred that he finally understood the worth of the elderly beyond physical strength.

6. What does this story try to teach us?

Answer: Answers will vary, points should be given for well written or well-reasoned answers.