

## Neko Bappa (Grandma Cat)

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Long ago, in a certain village in what is now Fukushima Prefecture, there lived a cat. The villagers all adored it, and it lived a very long life. One day, a villager noticed something astonishing about the cat: its tail had split into two! "This is it," they exclaimed, "the Nekomata of legend! A Nekomata that devours humans!" The villagers were terrified, and the entire village was thrown into an uproar.

To drive it away, the villagers burned red peppers, filling the air with smoke. Thick, terrifying smoke choked the village, and the cat, suffering immensely, fled. Though the villagers felt pity, their fear was too great.

Relieved by the cat's absence, peace returned to the village. Some time later, an old woman arrived at Kitayu (North Hot Spring), a place untouched by such commotion. She was shabbily dressed, and her eyes, perhaps poor, were squinting.

"I have no family and no money," she pleaded. "I'll do anything. Please let me stay." The innkeeper at the time, feeling sorry for her and finding her very kind, decided to give her work.

The old woman was diligent, working tirelessly from early morning until late at night. Perhaps she was devout, for she revered the Onsen Shrine, cleaning it daily and tending to it carefully. Thanks to the medicinal properties of the Eye Hot Spring, the old woman's eyesight rapidly improved, and she worked with even greater vigor.

One day, a family arrived at Kitayu. They enjoyed the bath and their meal, had a pleasant time, and then drifted into a deep sleep. In the early morning, a family member realized the grandfather was missing. They searched the inn but couldn't find him. When it grew light, they searched around the inn and found the grandfather, horrifically torn to pieces and caught on a large tree branch. It was a gruesome sight, seemingly beyond human capability, and everyone trembled with fear. Upon inquiry, it turned out this family had come from the very village involved in the Nekomata incident.

From that day on, the old woman was gone, and the people from that village have not returned to Kita Onsen to this day. So, where did that old woman go? Or rather, has she already returned to her cat form? Legend says the Nekomata relocated to Ura-Bandai in Fukushima Prefecture. Today, that area is known as Nekoma-ga-take, a bustling ski resort, one of the prefecture's best. If you ever visit Nekoma Ski Resort, please, whatever you do, don't burn any red peppers. Though, normally, people wouldn't do such a thing anyway.



By the way: "Bappa" is a term of endearment for an old woman in this region and throughout Tohoku. It's a kind, affectionate way to address them. And for an old man, the term is "Jicchi."