ROMANIAN ECONOMIC AND BUSINESS REVIEW

Special Issue
Monsters Re-Visited: The Fantastic Creatures of Japan
Editor: Carmen Săpunaru Tămaș

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INTRODUCTION. BEAUTIFUL MONSTERS

Carmen SĂPUNARU TĂMAȘ & Masanao KAWAKAMI[*]

In the highly acclaimed 2025 movie "Kokuho," the two main characters attend for the first time the performance of a national living treasure. The kabuki master they observe is decrepit, white paint sinking deep in the valleys and crevices of his face, yet physical beauty becomes irrelevant compared to his superhuman dance skills. Enraptured, Kikuo (the future national living treasure) exclaims: "Bakemono da!—It's a monster!" to which his friend Shunsuke adds: "Utsukushii bakemono… A beautiful monster." Both the phrasing and the hauntingly beautiful dance scene place Japan into an aesthetic category of its own—the kind of sublimation of beauty and transfiguration of reality which led to the revolutionizing of Western art—Japonisme. Just like its art, Japan's monsters stand between charm and grotesque, between allure and disgust, between god and demon, the same way an enchantingly beautiful maiden can turn into a bloodthirsty ogre when scorned and mistreated by her lover.

The Heron Maiden by Adam Cooley[1]. Sagi Musume is the kabuki dance showcased in *Kokuho*.

This volume is an eclectic exploration of beautiful monsters—the fantastic creatures of Japan. In the first part of the 19th century, Hokusai painted a scene that would become representative for Japan and a metaphor for social and historical changes: the Great Wave. The 21st century has been swept up by the

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[1] All of Adam Cooley's works are included with the author's permission. More of his paintings in the Yokai series can be found here: adamcooley.com/projects/yokai

great wave of wars, epidemics, and ideological shifts for which there can be only one sustainable response: human resilience and creativity. Although far from comprehensive, this volume represents our approach to a fragmented and divided world: a multidisciplinary collection including literary, art, and religious essays together with anthropological studies. The selection is not random: each chapter represents an essential component of a "chart for unknown waters." We look at demons, hags, vampires, familiar spirits, and other fantastic creatures using the tools of various fields in an attempt to offer the readers a bird's eye view of social and artistic phenomena, a map for navigating through the straights and currents of deep cultural waters that can help achieve a harmonious understanding of the whole.

The volume begins with an essay by Adam Cooley, the painter whose "Monstruous Dreams" series inspired the "Monsters Re-Visited: The Fantastic Creatures of Japan" symposium, held at the University of Hyogo in April 2024, and followed by a subsequent event at the Romanian-American University in October of the same year. Cooley allows us some rare insights into his artistic vision and what determined his extensive and original exploration and re-interpretation of Japanese folklore. Rebecca Copeland, the keynote speaker of the initial symposium and the author of a second creative chapter, reviews yamamba—monster, witch, and representation of female-ness—in the works of three modern artists, in a chapter that is as much an analytical work as a literary piece itself. Reverend Yoshinobu Miyake analyzes the various fantastic creatures of Japanese imaginary from a religious point of view, in an informative chapter that goes from the ancient period to modern and contemporary times.

As mentioned above, this volume is not confined within the strict limits of one academic area. From creative writing and religious perspectives, we move into history and anthropology, with Laura Miller's chapter being a review of shikigami-related beliefs and practices from the Heian Period until present times. Diego Cucinelli focuses on literary sources to create a view of mishappen humanity which somehow acquires extraordinary powers, and Yoko Matsumoto-Sturt analyzes demons and their representations from classical literature to manga and anime. Kathryn M. Tanaka looks into the re-imagined, re-invented fantastic creatures of Japan through an analysis of Adam Cooley's paintings based on a review of documented beliefs regarding such creatures, as well as a direct interview with the painter. Elisha Ager uses contemporary images of fantastic creatures to discuss how "traditional Japan" is re-created, emphasizing the concepts of nostalgia and worldbuilding. The last chapter, on the "good" demons that visit the human world once a year, is an ethnography of a contemporary ritual which brings us back full circle to the idea of re-discovery, re-interpretation, and continuous metamorphoses of the beautiful monsters and magnanimous demons that populate not only our imagination, but sometimes even descend from their realm to make our ordinary worlds extra-ordinary.

TRANSLATING THE UNCANNY: YŌKAI, RITUAL PROCESS, AND TRANSCULTURAL VISION

Adam COOLEY

Introduction: Living with Monsters

For most of my life, I have been drawn to monsters—not as simple embodiments of fear, but as figures that disturb categorical certainty. My childhood fascination with Gothic cinema introduced me to a Western vocabulary of the uncanny: vampires, werewolves, stitched-together corpses animated by electricity. These creatures were moralized and narratively contained. They were threats to be defeated or tragedies to be mourned.

When I began living in Japan, however, I encountered an entirely different ecology of the monstrous. The beings referred to as *yōkai* (妖怪) were neither strictly evil nor wholly supernatural in the Western theological sense. They were ambiguous presences: sometimes mischievous, sometimes dangerous, sometimes explanatory, sometimes inexplicable. They blurred distinctions between human and nonhuman, animate and inanimate, material and immaterial. As Michael Dylan Foster explains in *The Book of Yōkai: Mysterious Creatures of Japanese Folklore*, the term yōkai historically encompassed a broad range of anomalous entities and strange phenomena—its elasticity being one of its defining characteristics.

It was this elasticity that resonated with me most deeply. Yōkai are not monsters in opposition to order; they are manifestations of instability within order itself.

My series *Monstrous Dreams: Yōkai of Japan* grew from sustained engagement with this instability. The project did not begin as an academic exercise or as an illustrative survey of folklore. I had been creating monsters long before consciously engaging with Japanese traditions. Over decades of immersion in Japanese culture, visual language, and aesthetic systems, my work began to converge with yōkai—not as subjects to be copied, but as conceptual frameworks through which transformation itself could be explored.

Transformation operates in this body of work on multiple levels: iconographic transformation of inherited forms; material transformation through layered surface processes; perceptual transformation in the viewer; and transcultural transformation as images move between Japanese and Western contexts. What follows is not a catalog of imagery, but a reflection on process—on what it means to translate beings defined by change.

Yōkai as Cultural Process Rather Than Fixed Entity

Scholars increasingly emphasize that yōkai are not fixed taxonomic creatures but cultural processes. Foster's comprehensive study demonstrates how the category of yōkai was assembled across centuries of narrative, art, regional variation, and social discourse. Their endurance lies not in stability but in adaptability.

During the Edo period (1603–1868), illustrated compendia such as Toriyama Sekien's *Gazu Hyakki Yagyō* systematized and reimagined yōkai imagery, transforming oral and local traditions into circulating visual culture. Sekien's works were not ethnographic documentation in a modern sense; they were creative interventions. Some creatures were drawn from existing folklore; others appear to have been invented or heavily stylized. Through print culture, these images became canonical.

This history is critical for my own approach. There is no singular "original" yōkai form to which I could return. What exists instead is a lineage of reinterpretation. By entering into this lineage, I am participating in its historical logic.

Yōkai are closely aligned with animistic worldviews. In many premodern contexts, unexplained natural phenomena—echoes in the mountains, flickering lights in marshes, sudden illness—were personified as yōkai. The world was not inert matter but animated presence. In this sense, yōkai represent an epistemological orientation toward uncertainty. They do not eliminate ambiguity; they embody it.

Art, like folklore, inhabits similar zones. It creates space for phenomena that resist immediate rationalization. My engagement with yōkai emerges from this shared terrain.

Liminality and the Artist Between Cultures

Victor Turner's theory of liminality provides a productive framework for thinking about yōkai and my own position as an artist. Liminal states occur in transitional phases where social structures are suspended and transformation becomes possible. Yōkai inhabit such thresholds—appearing at dusk, in borderlands, at moments of vulnerability.

My life between Japan and the United States situates me in a comparable space. After decades immersed in Japanese artistic and cultural systems, returning to the United States did not mean reverting to an earlier identity. Instead, I occupy a hybrid position—shaped by Japanese visual culture yet formed within a Western artistic tradition.

Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the "third space," articulated in *The Location of Culture*, describes this condition of hybridity, where cultural meaning is produced through negotiation rather than replication (1994: 34-37). My paintings operate within this negotiated space. They are neither traditional

Japanese works nor Western appropriations of exotic subject matter. They are hybrid translations shaped by lived experience.

Liminality also describes the architectural conditions in which much of my work has been produced. In Japan, I worked in basements, beneath storefronts, in partially abandoned industrial buildings, garages, and repurposed warehouses. These were not neutral containers. They were transitional environments—neither fully public nor entirely private, neither domesticated nor derelict. Such spaces suspend ordinary distinctions. They exist between sanctioned and peripheral, visible and concealed.

Anthropologist Marc Augé (1995) describes certain contemporary environments as "non-places," spaces defined by transience rather than permanence. Although my studios were deeply personal, they shared this in-between quality. Descending into a basement or entering a warehouse corridor became a preparatory act. The studio functioned as threshold.

Working deep into the night intensified this suspension. Under makeshift lamps in industrial Osaka, repetition—layering, sanding, abrading—took on a ritual rhythm, a working method documented in a 2019 interview conducted in my Osaka studio (*Tokyo Art Beat*, February 2019). The architecture did not merely house the work; it resonated with it.

Translation and Reinterpretation

My engagement with specific yōkai figures involves sustained research. I consult classical sources, visual archives, and contemporary scholarship to understand a being's historical function and symbolic resonance. Yet fidelity to iconographic detail is not my primary objective. I aim instead to preserve structural essence while allowing formal reinterpretation.

As Foster demonstrates, even Edo-period representations were acts of mediation and invention. By situating my work within this lineage, I acknowledge that translation is inherent to the tradition. Translation here is not equivalence. It is transformation through passage.

Material Process as Ritual and Excavation

If yōkai are defined by transformation, then the material process of creating these works must embody transformation as well.

Each painting is built through successive layers of acrylic and wax. I paint, sand, and repaint repeatedly—sometimes dozens of times—until the image begins to assert itself. The yōkai are not drafted and then rendered; they are uncovered through abrasion. Sanding removes certainty. Repainting reintroduces ambiguity. Fragments of earlier forms remain embedded beneath subsequent layers. The figure emerges through resistance rather than design.

The waxes disrupt the adhesion of pigment while also fusing layers together. Certain passages soften or cloud; others hold unexpectedly. Color

appears suspended within depth rather than resting on a surface. This oscillation between disruption and cohesion produces the dreamlike atmosphere characteristic of the series.

The repetition of painting, sanding, and reapplication establishes a rhythm that is both physical and contemplative. Turner (1969: 94-130) describes ritual as a structured sequence that suspends ordinary time and enables transformation. The studio becomes such a space: a temporary chamber in which forms gradually emerge through process rather than declaration.

The stratified surface of each painting resembles a palimpsest. Earlier layers remain beneath the visible image. This material accretion parallels the structure of folklore itself. As Foster emphasizes, yōkai evolve through retelling and reinterpretation; each version carries traces of those that preceded it.

Seriality and Viewer Transformation

Across the hundreds of works that now comprise *Monstrous Dreams*, recurring motifs—dark framing borders, atmospheric fields, restrained palettes, symmetrical compositions—establish coherence. When exhibited together, the works encourage serial viewing. Recognition unfolds gradually. The uncanny becomes inhabitable rather than resolved.

Mobility and Contemporary Relevance

From Edo-period print culture to contemporary manga and anime, yōkai have continually adapted to new media ecologies. Their persistence depends upon reinterpretation. My project embraces this open-endedness. There is no final yōkai image. There is continuation.

In a world increasingly oriented toward categorization and algorithmic certainty, yōkai offer a counter-model. They embody ambiguity. My paintings do not resolve instability; they give it form.

Conclusion

Yōkai endure because they change. My work participates in this instability not by preserving canonical forms, but by translating them—materially, culturally, and perceptually.

I do not seek to fix them.

I seek to keep them in motion.

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YAMAMBA: THE OGRESS AS EGRESS TO IMAGINATION IN THE WORKS OF MODERN JAPANESE ARTISTS

Rebecca COPELAND[1]

Monsters mean different things to different people. For some they represent the unrepresentable and the unknowable—concepts and fears that disintegrate upon articulation. For others, monsters stand for all that society finds unbearable or unacceptable—the aberrant, the isolated, the ugly. Many of us, in this latter category, have developed an affinity for the monstrous. Sometimes we find the monstrous in ourselves. The monster speaks our rage and frustration and ironically becomes a source of comfort.

The *yamamba* has been such a monster for me.

She has beguiled me, slipping into my imagination, entreating me to accompany her on mythic journeys of creativity and self-knowing. The more I looked into images of the yamamba, the more surprised I was by how frequently she has served as a source of inspiration and ingenuity. She has appeared in ancient moral tales and theatrical performances, modern fiction, and contemporary artwork. She has even enjoyed leading new trends in street fashion. Through all her guises and iterations, the yamamba defies easy interpretation. Each creative response treats the yamamba differently. So, who is she? How should we tell the many stories inspired by this icon of the female demonic?

I would like to respond to these questions by presenting a few of the various ways Japanese artists have reflected the dynamism and power of the yamamba. Or to put it differently, the way they have used the yamamba's vital energy to help unlock doors to their own wonder and imagination.

I will focus on the works of three different modern artists: writer, Ōba Minako (1930-2007), photographer Yanagi Miwa (b. 1967), and choreographer, Yokoshi Yasuko (b. 1961), underscoring the way these women artists have appropriated the yamamba story to animate their own works. We will consider the way they have availed themselves of the yamamba legend as a means to question and at times subvert the status quo. And, we will explore the reasons the yamamba in particular has proven to be so enticing.

Before turning to this discussion, I'd like to provide an overview of the yamamba and her important attributes in an effort to capture features that have made her so beguiling to modern artists.

The title of my essay, "Yamamba: The Ogress as Egress to Imagination in the Works of Modern Japanese Artists," derives from the late-fourteenth-century

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Noh play attributed to Zeami Motokiyo (1363-1443). His play "Yamamba," or sometimes "Yamauba," features an encounter between a dancer and the mountain witch. The play represents the high point of Zeami's art. A demon play, or *kiri-mono*, it is sublime and deeply philosophical. But in the play's interlude, Zeami has a bit of fun with his topic. Interludes, known as *ai* or *ai-kyōgen*, allow a kyogen actor to take the stage and speak in a style closer to the audience's contemporary colloquial language. The actor repeats some of the plot or story for audience members who had not quite understood the elevated, poetic language. In this play the interlude actor, in the role of a local villager, offers a profane description of the mysterious mountain witch, the titular yamamba. He intends to use the term ogress or *kijo* to describe her. Lacking much of an education, this ordinary fellow refers to her as an "egress" (kido) instead. [And the translation here by Royall Tyler is perfect!] The villager is corrected, and the misunderstanding proves the source of very brief, very slight humor.

Let's follow this word play further. The mountain ogress serves as an egress. She offers a way into both creative imagination and philosophical introspection. We can see that even as early as this fourteenth-century play, the yamamba stands for the awesomeness, at times fearsomeness, of innovation, imagination, and inspiration—much like the depth and mystery of mountains themselves.

Naming the Yamamba

Before journeying into these mountains proper, let's reflect on the name, yamamba. We are accustomed to translate yamamba in English as "mountain witch." But, in fact, "witch" might not be the best translation. When we think of witches we think of those Euro-American crones who inhabited covens, consorted with the devil, cast evil spells, and tried to steal babies to deliver them to Satan. Japan's yamamba is a much more solitary figure. She doesn't serve a dark power, for example, or cavort in covens. She answers only to herself and acts out of her own interests and desires. Even so, there are remarkable similarities between the Japanese yamamba and the western witch. They were both dreamed into existence by cultures that feared women, particularly old women, and both witches and yamamba were seen as threats to the stability of patriarchal power. For example, both the yamamba and the witch were believed to steal, devour, or threaten babies—born and unborn—a direct assault on the perpetuation of the family. Witches and yamamba alike are surrounded by folklore and myths that have served to keep women in their place—after all, the image of both the witch and the yamamba embodies threats of ugliness and ostracism. Yet we also see in the irreverence and subversive nature of these figures the possibility of inventing new, liberating ways of being. It is precisely this liberatory, defiant posture of the yamamba that inspires the feminist artists I will introduce shortly.

Yamamba by Adam Cooley

Japanese folklore has a lot to say about the yamamba. In images and stories, folklore categorizes the mountain witch as a demon or *oni*. Most visual depictions of oni assign masculine characteristics to them, their blue- or red-skinned bodies are generally muscular and bare-chested. But oni are gender fluid. They shape shift, and their uncanny bodies may manifest as male and then morph into female. Until, at some point in the fourteenth century, the term for a particular kind of oni, the mountain witch, was introduced into the vernacular. This was a critical turning point in yamamba lore for it fixed the witch then and forevermore as a female demon. And her female-ness became part of the lexicon of horror associated with her.

The name yamamba establishes two other aspects of this demon's identity. First, she is old. The second half of her name, *uba* denotes a woman who is beyond childbearing age (with some exceptions, as we will see). She has stepped outside the circle of life and the economy of desire and has entered the era of expendability. An old woman contributes very little to an agrarian society. She may be wise but she is also wizened, and her continued participation in communal interests may drain scarce resources. She consumes more than she provides and endangers the fragile food chain in her proximity.

Some Japanese legends then, describe old women as *obasute*, or "abandoned grannies," referring to what may have in fact been a practice in impoverished agrarian villages of matricide (and sometimes patricide). Non-productive members of the community were abandoned to starve on mountainsides. These unfortunate grannies tended to then fade into the night, becoming one with the waxing and waning of the moon, their imagined spirits producing a sense of nostalgia in the children left behind, but not terror.

The yamamba is a different kind of granny. She is a resistant *ubasute*. She refuses to quiet her own appetites and her lingering presence in the mountains becomes one of terror. Rather than being carried submissively to the mountains, the yamamba appears to have been chased there—either by villagers who feared her, or by her own fear of the village's restrictions.

More about this soon, but now let's turn to the other important component in the yamamba's name, that of mountains, "yama."

Mountains of Desire

In many cultures, mountains are considered synonymous with that which is uncharted, wild, and mysterious, and Japan is no exception. Spirits of the dead are believed to return to the mountains. Tombs and graveyards are often on mountainsides in Japan. Miyake Hitoshi notes: "Mountains are regarded as a liminal space between this world and the otherworld. The mountain is an avenue to heaven; a mountain cave is an entrance to the otherworld (Miyake, 78-79). Esoteric temples find their home in the mountains. Mountains are the site for religious pilgrimage and austerities.

There has always been a tension between the mountains and the village (*sato*). The village suggests civilization, community, and proper order. Whereas the mountains are unbounded. The sense of something unbounded and limitless brings us to another key characteristic of the yamamba, a physical one, her appetite. It is nearly impossible to satisfy. We've already discussed the way elderly women were seen as a drain on social resources. Metaphorically speaking then, the old woman is cannibalistic, eating the very life force of the village and giving nothing back. The yamamba is often imagined devouring cattle whole as well as people. Or in one case, she has two mouths.

Connections between women and appetites, regardless of age, invites fear and suspicion—as can still be seen today with the obsession over female thinness in some cultures. Or over anxiety women feel when eating in public. A woman who eats too much is a woman out of control. Gustatory appetite stands in for other appetites as well—that are unseemly in women—such as an appetite for sex or knowledge—or fame. Appetite suggests an inappropriate self-indulgence. One reason so many female artists find an affinity with the yamamba, is probably because they, too, have been accused of unlady-like behaviors—their creativity requires a kind of selfishness, as though they, like the yamamba, just want to eat all the time. Their desire for self-expression and discovery insatiable.

Fear of the Single Woman

How did this fearsome, hungry ogress gain her place in Japanese folklore? Like most legends, there were likely moments in the past where people encountered mysterious old women who piqued their curiosity or stoked an

unreasonable fear. Single women of any age dwelling in isolation would have roused suspicions in ancient times. (In some communities, they still do! Crazy cat lady, anyone?) Really, anyone who lives alone in a rugged place like a mountain—must be not only strange but likely somewhat supernatural.

Perhaps real women served to give life to the yamamba myth. Contemporary Japanese poet and critic Baba Akiko (b. 1928), for example, has written extensively on the yamamba and believes an early source for "the woman in the mountain" was likely that of the itinerant entertainer. In the medieval era, as the Japanese population grew, people began to travel across the mountains to one town and then another to trade or to look for work. Female entertainers traveled as well, and many likely set up their place of business along the mountain pathways and made their living by entertaining passersby. Baba conjectures that once these women grew old, they continued to live in the mountains, becoming associated with the *yamamba* (Baba, 276–77). Stories then emerged, argues Baba, of old women living alone in the mountains who prey on passersby. They were believed to be cannibalistic and deadly.

But not everyone saw the yamamba as a horrific figure. We know that many other early stories also described the yamamba in positive terms, as wise and helpful. In Zeami's noh play, for example, she is depicted as helping the weaver with her loom and the farmer with his harvest. Although, as we've seen, the yamamba is often described as appetite incarnate, some stories portray her as extraordinarily fecund. In one legend she gives birth to 7800 babies at once (Reider, 15). Some yamamba were even glamorous. In the 18th century, for example, the yamamba figure was traced to a beautiful courtesan who flees the licensed quarters to give birth—not to 7800 babies but only to one, Kintarō, a child of superhuman strength who becomes a famous warrior. These early tales certainly make one thing about the yamamba clear: whether frightening or friendly, she doesn't do anything halfway. She is extreme.

Extremely deadly or extremely nurturing. And in many respects, she represents a kind of justice, the validation for retribution. Those who trespass on her territory and make light of her prohibitions are dealt with harshly. Those who are kind to her are rewarded and protected. In this way, the yamamba, like many other oni/demons in Japanese myth, crosses over into the realm of the kami/gods. She is at once a demon and a god; the manifestation of fearsome power in female form.

Zeami's Yamamba

No wonder the yamamba and the wealth of possibilities for interpreting her attracted the attention of artists, too. I've already mentioned Noh playwright Zeami Motokiyo, but let's take a closer look at his play, since that is where the word "yamamba" enters into currency. The play describes a dancer who has made her name in the capital of Kyoto by performing dances based on the

imagined yamamba. She is on her way through the mountains to a famous temple—where she will give thanks for her success. Once she is deep in the mountains, she meets a mysterious old woman. Suddenly, although it is only noon, the sun leaves the sky and night falls. The old woman asks the now terrified dancer to perform her signature dance. We learn that the yamamba wants to be reassured that her name, her dance, her fame will not forgotten. As the play continues, the old woman reveals that she is the true yamamba. It is she who has been the source of the dancer's creativity and fame. And through the beauty of the play itself, she—and all who behold the power of the stage performance—shows that the awesomeness of the yamamba, which can only be hinted at but never truly captured, will never fade.

When we step back and consider Zeami's position in this vision, the play takes on greater meaning. It is not only about an unruly woman, but the vagaries of fame in the medieval court. Zeami was by now a famous performer. But, as a performer, he was vulnerable to the taste and power of the ruling class. Performers, no matter how privileged, were "special status people," some would say outcastes, and they depended on the powerful for their survival. In fact, Zeami would eventually fall out of favor with the ruling class and would be exiled. In the play then, when the yamamba asks to see her dance performed, she is echoing Zeami's own concern that his art not be forgotten, or merely imitated. The yamamba becomes the metaphor of Zeami's own anxieties and appetite. She symbolizes the power of his artistic vision but also its precarity. She also highlights the fact that art, pure art, at its inception, is often difficult to perceive. It emerges from the dark chaos of creative genius and threatens established sensibilities. Artists then, like the yamamba, are denizens of marginal worlds.

The Modern Yamamba: Mythic "Re-Vision"

In the modern era, too, the yamamba fascinated male artists. The playwright and author Izumi Kyōka (1873-1939), active in the early 20th century played on the titillating tension between the yamamba's deadly and maternal natures. His short story "The Holy Man of Mount Kōya" (Kōya Hijiri, 1900), for example, draws readers into a mysterious mountain world, far away from the modern realm, where the titular holy man encounters a magnificent woman who is both terrifying and beguiling. As with Zeami's work, this yamamba, too, serves as the monk's egress onto his spiritual path.

By the mid-20th century, however, the feminist appropriation of the yamamba took a slightly different turn, celebrating the yamamba's singularity and outsiderness. They employ her grotesque aspects as an imaginative catalyst to escape or overturn social demands for proper femininity. But, why appropriate myth in the first place? There are any number of female historical figures who pushed the envelope, inciting controversy and chaos. So why draw on this particular mythic woman?

Following this question, we see that women artists turn to myths for a variety of reasons. Of these, perhaps the most compelling is that mythic tales feel foundational. Western notions of male supremacy can be traced to the Book of Genesis, for example, and in Japan the subjugation of the unruly female can be tied to the ancient tales collected in the *Kojiki* (712). Because women and womanhood rarely fare well in these foundational narratives, digging down into myths offers women artists a means to assert control over them. Taking on these myths irreverently in their own voices allows women to level the playing field a bit. Their stories can restore justice, establish new foundations, and pose alternatives.

Another reason that myths and fairytales are attractive to appropriate is because the female characters in them are already aberrant. They grab our attention from the start. By re-telling these tales, women artists are able to pose questions about identity, gender politics, and the role of women in contemporary society. By allowing the marginalized or aberrant character to take center stage, to tell the story in her own voice, these artists are able to challenge the power structures that abjected her in the first place.

Claiming the authority to rewrite myth, Japanese women artists have appropriated both western and Japanese fairytales alike. Their stories often establish bonds of identity with the mythic female, whether Japan's Moon Princess or Hans Christian Anderson's Little Mermaid. Yet, the one mythical figure that appears most often in Japanese feminist retellings is the yamamba. Of all the legendary figures—why her? Why not the Sun Goddess or the seductive fox? The yamamba seems so …. grotesque. But for the majority of artists, it is the very grotesqueness of the yamamba that invites inspiration. In sum, she represents everything that women must not be: hungry, alone, unbounded. Appropriating the yamamba's terrible power allows the artist to step outside the myths that already claim her in her everyday life, the myth of the proper woman, of polite contentment, of the "happy-ever-after."

The complexities of the yamamba's backstory as icon of female beauty and monstrosity, of the abject and the enticing has required an extensive introduction. Now, let's consider the way she has re-emerged in contemporary women's art, in the three examples I mentioned earlier. I am interested in the way each artist adds new dimensions to the characterization of the yamamba and also uses the yamamba to create a lineage of resistance upon which to draw strength.

Ōba Minako and "The Smile of a Mountain Witch"

First, let's turn to Ōba Minako and her 1976 story "The Smile of a Mountain Witch." Oba lived in the United States for some years, mostly in Alaska. A keen observer of human nature, Ōba was acutely aware of her own alienation and otherness. But she wasn't just an outsider to the culture she

experienced in the US. She often depicted women who felt alienated from their own sense of self—unable to accept themselves as wives or mothers or, in fact, in any domestic female role deemed proper. In a number of her stories, Ōba explores this sense of isolation and otherness through the yamamba, breathing new life into the myth as she does so. Rather than viewing the yamamba as an object of fear—and exclusively as representation of female aberration—she invents an interior for the yamamba and tells the story from the inside out.

But surely these old witches cannot have been wrinkled old hags from birth. At one time they must have been babies with skin like freshly pounded rice cakes and the faint, sweet-sour odor peculiar to the newborn. . . . For one reason or another, however, we never hear about young witches living up in the mountains (Ōba, 90).

In "The Smile of a Mountain Witch" she uses the yamamba to present an alternative picture of girlhood, imagining what it would be like to grow up aware of one's own supernatural powers. Ōba's yamamba lives in a human settlement, in the *sato*. The yamamba has the ability to read minds, but as a little girl she soon learns that if she is too talkative or too honest or too self-centered, people will not like her. Because she knows what people are thinking, she is able to adapt herself to meet their expectations. She feels that she must learn to hide her talents, her yamamba nature, to pretend and to perform. In other words, she becomes an allegory of what real girls must learn to do.

Adulthood only heightens this budding yamamba's sense of duty to others. When she eventually marries, she discovers that her egotistical husband wants her to be jealous, and so she acts jealous. He also wants her to be desirable to other men, so she flirts. She performs the role of a dutiful wife. But her inner yamamba grows weary of living in the human world and living up to its expectations. She dreams of returning to the mountains where she can be free and natural.

When she imagined herself living alone in the mountains, she likened herself to a beautiful fairy, sprawled in the fields, naked under the benevolent sun, surrounded by trees and grasses and animals. But once a familiar human being appeared from the settlement, her face would change into that of an ogress. He would stare at her, mouth open like an idiot, and utter coarse, incoherent, conceited words, making her fly into a rage (Ōba 99).

When the yamamba looked at her face reflected in a clear spring:

Then she would see that half her face was smiling like an affectionate mother, while the other half was seething with demonic rage (Ōba, 99).

One of the most poignant scenes in Ōba's story comes at the end. As the yamamba is dying, she thinks back to her own mother and realizes that she too must have been a yamamba. The thought makes her smile. Her own daughter, seeing her deathbed smile, assumes her mother's smile represents her fulfilled life.

"Such a beautiful death mask—Mother, you really must have been a happy woman" (Ōba, 107).

Even the final act is misread. The reader, however, is in on the truth.

The tragedy in Ōba's story is that the yamamba not only denied her own power, she passed along to her daughter an inheritance of self-denial. The proud legacy of yamamba power that she might have bequeathed her daughter is retracted in deference to the expectations of her social circles. We understand that the daughter, who is also a yamamba, has hidden her talents, too, in order to fit nicely into polite society. Any avenue of communication between mother and daughter, any opportunity for mutual comfort and acknowledgment, or dual fight for change, is foreclosed.

Yanagi Miwa and the Photographs of Future Yamambas

The photographer Yanagi Miwa, my next case study, takes an opposite approach. She celebrates channels of communication between generations of potential yamambas in her ongoing photographic series "My Grandmothers," which she started in 2000. Here, she creates a multigenerational montage of female communication, allowing the yamamba to speak to (and sometimes for) their granddaughters. Her yamamba grandmothers reach back from the future to assist their younger selves. For her photograph series **"**My Grandmothers," Yanagi asked young women (as well as a few men) to visualize what kind of woman they themselves might become in fifty years. Her photographs (which sometimes took her years to shoot) recreates that visualization, placing the young woman in the role of the grandmother. Yanagi calls the images she creates "grandmothers," rather than "old women"—not because her models share a blood kinship with her but to suggest that all older women are, as critic Mayako Murai explains "grandmothers to younger generations of women who will follow their path. That the series has included three male models so far also shows that Yanagi's notion of grandmotherhood is not limited to its biological sense" (Murai 238). Borrowing from these models' ideas, Yanagi creates collaborative portraits of the ideal elderly woman. Many of these creations emerge as transcendent and free-floating women, untethered by choice to family or home. We see grandmothers jet setting somewhere, destination unknown, or side-eyeing the emotional weakness of their younger selves with an assurance that comes from survival. A few of the images reclaim famous European fairytale scenes, such as those from Cinderella or Sleeping Beauty, revealing how—again to quote Murai— "traditional fairy tales can inform the ways in which we understand and imagine our life stories as far as half a century into the future" (238). But the insertion of the *elderly* "fairy princess" subverts the story by claiming agency over the narrative. As Murai notes:

[T]he women in the My Grandmothers series glow with vitality and individuality, as though old age were the golden age for women, when they

could finally be freed from social obligations expected of women of reproductive age. In the disguise of a so-called second childhood, these women seem to regain access to their pre-Oedipal omnipotence (237).

Dancing the Yamamba: Yasuko Yokoshi and *shuffleyamamba*

Contemporary dance choreographer Yasuko Yokoshi is another artist who appropriates the yamamba image. Yokoshi is an artist now active in Kyoto. Classically trained in ballet, she traveled to New York City as a young woman and soon immersed herself in the contemporary dance scene, until she returned to Japan twenty years later to begin studying Nihon buyo. In her 2019 performance piece *shuffleyamamba,* Yokoshi weaves together a multifaceted work that celebrates the enduring legacies of dance and female performance. Her provocative movements, costuming, and narrative confront entrenched assumptions about age, race, and desiring bodies, crossing the borders of artistic convention. In a way, her piece fills the gap between the tragedy of Ōba's story and the optimism of Yanagi's photographs. Her work gestures towards Zeami's earlier Noh play "Yamamba" by embedding the noh song and dance into the choreography, but at the same time she does more to accentuate and celebrate the creative lineage shared by women, which is subtly presented in Zeami's piece.

The lineage is one that is at once cruel and liberating. Using an absolutely fabulous layering of media on stage and sampling from both vernacular and Western dance traditions, Yokoshi charts the way women performers have had to contend with the sexualization of their specularization, that is, the common readings of women on stage. The woman on stage is by the very fact of her visibility an object of male desire, regardless of whether she is dancing a burlesque or performing a religious ritual. Yokoshi counters the routine visibility of the stage performer with the unscripted, nonconforming sexuality of the yamamba. The yamamba represents the elided power of female creativity. The female dancers performed in *shuffleyamamba* are descendants of the yamamba, the true fount of female power and creativity. But they have lost touch with their true potential, forcing their bodies to conform to scripted and carefully controlled dance movements—whether traditionally western or Japanese—and to offer themselves as objects of specularization. Yokoshi shows both yamamba energy as creativity and women as forced to discipline, even negate this energy

Conclusion

Why does the yamamba surface in so many landmark works by Japanese women artists? We can see how the figure of the yamamba serves as the touchstone—or egress—to all their aspirations for freedom from the stifling demands of the patriarchal family system—a system that expected women to sacrifice for the betterment of their husband and children. But the yamamba

also reveals the vulnerability of women who do resist. They will be misunderstood and misread, sexualized, and ostracized. The yamamba is an image that bears the press of time. She is a composite of layers of myth, misogyny, and the fear of female power and creativity. For women artists, she represents the layered lives of all the women who have come before them. She is the container for their own complex stories and the stories of their forbears. In Ōba's work, the yamamba represents the suppression of those stories and the silencing of the voice. Ōba asks us to consider how oppressive must a social system be if it can deprive even a yamamba of her voice.

Dancer Yokoshi recaptures the yamamba's ability to astonish—she allows the yamamba to dance before us as a powerful force that is both terrifying and vulnerable. In contrast, photographer Yanagi Miwa invites us to collaborate in envisioning new grandmothers, the yamamba-like grandmothers who offer the possibility of a future for women and men, for transcending gender, stereotypes, and fears. Her yamambas open the door to new dreams and adventures.

Exploring how three women artists have reframed the yamamba's transgression, we see how they find power in her richness as allegory. These artists make us wonder how long the myth of the yamamba as monster will continue. Will she continue to be isolated from the pleasant niceties of the village, chased from the borders of the community and thrust back into the liminal wilds of the mountains? Or, will she remake the village to suit her own vision, giving us all more powerful appetites for creativity and self-expression? Will the achievement of gender equality or gender transcendence in Japan lead the yamamba to vanish from contemporary art, or is there something more, something primal that will ensure her forever future?

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REVISITING JAPAN'S SHIFTING SHIKIGAMI SPIRIT HELPER

Laura MILLER[1]

In this essay I will explore the transformations in visual representations and meanings of supernatural creatures named *shikigami*, beings who were initially described in medieval Japanese folktales. The most common understanding of shikigami is that they were supernatural entities conscripted as servants to a ritual specialist called an *onmyōji*. In scrolls we see shikigami portrayed as attendants to onmyōji who held prominence during the Heian era (794 to 1185). These early depictions of spirit helpers are of gnarled, distorted humanoid creatures. However, in recent media such as manga, anime, and film, the spirit helper has been radically transformed and diversified. The refurbishing of the spirit helper into new forms is remarkable because it illustrates the extent to which post-Heisei period (1989~2019) Japanese media considers a range of aesthetics and desires when obscure historical material is recast to suit modern ideas and tastes. After a brief overview of shikigami origins, I will survey a few cases of newly envisioned shikigami[2].

Shikigami in early history

An early written description of the abilities of the wizard is found in the fictional tale *Shin Sarugakuki* completed in 1052 and written by the court noble and poet Fujiwara no Akihira (Tu 2020). Although fictional, it contains rich material about the everyday life and thinking among the court aristocracy. It describes onmyōji as able to do things such as summon the twelve guardian deities, call thirty-six types of wild birds, and control shikigami. The famous onmyōji Abe no Seimei (921-1005) is featured in many of these early sources: "Popular collections of tales like *Konjaku monogatari* and *Uji shūi monogatari* include stories describing Abe's use of divinatory techniques, generally portraying him as a person of extraordinary paranormal powers. These tales particularly emphasize his ability to channel the familiar spirits called shikigami" (Inoue nd). The mythology about Seimei expanded in 1662 when a collection solely about him was published, named *The Tale of Abe no Seimei* (Asai 1980).

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[2] This essay was first presented as a conference paper (Miller 2015). I thank Carmen Tamas for inviting me to revisit it.

In an important study of shikigami, Pang (2013) tracks their history in premodern classical works. She claims that, although the most common concept of a shikigami is simply that it is a being who is a wizard's servant, she also outlines other theories concerning their meanings and origins. One interpretation is that shikigami are symbolic of human cognitive power, that they are anthropomorphic realizations of psychological or mental states. A second theory is that shikigami are the manifestation of inherent energy that is localized in objects that can be tapped into and employed through spells. A third idea is that shikigami are a metaphorical reference to supernatural beings associated with a divination device that is linked to a system of calculations, dates and Chinese astrological nodes. The divination system, named *shikisen*, entailed the use of a tool called *chokuban* (this cosmographic board is sometimes also called *shikiban*). The tool is composed of two attached parts, each capable of being rotated. The bottom layer was square and called the Earth panel. It is fixed and represents events and people in the present world. On top of it was the Heaven panel, a round orb that can be rotated. On the Heaven panel are points indicating the twelve "guardians of the month." Pang is referring to the Jūni Tenshō or Twelve Heavenly Generals, who occur frequently in contemporary shikigami representations.[3] The idea is that shikigami are a deified representation of the shikisen divination system.

Other scholars and writers offer even more intriguing theories about the origin of the shikigami. Shigeta (2013:93) wonders if shikigami were simply young boys who accompanied an onmyōji and were misinterpreted as shikigami: "Thus it seems to have been a custom of the time for onmyōji to be attended by young boys, and people may have looked on them as shikigami commanded by the onmyōji." He goes on to say that although found in folktales, non-fiction historical records of the employment of shikigami by court wizards have never been found.

The famous writer Yumemakura Baku, creator of many onmyōji-oriented works, shared some of his ideas about the possible origins of shikigami during an interview (Itoi 2024). He first mentions the popular Twelve Heavenly Generals theory noted above, but then goes on to propose another possible origin. Yumemakura says that Abe no Seimei, the most illustrious onmyōji who commanded many shikigami, kept the Twelve Heavenly Generals "under the

[3] There is debate about the Twelve Heavenly Generals in Onmyōdō and the Twelve Heavenly Generals found in Buddhism. The Buddhist list is derived from the category of supernatural beings named Yakusha, who serve Yakushi Nyorai (the Medicine Buddha). It was not until the early Kamakura period that the Buddhist Twelve Heavenly Generals became associated with the 12 animals of the Chinese zodiac, although the generals themselves are not depicted in animal form in Buddhism (although the associated animals may appear in their headdress or elsewhere). In contrast, the Twelve Heavenly Generals in Onmyōdō are sometimes illustrated in animal form.

Modori Bridge after Seimei's wife kicked them out." He is referring to a story in the *Genpei Jōsuiki* (volume 10, a variant of the *Heike Monogatari*), about a divination ritual that took place at the bridge named Ichijō Modoribashi in Kyoto.[4] Twelve children participated in the event, crossing the bridge while clapping their hands. The *Genpei Jōsuiki* text suggests that perhaps the children were incarnations of the Twelve Heavenly Generals shikigami that Abe no Seimei had been lodging under the bridge. Seimei apparently first kept these shikigami around his house, but his wife found their faces scary, so he decided to warehouse them under the bridge nearby. From there he could summon them to his nearby home when needed. People involved in auspicious events such as weddings avoid crossing the bridge today. The Seimei Jinja (the main shrine dedicated to Abe no Seimei) created a small replica of the bridge that is placed in a garden area together with a kneeling shikigami statue (see Figure 4).

However, Yumemakura continues on his speculative journey through an overextended argument that is a bit convoluted. He suggests that the Buddhist deity figure named Matarajin was originally a Jōmon period (c. 14,000 ~300 BCE) deity or shikigami that traveled via the Silk Road from its origin in Africa to other countries, undergoing name changes and variation in the legends about them. Yumemakura supported this theory by talking about Noh theater masks and ancient representations of distorted faces that are found across the globe. Yumemakura admits that schoalrs have not greeted his theory with enthusiasm. The interview took place thirty-eight years after Yumemakura (1988) penned the first volume of the Onmyōji light novel series that helped inaugurate the popular culture production of thousands of manga, TV series, films, games, theatrical productions, and more. In that early onmyōji work Yumemakura created a shikigami named Mitsumushi who takes the form of an adorable female court lady. It appears that he has veered in a new direction in his thinking about shikigami.

Legendary and well-respected wizards such as Abe no Seimei possessed the power to command the spirit helpers, who protected them and carried out some of their business. Most of the medieval descriptions of shikigami depict beings with low-ranking spiritual existence, thus somewhat similar to the European concept of the familiar spirit (Wilby 2005). European folklore and drawings of familiar spirits generally depict a range of small animals or humanoid forms, but unlike shikigami, they did not have widespread and enduring cultural significance. There were various types of shikigami. Some were described as paper effigies called *katashiro*, others were inanimate objects transformed by the wizard into living spirit helpers, while some were animal, human, or humanoid supernatural beings with shapeshifting abilities. Spirit

[4] The story is retold in the *Kyōto Tōri Hyakkajiten* (Kyōto Street Encyclopedia). Online at https://www.kyototuu.jp/Geography/BridgeIchijyouModoriHashi.html

helpers are thought to have been visible to the wizard alone. The supernatural shikigami attendant could transform into various other beings and carry out mundane or dangerous tasks on behalf of the wizard by creating self-replica decoys to trick enemies. The shikigami paintings in scrolls are deformed creatures with enormous noses, bulging eyes, misshapen heads, and stunted limbs.

It is important to note that the shikigami in pre-modern sources and legends do not have names, although as seen in scroll illustrations, they look quite different from each other with red skin or other hued bodies. In the scroll painting (Figure 1) called *Fudō riyaku-engi emaki* (Illustrated Handscroll of Benefits from Fudō, Tokyo National Museum), dated between 1333 and 1392, we see an onmyōji being assisted during a purification rite to eliminate disease demons, with two shikigami facing in the direction of the demons. The demons are embodied manifestations of ailments (called *yakubyō-gami*). Although the scroll does not name who the onmyōji is, he is usually identified as Abe no Seimei.

Figure 1. *Fudō riyaku-engi emaki*, 14th century. Wikimedia Commons.

This initial painting was the model for subsequent representations of shikigami, and several later paintings were based on the tableau in this scroll. They place the onmyōji, the shikigami, and the demons in the same positions. A large painted votive plaque (*o-ema*) at Seimei Jinja in Kyoto also depicts an identical scene. Large votive plaques like the one at Seimei Jinja are usually linked to the enshrined deity or legends about the shrine.

In 2023 an exhibition held at the National Museum of Japanese History (Kokuritsu Rekishi Minzoku Hakubutsukan) featured a large diorama of the legendary scene from the scrolls. The exhibit was named "Who are Onmyoji? Fortune-telling, spells, and calendar-making," and it combined images and

artifacts both from history and from contemporary popular culture.[5] In the diorama they exhibited, the shikigami kneeling to the left of Seimei (who is wearing a black robe and reading a text) are more defined, rounder, and less grotesque than those in the scrolls (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Diorama of Abe no Seimei with shikigami and demons. Kokuritsu Rekishi Minzoku Hakubutsukan, 2023.

There are many versions of this tantalizing scene of the figure of Abe no Seimei and his shikigami assistants. However, another core portrait of Abe no Seimei that is also reproduced in countless media is a Muromachi era (ca 1336–1573) painting on a silk scroll. It is owned by the Abe Ōji Shrine in Osaka and is rarely shown to the public. However, it was on loan to the Seimei Jinja in Kyoto for an exhibit in 2022 (*Asahi Shimbun* 2022). The deeply hued painting shows Seimei praying while seated on a raised platform together with a humanlike shikigami with orangish skin tones and hair tied up with headband. The shikigami is holding a torch and looking on with great interest. A later sketch adaptation of this portrait was done by Kikuchi Yōsai (1781- 1878), a painter known for his monochrome portraits of historical figures (Figure 3).

[5] Exhibit held October 3 to December 10, 2023. Website at https://artexhibition.jp/topics/news/20231002-AEJ1618198/

Figure 3. Drawing of Abe no Seimei and a shikigami. In the *Zenken Kojitsu* by Kikuchi Yōsai (1781- 1878).
Wikimedia Commons.

This representation of shikigami seems to have been adopted by the Seimei Jinja in Kyoto when they undertook their extensive renovations after 2003. There is something called *kaodashi kanban*, which are standing boards with cut-outs for visitors to stick their faces through for photos. They are popular in tourist spots, and Seimei Jinja has its own. Theirs includes Abe no Seimei and three shikigami: two are similar to the original *Fudō riyaku-engi* scroll, and one is drawn from Kikuchi's drawing. Seimei Jinja also commissioned a small garden-sized version of the Ichijō Modori Bridge mentioned above (Figure 4). The miniature scene includes a statue of a shikigami wearing a headband and holding a torch.

Figure 4. Photo of shikigami and miniature Ichijō Modori bride at Seimei Shrine.
Wikimedia Commons.

The shrine sells a cute cell phone strap of this version of shikigami (Figure 7). This version of the shikigami moves us towards acknowledgment that in recent decades they are often presented in a cute manner, making them endearing rather than repulsive. The scenes of Seimei conducting an exorcism ritual, and of the shikigami who help him, have captivated viewers for centuries. While it continues to be reproduced in modern forms, the appearance of both Abe no Seimei and the shikigami, are often represented in different or more complex ways (Miller 2015).

Shikigami Transformed

A review of shikigami in contemporary media finds that they are presented as more diverse, individualized, and often handsome or adorable. They are rarely brute onmyōji helpers, but instead are named and aggrieved characters with complex personalities. Culture producers indulge contemporary preoccupations, especially those found in the lucrative female fan market, and thus create a spectrum of cutely grotesque shikigami characters that appeal to this readership and consumer category. In particular, the spirit helper exemplifies popular aesthetics found in youth culture. One is *kawaii* (cute), which includes many overlooked permutations, including the concept of *guro kawaii* "grotesque cute." This is a sensibility that characterizes much of girls' manga, anime, fashion and other cultural forms (Miller and Stevens 2021). Many of the shikigami seen in current manga, anime and film reflect the grotesque cute aesthetic.

In recent years, shikigami in popular culture have not only been represented as cute or grotesque-cute beings, at times they have also taken on individual personas and histories as well. An example is found in the feature film released in 2011 entitled *Onmyōji* (Takita 2001). The primary shikigami who serves Abe no Seimei is named Mitsumushi (Honeybug). She is a shape-shifting butterfly who normally appears in the form and clothing of a Heian period aristocrat. She is said to have been brought back as a rare butterfly by the Buddhist priest Kūkai (Kōbō Daishi) from his participation in a cultural and diplomatic mission to the Tang capital of Chang'an in 806. Mitsumushi is loyal and cheerful but seemingly dense. Her spoken voice and words are simple and repetitive. For example, she often repeats the sentiment "He is a very good man" about the character of Minamoto Hiromasu, Seimei's friend and sidekick in the film series. She is an embodiment of the type of shikigami who are deceptively human-like, yet beneath their outward forms they are more like faithful pet dogs with low intelligence. However, in some later representations of the shikigami Mitsumushi, she reveals more intelligence. An example is the NHK TV drama series *Onmyōji*, with former SMAP boy band member Inagaki Gorō playing the part of Abe no Seimei, Sugimoto Tette played Minamoto Hiromasa, and Honjō Manami played Mitsumushi (Odagiri 2001). Mitsumushi

exhibits strong feelings for Seimei, and shows awareness that Hiromasa has a crush on her.

Shikigami with complex biographies are also found in works such as *Shōnen Onmyōji*, the story of a novice teenage wizard named Abe no Masahiro, who is putatively the grandson of Abe no Seimei (Mori 2006). It began as a low-grade novel by Yūki Mitsuru (2001) that eventually became a manga, an anime, a musical, and a PlayStation2 game. One primary spirit helper in *Shōnen Onmyōji* is the noticeably unique character named Mokkun, a shape shifting fox-cat hybrid. Here we meet an endearing manifestation of the shikigami. In the series this shikigami is super intelligent with an assertive and mischievous personality. The sweet yet obtuse female human-like shikigami Mitsumushi is an interesting contrast to bunny-kitty Mokkun, who is erudite, snide, and cranky (Figure 5). In the first episode of the anime series, Abe no Seimei asks his grandson to look into some disturbance, and Mokkun grumbles that "He makes it sound like a simple errand." Mokkun often makes insinuations that Masahiro is inept or clueless. He says things such as "At least I can give you credit for enthusiasm," with the implication that otherwise he has failed. When Masahiro says "A *mononoke* [a different, vengeful supernatural being, not a shikigami]) like you," Mokkun argues with him, ending with "You're Seimei's grandson and you don't know the difference?" (Yamada 2006).[6]

Figure 5. Mokkun in *Shōnen Onmyōji* Episode 1.
Screenshot from anime (Yamada 2006).

[6] It should be noted that the original voice of Mokkun in the Japanese anime is that of a male teenager, and not the same as the higher pitched-female voice in the English subbed versions. The use of a female voice for dubbing softens Mokkun's brusqueness.

Mokkun is eventually revealed as one form of a more humanoid character named Guren, who supposedly was Abe no Seimei's main shikigami. This is of course a fabrication, because in the legends and folktales, shikigami were not named beings.

The market for shikigami-related manga covers several micro-markets. I will mention a few that target female readers. For young readers there is a series entitled *Shikigami x Shōjo* (Kubota 2007). In this story a student named Hibiki summons five shikigami to aid her in battling bad goblins. The five shikigami are cute beings named after the Four Guardians of the Four Compass Directions plus one other.[7] One shikigami looks a bit like a hastily drawn cat, another is a cheerful cow-like being, and one is an odd round thing that wears a bandana cap. They are cheerful and blob-like, and will sometimes sit on Hibiki's shoulder like parakeets. The first volume includes three separate bonus mini-manga named "Shikigami Days," of two pages each. In these the four odd shikigami gossip, grumble, and talk mainly to each other about what is going on in their lives.

In contrast to this light-hearted and innocent manga, there are also manga that appeal to an audience interested in erotic material. A somewhat older readership consumes products that fall in the overlapping categories of romance, erotic, shōjo, and the supernatural. Here we find two manga for women that present shikigami as ensnared love slaves. One example is *Moe Moe Darling: My Boyfriend is a Shikigami* (Asami 2007). The main character Maika is a female descendant in an onmyōji lineage who is given a shikigami for her 16th birthday. The shikigami is named Homura, and he acquires power through having sex. Homura is described an *ero shikigami,* erotic spirit helper.

The manga series *Shikigami Danshi* (Young Male Spirit Helper) was first published as a *yomikiri***,** a standalone pilot manga that is not part of a series (but if popular, it might become a serialized manga). It first appeared in the January 2015 issue of the manga magazine *Cheese* (Chīzu. Figure 6). *Cheese* is a monthly girls' manga magazine published by Shōgakukan. *Shikigami Danshi* was later published as a series in separate bound versions by Nanao Mio (2015). It is the story about a young woman who realizes she has inherited magical wizard abilities, so decides to control the coolest guy in her school by turning him into a shikigami so that he will serve as her supernatural aide. Nanao's understanding of shikigami appears to be something like a spellbound masochistic sexual slave. It presents an interesting yet abbreviated and jokey understanding of the way onmyōji learn their work. For example, instead of having to go through the long-term training, similar to a that of a university graduate student (a process which is documented for historic onmyōji), she is

[7] For a review of the English version see Sherman (2011).

simply provided with written instructions. She is given a scroll entitled "How to Use Shikigami" that educates her on the methods needed to ensnare her target. The premise is that simply by writing down the wish to make someone obey your directives it will seal them in your power as a shikigami.

Figure 6. January 2015 cover of manga magazine *Cheese*, featuring "Shikigami Danshi."

How wizards summon or control the spirit helper is particularly open to imaginative interpretation such as this. In cases other than *Shikigami Danshi* manga, another method said to be used for controlling shikigami was via use of magical incantations and hand signs. The hand gestures are sometimes called *kuji-in* (Nine Seals).[8] The beautifully executed hand signs performed by the actor Nomura Monsai, who played the role of Abe no Seimei in the first *Onmyōji* film (Takita 2001), provided inspiration for thousands of media products that include these gestures. Nevertheless, a Heian-era written description dedicated to how to control shikigami has never been discovered.

Much of the new popular culture media treat the shikigami designation as an open, undefined category that may be populated with almost anything related to the supernatural world. An example is the frequency in which manga, anime, games, blogs, and websites confuse *ayakashi* (vengeful spirits) with shikigami. This jumbled appropriation of the term shikigami means that the named entity has lost its original meaning and is now more or less a synonym for almost any

[8] *Kuji-in* continue to be used in some religious practices, such as among Shugendō adepts.

supernatural being. A major publishing success was the manga series *Jujutsu Kaisen* (Akutami 2018- 2024) that was later offered in other media forms such as games and anime. It includes a number of characters from Japanese folklore, including shikigami. In this series the shikigami are named beings in the form of dogs or chimerical creatures. These beings do not resemble classical shikigami. In a similar fashion, numerous supernatural beings from Japanese folklore are similarly prevalent in manga, anime, and other popular media. Global fans are familiar with names for supernatural beings such as ayakashi, mononoke, *yūrei* (ghosts), *yamamba* (mountain witch), and others. With a lexicon for supernatural beings at hand, why are culture producers reaching for the shikigami, especially in cases where the being thus named does not accord well with the term? Perhaps shikigami is used as a replacement for more suitable terms because it marks the media product as uniquely offering something mysteriously more complex or ancient.

Onmyoji Arena is an online Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) game hosted by NetEase Games. The playable characters or roles are named "Shikigami" and are supposedly drawn from Japanese folklore or the "onmyōji universe." However, among the main roles in this game are samurai, mage, marksman, support and ninja. On their fan website named Onmyoji Arena Wiki they have a "List of Shikigami" that includes more than one hundred entries, with the samurai type shikigami showing prominence.[9] The concept of something like a samurai shikigami is difficult to process unless one completely vacates the meaning of shikigami. Shikigami that have been detached from their understandings in folklore and legend have become normalized in popular media in ways that strip its rich history of forms and associations.

Japan is famous for the range of incredible merchandise tie-ins for popular manga, anime, games, and films. The transnational franchise of popular characters and media, called media mix in Japan, includes the production of everything imaginable beyond the original media, such as games, toys, plushies, entertainment venues, and even food items or naming (Steinberg 2023). Thus, it is not surprising to find shikigami-related plushies, stickers, stamps, notepads, dishware and food. I saw an advertisement for shikigami curry rice one time. The tie-ins for the Jujutsu Kaisen franchise are impressive, not only because of the expected figurines (Bushiroad Creative 2023), but also dishware.[10] As mentioned above, even the Semei Jinja worked its own media mix by offering

[9] Onmyoji Arena Wiki online at https://onmyojiarena.fandom.com/wiki/List_of_Shikigami.

[10] The Japanese e-commerce company Mercari sells Jujutsu Kaisen shikigami curry dishware. It is a curry bowl decorated with the cute shikigami beings from the series on the rim of the bowl. Jujutsu Kaisen Megumi Fushiguro karē sara. Online at https://jp.mercari.com/item/m10129477294?srsltid=AfmBOop9i1jnCKYLbkQHSTLFPCp8paGeXVMGNmrta2E7UU3O_IB3HK0-

items such as a cute shikigami cell-phone strap. A private shop once in the vicinity of the shrine sold shikigami oil blotting papers, towels, fans, and more (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Shikigami cosmetic oil blotting paper and shikigami figure cell phone strap on a red cloth with a representation of the cosmographic board printed on it. Photo by Author.

Shikigami products are popular not only with fans of Abe no Seimei and onmyoji, but also people interested in divination. The inexhaustible and savvy writer named Kuyōgi Shūkei published a book and occult play objects bundled together entitled *The Secrets of Abe no Seimei: Divination with the Wizard's Spirit Helpers* (Kuyōgi 2001). It includes a fold-out cardboard cosmographic divination board with twenty-four named cards representing The Twelve Heavenly Generals (Jūni Tenshō) and other characters used in the Rokujin Shinka divination system. The Twelve Generals in this divination set are named Jūkai, Densō, Shōkichi, Shōsen, Taiichi, Tenkō, Daishō, Kōsō, Daikichi, and Shinkō. The person seeking the divination shuffles the cards and selects eight, which are then placed in a tarot-card type of numbered layout on the cosmographic board (Figure 8). A few of the cards depicted in Figure 8 are shikigami named Jūkai who is a rooster, Shōsen who is a horse resplendent in orange attire, Daikichi who is a black bull, and Shinkō who is a rat wearing a luxurious purple robe. I am intrigued by Kakai, a dog who is holding a katashiro paper effigy, which are sometimes animated and turned into a shikigami by onmyōji. Is this a shikigami holding another shikigami?

Figure 8. Cosmographic divination board with shikigami cards Kuyōgi 2001). Photo by Author.

The evolution of shikigami from dumb beings to crafty humanlike spirits with their own wills and obnoxious personalities has not replaced the idea that some inanimate objects can be energized by a wizard to serve as a low-level shikigami. The katashiro type of paper effigy shikigami also remains a widely used image in popular media, and may be present together with humanlike shikigami.

Theorizations of monsters by scholars often link the resurgence of interest in vampires, mummies, aliens, and zombies to fears about rapidly changing social life and the disintegration of morality and selfhood. For example, the cover text of an edited volume (Wonser and Boyns 2016) posits that zombie films "express cultural anxieties about selfhood, loss of autonomy, and threats of de-individualization." This concept has been dubbed Monster Theory, and was also explored by scholars in an edited volume that claims to "consider beasts, demons, freaks, and fiends as symbolic expressions of cultural unease that pervade a society" (Cohen 1996). Thus, thinking about the monstrous as a reflection of social anxiety has widespread currency in academia. In contrast, during the interview with the author Yumemakura discussed above, he points out that he is always asked if the interest in onmyōji is because of social anxiety or unrest. He rejects that idea, and stresses that the appeal of the stories is simply how they allow one to enter a fantasy world. I agree with Yumemakura that given the ubiquity of monsters and supernatural beings throughout history and globally, simply pointing to "social unrest" as a contributing factor does not tell us very much. Furthermore, there is often more than one simple explanation for cultural and social shifts.

In addition to providing entertainment value and escapism, the shikigami boom among girls and women may also have aspects of their rejection of suffocating productivity-oriented activities.[11] By participating in shikigami fandom they are stepping away from expected gendered behaviors related to school, work, or care of others. Shikigami media is a fitting vehicle for time away from chores and responsibilities.

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CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF BAKÉMONO IN ANCIENT, MEDIEVAL, EARLY MODERN, AND POSTMODERN JAPAN: THEIR SIGNIFICANCE TO THE JAPANESE PEOPLE

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Introduction

The Japanese understanding of supernatural beings differs significantly from that of Western and Middle Eastern societies, which are rooted in Abrahamic monotheism. Monotheistic traditions draw a sharp ontological distinction between God as Creator and all created beings, including humans. In contrast, Japanese cosmology regards both *kami* (deities) and *bakémono* (monsters) as beings possessing extraordinary power beyond that of ordinary humans. In Shinto, when enshrined by the people, or in Buddhism, when ritually offered up, a bakémono once perceived as a threat can be transformed into a protective kami. In other words, the determination of whether a powerful presence is viewed as a benevolent kami or a malevolent bakémono depends on human perception and ritual engagement. This deeply embedded collective worldview may explain why Christianity has never gained more than 1% of the Japanese population, and why Judaism and Islam, despite centuries of missionary activity, have remained marginal.

Having been born in Japan during the mid-20th century—a period of rapid economic growth following the national crisis of wartime defeat—I perceived overwhelming supernatural forces not as medieval *yokai* (specters), but as *kaiju* (monsters) like Godzilla or Gamera. The Scientific Special Search Party (SSSP) functioned as a modern analogue to yin-yang masters and esoteric Buddhist monks, responsible for sealing away these monsters. However, when such monsters exceeded the limits of human science and technology, Ultraman emerged as a deus ex machina, instantly restoring a chaotic world to its original peaceful state. For digital natives, particularly Generation Z, who have grown up amidst the proliferation of personal computers and mobile devices, Japanese animation works such as “Pokémon” depict cooperative relationships between humans and creatures. The global popularity of these Japanese anime works may even signal a shift away from the monotheistic worldview that has dominated much of the world for over two millennia.

This paper explores the evolving concept of bakémono in Japanese culture by tracing its transformation across four historical periods: ancient, medieval, early modern, and postmodern.

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[*] Konko Church

1. The meaning of "bakeru" in Japanese

Before delving into the historical trajectory of bakémono in Japan, it is essential to consider the meaning of the Japanese verb *bakeru*. According to Shogakukan's "Digital Daijisen," the Japanese verb "bakeru" has four main meanings.

(1) To change one's original form or shape into something else—for example, a fox transforming into a human.

(2) To conceal one's true identity and assume another—such as disguising oneself as an employee to gain unauthorized access.

(3) To undergo a complete transformation in purpose or nature—for instance, money intended for a book being spent on alcohol instead.

(4) To change suddenly or unexpectedly—for example, an actor's reputation improving after a major incident, or dramatic fluctuations in stock prices.

Thus, the verb "bakeru" encompasses both positive and negative connotations, fundamentally referring to a significant transformation in state or condition. It is quite fitting that in the middle of the 19th century, the Japanese of that time translated "chemistry," a field of natural science introduced from the West, into the Japanese word "bakegaku (study of transforming)." A familiar example is the chemical reaction whereby hydrogen and oxygen gases combine to form water. However, this transformation does not occur simply by mixing the gases; it requires a catalyst—such as a spark—to initiate the reaction. In other words, for transformation to occur, cause and effect alone are insufficient; in Buddhist thought, the concept of karma serves as the mediating link between them. Thus, karma emerges as a key concept in understanding the historical development of bakémono in Japan.

2. The Ancient Period: *Onryô* (Vengeful Spirit) and *Mononoke*

In both Western and Eastern primitive societies, humans were largely powerless in the face of natural disasters and infectious disease outbreaks (Tamas & Tanaka 2020: 5). Throughout the world, Homo sapiens—so-called "wise apes"—commonly posited invisible spiritual beings as working hypotheses to explain the seemingly irrational cruelty of nature. Especially in the Japanese archipelago, where the frequency of natural disasters—earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, and typhoons—far exceeds the global average, people came to recognize and revere the forces of nature themselves as kami. This aligns with the definition of kami proposed by the 18th-century physician and literary scholar Motoori Norinaga, who wrote: "Whatever it may be, that which is extraordinary, virtuous, and awe-inspiring, we call kami." (Hirota 2022: 122-123) In such a worldview, kami does not always act in favor of humans and may at times bring harm. Conversely,

yokai—typically associated with negative traits—can also bestow blessings (Komatsu 1982).

What, then, determines the variable attributes of kami in the Japanese context? According to folklorist Kazuhiko Komatsu, benevolent kami are divine spirits rendered controllable by humans through the act of ritual enshrinement. In contrast, demons or yokai are considered beyond human control precisely because they have not been ritually enshrined (Komatsu 2017: 87). The most well-known example is Sugawara no Michizane (845–903), who, after being falsely accused by political rivals, was demoted and sent to Dazaifu in Kyushu, where he died harboring a deep grudge. After his death, he was believed to have become a vengeful spirit who caused natural disasters in the capital, Kyoto. These disturbances were eventually quelled when the Imperial Court built a shrine in his honor and enshrined him as Tenman Daijizaitenjin.

Onryô by Adam Cooley

During the Heian period (794-1185), the word "mononoke" was frequently used to refer to grudge spirits. At the time, most mononoke were believed to be the spirits of individuals bearing grudges, and they rarely manifested directly before people. When represented in paintings or sculptures, they were often portrayed as muscular ogres with horns and skin colored red, blue, or green.

In the medieval period, however, a new interpretation emerged: mononoke were sometimes understood as *tsukumogami*, spirits dwelling in aged household objects. These yokai were incorporated into the ranks of oni (demons) and

became associated with the concept of the "Hyakki Yagyō" or "Night Parade of One Hundred Demons." Alternatively, disembodied human features such as eyes, mouth, arms, and legs appeared as independent supernatural entities. Some yokai even took hybrid forms, combining human body parts with everyday objects such as lanterns or umbrellas.

3. The Middle Ages: Tsukumogami and Mononofu

What exactly are tsukumogami? The illustrated tale *Hijō Jōbutsu-e* ("The Scroll of Sentientless Enlightenment"), believed to have been written during the Muromachi period (1336–1573), is commonly known as Tsukumogami Emaki due to its depiction of tsukumogami in the opening scene. According to this scroll, tsukumogami are household items or utensils that, after a hundred years of use, acquire a spirit and begin to tempt or haunt humans.

Chôchin Obake ("a transformed lantern")—Tsukumogami by Adam Cooley

Does this imply that mononoke in the Heian period referred primarily to vengeful human spirits, whereas by the Muromachi period, the term came to include tsukumogami—specters originating from discarded household objects? By the era of Ashikaga Yoshimitsu, the third shogun of the Muromachi shogunate, powerful temples such as Kōfukuji and Enryakuji had significantly expanded their influence. In addition, financiers known as dōsō-sakaya flourished in and around Kyoto, benefiting from the vast wealth generated by trade between Japan and Ming-dynasty China (Miyake 2019: 138-144). With the advent of consumer society, affluent city dwellers began to discard old but still usable vessels.

A widespread belief held that after a hundred years of use, a vessel would acquire a spirit and begin to seduce or influence the hearts of people. Out of fear of this transformation, city dwellers would discard their old vessels during year-end cleanings—often one year before the centennial mark. In Japan, it was widely believed that all things in the universe possessed spiritual potential. Thus emerged the concept of tsukumogami, a compound of the kun-yomi "tsukumo"—meaning "ninety-nine," one short of a hundred—and "kami", meaning a spirit or deity. During this time, social authority shifted from the aristocracy—who had feared Mononoke—to the *mononofu* (samurai), who used military force to suppress such supernatural entities.

If we examine tsukumogami within the framework described in the second subchapter—where benevolent kami are spirits made controllable through ritual enshrinement, whereas demons or yokai remain beyond human control due to their lack of ritual acknowledgment—we gain a deeper understanding of their cultural function. In Japan, objects that were no longer used for their original purpose and were not properly ritually treated—neither offered in the Buddhist sense nor enshrined in the Shinto sense—were believed to transform into yokai. This serves as a potent reminder for contemporary society, which takes mass production, consumption, and disposal for granted.

4. Early Modern Times: Ghosts and *Monoshiri*

It is perhaps surprising that the entities now commonly feared in Japan as *yūrei* (ghosts) did not emerge in their recognizable form until the Edo period (1603–1867), following the violent Sengoku (Warring States) era and over two centuries of relative peace. In culturally rich cities like Kyoto and Osaka, numerous scholarly works on Buddhism, Confucianism, history, literature, geometry, and pharmacology were published, giving rise to a class of intellectuals known as *monoshiri* ("those who know things"). During the Edo period, Japan is believed to have had one of the highest literacy rates in the world, particularly among the common people. While literacy rates in major European cities such as Paris and London during the same period hovered around 10–20%, Edo (now Tokyo) reportedly achieved an estimated literacy rate of 80%. Literacy extended beyond the samurai and merchant classes—whose professions required reading, writing, and arithmetic—to include craftsmen, children, and even courtesans. In Edo, a variety of printed media flourished thanks to woodblock printing. Popular genres included *akahon* (children's folktales with red covers), *kurohon* (romantic tales), *aohon* (light entertainment fiction), *kibyōshi* (illustrated comic books), and *sharebon* (stories set in red-light districts). These books were widely circulated not only through bookstores but also via rental book services.

Numerous ghost story collections were published, including the "three great ghost tales of Edo"—*Yotsuya Kaidan*, *Banchō Sarayashiki*, and *Botan*

Dōrō—as well as works like *Totonoigusa*, *Kaii Zatsudanshū*, *Sorori Monogatari*, *Otogibōko*, *Shokoku Hyaku Monogatari*, and *Shin Otogibōko.* These stories inspired diverse media forms such as *rakugo* (comic storytelling), *kōdan* (oral narrative), kabuki theater, and ukiyo-e prints. As a result, ghosts and yōkai became consumable cultural icons for audiences seeking novel and sensational experiences.

Scholars have identified four recurring themes in Edo-period ghost stories: (1) the obsessive love or vengeance of women, often the cause of supernatural disturbances; (2) karmic retribution for the immoral acts of parents toward their children; (3) unexpected appearances of yōkai in various grotesque forms; and (4) animal transformations, in which familiar creatures morph into demonic entities (*Edo no Kaidan* 2021: 5-7). Thus, the onryō (grudge spirits) that once haunted the aristocracy in ancient times gradually evolved—via tsukumogami in the medieval period—into bakemono that served as popular entertainment for the common people in early modern Japan.

5. Modern and Post-modern Times: Kaiju and Pokémon

In the mid-19th century, under pressure from Western military threats, Japan was compelled to open her borders and subsequently transformed herself from a feudal polity under the Tokugawa shogunate into a modern nation-state in an effort to overcome her perceived backwardness. In the process, Japan adopted Western political systems and scientific paradigms, systematically discarding elements of traditional Japanese thought as "superstition." Through these reforms, the country rapidly constructed a modern state apparatus and, by the early 20th century, had emerged as a peer among the Western powers. However, the animistic worldview that had been cultivated in Japan over millennia could not be eradicated overnight. This latent cosmology resurfaced following Japan's defeat in World War II, as the Western model of civilization — based on wealth, power, and military dominance—began to lose its authority.

This resurgence contributed to a postwar boom in new religious movements and monster films, both of which gained a lasting foothold amid Japan's era of rapid economic growth. As the role of monstrous threats and Ultraman as a deus ex machina has already been addressed in the Introduction, this section instead focuses on the postmodern era, characterized by the proliferation of digital and internet technologies. In this context, the releases of Microsoft's Windows 95 operating system in 1995 and Nintendo's Pokémon game in 1996 marked key turning points in the digital and cultural landscape. Originating as a single video game, Pokémon rapidly expanded into animation, card games, and merchandise, reviving the multi-platform media strategy that had historical precedents in the Edo period.

Pokémon is structured as a role-playing game in which a child protagonist collaborates with various creatures—such as Pikachu—to achieve shared

objectives. This collaborative narrative model—where humans and non-human creatures interact as equals—has found particular resonance in Japan, likely due to deeper cultural and religious foundations. One possible reason for the deep cultural affinity toward such narratives lies in the syncretism of Japanese religious traditions. Mahayana Buddhism, introduced during the Asuka period (mid-6th century), spread more rapidly in Japan than in China or Korea, with which it shares historical transmission. Its lasting appeal may be due to its successful integration with indigenous animistic beliefs, allowing it to coexist with Shintoism—the so-called "national religion" of Japan—for over a millennium. In particular, the Tendai Buddhist school's interpretation of the Lotus Sutra—which holds that "all sentient beings possess Buddhahood"—had a profound influence on Japanese Buddhism after the Heian period, leading to the formation of numerous sects collectively known as Hokkemon. This doctrinal attitude resonates with the worldview presented in Pokémon, which emphasizes coexistence between humans and non-human creatures without hierarchical distinction.

Human civilization is now entering an entirely unprecedented phase marked by the rapid development and diffusion of generative AI. Given their long-standing cultural tendency to attribute personality or spirit to inanimate objects (mono), the Japanese may be particularly inclined to accept AI entities as having agency—much like they have done with monsters and robots in fiction and belief. It remains to be seen what forms of "new bakémono" may emerge within this technological milieu—and how they might catalyze transformations in the Japanese cultural imagination.

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DEFORMITY IN ANCIENT JAPANESE TALES, MYTH AND BUDDHIST ANECDOTES

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Since ancient times, deformity has been a recurrent topic in Japanese art and folklore, with an abundance of examples to be found in tales, literature and visual arts. Nevertheless, the attitude of contemporary society towards this issue is one of strong reluctance as well as significant lack of empathy towards ethnic minorities. Recent years have seen the emergence of a new phenomenon known as *mitame mondai* (lit. 'problems connected with a person's physical appearance'), or in other words, discrimination suffered by people affected by birth defects in their personal or professional life. This has sparked a new and quite animated debate across the media as well as more academic spheres, regarding deformities more in general. Studies on the topic have so far moved in two directions: firstly, towards a sound representation of the social conditions experienced by those affected by birth defects; secondly to try to find the origin of contemporary society's hostile attitude towards people with deformities by way of thorough analysis of literary and artistic sources.

This essay aims at contributing to this line of research by discussing examples of Japanese folklore and by comparing them with other important writings dating back to the period between the 8th and 12th century within Shinto and Buddhist traditions. In particular, we would like to reflect upon the representation of deformity in ancient Japan and trace a link with the approach adopted towards this issue by popular culture and spirituality.

1. Introduction

Deformity has long been a thoroughly observed and represented topic in Japan. Throughout the centuries, society has responded to this issue in different ways. It is often associated with the idea of a "monster" in ancient historiography, in literature and in Buddhist paintings, as well as in bestiaries (*yōkai zukan*) dating back to premodern times. Numerous examples of Japanese cultural heritage allow us to infer that deformity has long been and still is an important source of fascination and interest. As suggested by Umberto Eco, art has played an important role in this since, thanks to the instruments of its very nature, it can remodel atypical shapes and forms that are in contrast with the canonical ideas of beauty, thus giving these new forms a different, and sometimes even attractive, appearance (Eco 2011: Ch. 4 and 9). Nevertheless,

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due to numerous implications connected to culture and spirituality, this has come to represent a sensitive issue for modern Japanese society, that tends to be reluctant to discuss this topic. Similarly, Japanese modern society seems hesitant to debate themes regarding ethnic minorities in the territory such as the outcast (*burakumin*) (Stevens 2013: 45; Takezawa 2015: 76-77).

Moreover, recent years have seen the emergence of a phenomenon known as *mitame mondai* (lit. 'problems connected with a person's physical appearance'), or in other words, discrimination suffered by people whose physical appearance may present abnormalities, in their personal and professional life. More than ever before, deformity now sparks animated discussions in both the media and academic spheres. Studies on the topic have so far moved in two directions: on the one hand, they seem to be a sound representation of the social conditions experienced by those affected by birth defects and disabilities, thus also denouncing the discriminations they must endure (Yoshii 2016; Okura 2021). On the other hand, they try to find the origin of contemporary society's hostile attitude towards people with deformities in a thorough analysis of literary and artistic sources such as the research on myth presented by Okuyama and the study by the American scholar Osterfeld Li on the grotesque in Buddhist anecdotal literature of the late Heian period (794-1185) (Okuyama 2017; Osterfeld Li 2009).

This essay will discuss examples of Japanese folklore as compared to other important writings dating back to the period between the 8th and 12th century within Shinto and Buddhist traditions. In particular, we would like to reflect upon the representation of deformity in ancient Japan and to trace a link with the approach adopted by popular culture and spirituality towards this issue[1].

2. Deformity in folklore

Representations of deformity or *kikei* (lit.'obsolete form' or 'strange form'), can be found in Japan from very early times. The mid Jōmon period (10.000-300 B.C.) marks the beginning of an intensive production of terracotta figurines (*dogū*) representing people with atypical physiognomy, as testified by the figurine depicting a person with curiously round limbs and stumps in place of hands and feet, found during an excavation in the Miyagi Prefecture. In the following Yayoi period (300 B.C.-300 A.D.), we witness a flourishing production of *haniwa*, terracotta figurines representing humans, animals or everyday objects. In particular, the figurines representing humans have been found missing several limbs. This has led to believe that they were assigned a

[1] The tales mentioned in this essay are found in Seki 1980.

given function within some sort of healing ritual or even that they might be employed as replacements of human sacrifices (Fahr-Becker 2000: 618-619).

Nevertheless, one of the most prolific sources of information is the world of tales that, as Italo Calvino suggested, represents a vast encyclopedia of the tellable, the characters of which are universal abstractions (Calvino 1988: 19 and following). Therefore, in this section we will analyze some folkloristic tales and stories in which the main characters stand out because of their physical malformations. We will focus on how this is perceived by the disabled person and by those around them and the dynamics connected to such issues.

2.1 Deformities in 'Children of Miraculous Birth'

Long ago a gambler had a son
whose eyes and nose looked as though
they had been squashed together by main force.
(Tyler 1987: 319, "The Ugly Son")

The world of Japanese tales is filled with characters with physical abnormalities due to deformities. The most famous in this genre are known as 'miraculous births' (*ijō tanjōtan*), stories of children born out of the encounter between a human being and a supernatural creature, between two supernatural creatures or for intercession of the gods[2].

Among the best-known examples of this is Kintarō, whose parents are a mountain witch (*yamanba*) and a dragon. A child of superhuman strength and distinct military skills, Kintarō also possesses an unmistakable gift that sets him aside from others: his features are human, but his skin is of a bright vermillion, a symbol of his being related by blood to dragons. However, the peculiar color of his skin does not prevent Kintarō from asserting his position in human society and becoming a valiant fighter who, side by side with other celebrated warriors such as Minamoto no Yorimitsu (948-1021) and Watanabe no Tsuna (953-1025), defeats and kills dangerous anthropophagus demons[3].

Another child of fabulous birth is Issunbōshi, deity Sumiyoshi's response to the prayers of an older, childless couple. Issunbōshi is not as lucky as Kintarō and, according to the tale by his name, when he was born, he was as tiny as the tip of a finger. The older couple kept him, but, despite the passing of time, the child did not seem to be growing in size. Therefore, the parents gave him a sewing needle to use as a sword and sent him off. From then on Issunbōshi had to find his way into the world and to face adversities. However, thanks to his

[2] In this particular case, the tradition of tales on unions between different species is known in Japan as *irui kon'intan* (lit. 'heterogeneous marriage stories'). See Kawamori 2016.
[3] Minamoto no Yorimitsu and Watanabe no Tsuna are two leaders that are present in various writings from ancient and medieval epic poetry and fantasy novels.

wit and thus using his size to his advantage, he managed to defeat two dreadful ogres. Finally, thanks to the power of a small magic hammer, the boy grew to a normal size and turned into a valiant samurai.

In addition, also the young heroes of the tale *The Boy with a Runny Nose* (*Hanatare kozō*) and the story *The Gambler's Son Seeks Wife* (*Bakuchi no ko no mukoiri*) are affected by physical abnormalities, but the context in which their story develops is somehow different from the tales we have looked into so far. In the first, a very poor man is in the habit of offering flowers to the Water Princess, who in turn rewards him with Tohō, a child with very peculiar features. Despite constantly having a runny nose, the child is capable of working great wonders and can make all his father's wishes come true. Once the man has become rich and has had all his wishes granted, he starts to get tired of this child who is always dirty and whose nose is always snotty, especially as Tohō firmly refuses to blow his nose even though he is often encouraged to do so. The father then wishes he would bid him farewell and the boy vanishes. However, the wealth the man has gathered also disappears, leading the man to depression.

The Gambler's Son Seeks Wife is part of *Tales from the Later Gleanings of Uji* (*Uji shūi monogatari*), a collection of folkloristic stories dating back to the end of the twelfth century and belonging to the series of 'difficult tasks of the sons-in-law' (*nandai muko*), a topic that has been developed in numerous tales (Setoguchi 2014: 77-94). The main character is the son of a gambler. His face is so disfigured that his "eyes and nose looked as though they had been squashed together by main force" (here and to follow, Tyler 1987: 319-320). His parents often wonder how they are going to get him married, until one day they hear that a rich man is seeking a handsome bridegroom for his daughter. They inform the man that "the fairest youth in all the land" wants to marry the girl and, as the rich man accepts the match, they set the date for the engagement celebrations. On the couple's first night, according to tradition, the gamblers' brotherhood escorts the groom to his bride. However, fearing that the boy's deformity might disrupt the wedding plans, once there, they come up with a plan. Pretending to be a demon, one of the brothers jumps on the roof of the house and screams "Fairest youth in all the land!", thus catching the groom's attention. Acting as though he wants to punish him for having taken his woman, the fake demon threatens the boy: "What do you cherish most, your life or your looks?". The people in the house then urge the boy to choose life and he follows their advice. The fake demon then hits the boy in the face and disappears. Bystanders stare at the boy's face and are left speechless. At that point the boy cries: "How can I live among people with a face like this? And to think that you never once saw me as I used to be!". Out of compassion, the girl's father promises him his fortune in compensation and the young man lives a very pleasant life indeed.

In the cases we have looked into so far, we have observed different kinds of deformities, from Kintarō's peculiar red skin—which is reminiscent of a severe case of eczema—to Issunbōshi's dwarfism, to the gambler's son's disfigured face that could be ascribed to a severe case of rhinorrhea. In each of these cases, their deformity marks their fabulous birth, it is a feature impressed in their body that is also evidence of their being "different" but, at the same time, special. The gambler's son could be seen as an exception, and although the story does not mention it in such terms, his deformity can very likely be ascribed to the father's vice of gambling (*tobaku*), a widespread practice that was banned in the late seventh century [4]. From this perspective, his malformation cannot be considered a sign of the boy's peculiar quality, but rather as evidence of the dishonor brought to him by his father.

For Issunbōshi and Tohō, their deformity results in their being sent away from their fathers' homes, and in both cases the parents come across as fools who are incapable of seeing the qualities hidden behind their children's abnormalities. In none of the examples we have looked at, do their deformities represent an impediment to their finding happiness. On the contrary, in Issunbōshi's case it is his abnormal size that allows him to defeat the two ogres who try to devour him.

However, the case of the gambler's son is more complicated. The plot hints at the fact that his deformity could be the cause of great hardship in his life. Despite that, thanks to the support he receives from the gambler's brotherhood, the young man comes up with a plan so that other people may accept him too, thus exorcising the image of 'monster' through commiseration. Moreover, this is the only case in which the Supernatural is not directly involved, while in the other stories the problem of their physical defects is overcome by the intervention of a supernatural creature or the performance of a magical artefact. When compared, these tales hint at the fact that deformity can be proof of either a supernatural quality or a fault. In any case, it is not an issue that can be resolved by human beings with the tools available to them. Nevertheless, these stories, and especially those of Kintarō and the gambler's son, prove that it is possible for a person to find a way to live with their deformity and manage to play an active role in society.

[4] *Kojiki* and *Nihongi* report that in 689 and edict banning the game of *sugoroku* was issued. *Sugoroku* is a gambling game played with dice. A 720 Buddhist text, *Laws on Monks and Nuns* (*Sōniryō*), bans gambling among religious people. See *The Yōrō Ritsuryō Sōniryō – Laws on Monks and Nuns* (interpreted by J. Piggott) [online publication https://dornsife.usc.edu/assets/sites/63/docs/Ritsuryo_Soniryo-Piggott.pdf (last access 19/09/2021)].

2.2 Deformity in *The Old Man with the Wen* and *The Girl without Hands*

Two other characters of Japanese folklore that have become famous for their physical abnormalities are the old heroes of the tale *The Old Man with the Wen* (*Kobutorijīsan*). Both tormented by a big wart on their faces, the old people set off for the Shinto shrine determined to beg the gods to get rid of this nuisance. Here they meet a group of *tengu*, demonic creatures with hybrid bodies, half human half crow, and are made to dance. According to the narration, *tengu* are satisfied with the performance of the first man and since they find that the wart on his face covers his features and is therefore quite disturbing, as a reward for his talent they decide to remove it. The second man, however, does not prove to be as skillful a dancer, and the disappointed *tengu* put on his face the wart they have removed from his friend. The story's ending focuses on how happily the event turns out for the first man and how grotesque the second man has become.

A similar story can also be found in *Tales from the Later Gleanings of Uji*. Differently from the first story, instead of *tengu* we have ogres and the two old men interact with them at different times. The first man has a wart on the right side of his face that is as big as a mandarin and prevents him from having a healthy social life. Similarly to the previous story, the first man sweeps the audience off their feet with his dance and the ogres, to make sure he will come back and entertain them again, 'kidnap' what they consider the best part of him, his wart, and remove it from his face. The old man therefore returns home and tells his friend what has happened. The latter decides to follow in his footsteps. Persuaded that the man who performed the night before has come back to entertain them again, they watch his performance but are disappointed. In order to break the agreement made the previous night and get rid of him, they give him back his wart and put it on his face. In this case too, the second old man ends up with two warts on his face[5].

Although both tales revolve around two old men's deformities, in actual fact, they also contain other stories, which give the narration a hint of comedy. *Tengu* also make their appearance. These supernatural creatures are famous for their huge noses and for being considered mountain gods. Maybe a transfiguration of the noble class, the whimsical and haughty *tengu* find the old man's wart disgusting and do not even consider the fact that they themselves are bearers of an even more evident malformation. On the contrary, in *Tales from the Later Gleanings of Uji* we find ogres (or 'demon'; *oni*), creatures that in the collective imagination have awkward and lumpy bodies and are "interpreted historically as visualizations of otherness and the dangers

[5] An English translation of this version was curated by Royall Tyler and given the title "Lump off, lump on". See Tyler 1987: 239-241.

associated with it […] everything foreign and mysterious that threatens the status quo", all of which reflects people's "fear of historically marginalized populations" (Foster 2015: 119). Outcasts by their very nature and representative of the poorest and most vulnerable part of society, ogres show admiration for the man's wart and see in it the symbol of a special quality.

Tengu by Adam Cooley

Among the tales that deal with the topic of deformity, the story of the two old men with a wart on their faces is one of the most famous in its own right. A similarly popular tale is *The Girl without Hands* (*Tenashi musume*), the story of a woman with physical deformities. The basic plot is reminiscent of European tales of young girls and their cruel stepmothers. These are known in Japan as *mamakotan* (lit. 'story of stepmother and stepdaughter')[6]. Envious of her beauty and her qualities, the cruel stepmother decides to have the young woman's arms cut off and to kick her out of the house. A good-hearted man moved by the young woman's disability takes her in and gives her shelter. However, the cruel stepmother does not stop tormenting the young woman to the point that the latter finds herself having to leave her husband's home with her baby son on her shoulders. On her journey, she stops by a river but, as she bends down to drink, she feels the baby slipping away from her shoulders. Instinctively, she reaches

[6] The theme of stepmother/stepdaughter appears in many texts of Japanese literature, starting with *Ochikubo monogatari* (The Tale of Ochikubo, late 10th century). See Mulhern Irie 1985.

out to grab him and in that very moment her arms miraculously grow back. From then onwards her future is bright and she is reunited with her beloved husband, while her stepmother is heavily punished by the local governor for the insane acts she has committed.

The stories of the old men and the tale of the young girl stem out of very different assumptions. While in the first case the wart is a birth defect, in the case of the stepdaughter her disability is the result of crippling violence. However, what the two stories have in common is the difficulties caused by their deformities. For the old men, these mainly have to do with their social interactions, while for the girl these are also practical complications that hinder her everyday life, until she is finally freed of such a burden at the end of the story. In a nutshell, just like the stories of Issunbōshi and the gambler's son, the tales of the first old man and the young woman both have a happy ending. To this end, it is important to underline that these are inconsistent with Japanese tale tradition, which do not normally conclude with a beautiful wedding or a happy ending, even if it is the result of countless misfortunes, as in the case of European tales. In place of our happy ending, Japanese tales usually culminate in a separation. In the case of stories in which one of the characters is the victim of an evil spell, these do not necessarily regain their original appearance at the end of the story. For instance, the heroine of the well-known tale *Urihime* (Urihime) is turned into a bird and does not transform back into a woman after the witch is sent away. In *The Demon Seeks Wife* (*Oni no mukoiri*) the bride is killed and turned into an eel and so she remains. According to the anthropologist Kawaii, the 'unhappy' ending of tales originates in the Japanese cultural idea of a 'melancholic beauty', or that intense emotion tainted with melancholy (*aware*) which represents one of the aesthetic principles on which the Japanese literary heritage is founded (Kawaii 1995: 176-178).

From this perspective, the introduction of the theme of deformity seems to challenge the traditional structure of Japanese tales, or in any case, to overturn its mechanism: the wonderful results obtained by Kintarō, Issunbōshi, by the gambler's son and by the old man with a wart, prove that it is a person's intelligence and skills to determine if a human endeavor will or will not be successful, not a physical malformation. Similarly, the young girl leads her life as normally as she can despite her disability, thus showing courage in the face of life's adversities. Differently from the aforementioned heroes, however, her disability is the result of a very painful chapter in her life rather than a birth defect. Out of the stories we have here analyzed, the only one that seems to be in line with the Japanese tales tradition is *The Boy with a Runny Nose*, although the plot in this case revolves around the father and Tōho is a rather secondary character. In this tale, the ending focuses on the price that the man has to pay for having been so shallow as to discriminate against Tōho because of his deformity and not having been able to fully appreciate him.

3. Deformity in ancient Japan between Shinto and Buddhism

In the following section, I aim at presenting some relevant beliefs about deformity in Japan, so as to better understand the sociocultural notion of this issue. Broadly speaking, the two major religious traditions which influence ideas about deformity are Shinto and Buddhism: the former is often referred to as an indigenous religion, while the latter was first introduced in Japan from China in the sixth century (Inoue 2003: 1-11; Yoshida 2006: 144-162). Both religions have made significant and lasting contributions to the Japanese worldview, which includes attitudes towards physical wellbeing and deformity as well as representations of deformity, which in turn can contribute to or help break down the myths and the stereotypes surrounding this issue.

3.1. Deformity from Shintō perspective: 'The Leech Child' and 'The Cyclop'

After the sun and the moon,
the next child which was born was a leech-child.
When this child had completed his third year,
He was nevertheless still unable to stand upright.
(Aston 1972: Vol. 1, 20)

Congenital deformity is explicitly present in the Shinto creation myths, and more exactly in the narration about the deity known as Hirugo (or Hiruko), included in the historiographies *Records of Ancient Matters* (*Kojiki*, 712) and *Chronicles of Japan* (*Nihon Shoki* o *Nihongi*, 720), which are among the oldest works that have been passed onto us as well as being foundational to Shinto. The first gendered deities, Izanagi and Izanami, who were technically brother and sister as well as husband and wife, created the Japanese islands and, after that, also gave life to several deities (Murakami 1988). It is believed that one of the couple's first children, the one destined to become 'the ruler of the world', was born with a serious deformity as a result of Izanami's inconsiderate behavior towards her partner[7]. *Records of Ancient Matters* does not dwell into the details of the deformity in question, however, scholars have observed the characters that compose the name of the newborn which literally mean 'water leech child', and while some have interpreted it as a malformation of the limbs, others have opted for a case of molar pregnancy (Harada 1994: 188). In this respect, *Chronicles of Japan* points out that Hirugo was unable to stand on his feet by the age of three, and the term 'leech child' probably alludes to his useless (or absent) limbs that prevented the child from standing upright.

[7] According to historiographies, Izanami committed the crime of uttering the ritual phrase that precedes sexual intercourse before her partner. Condemning a woman for speaking before her man was probably influenced by Chinese ideas.

Nevertheless, in both cases the destiny of the baby is the same. According to historiographies, Hirugo was set adrift in a reed boat to perish in the ocean.

On the grounds of such an ending, Yokota suggests that the legend of Hirugo can be considered the first historically documented case of murder of a deformed character (Yokota 2015: 93; Ouwehand 1964). However, Hirugo's adventures do not end here. In fact, according to the tradition, he was resurrected as Ebisu, another deity. Because of its association with Hirugo's legend, the image of Ebisu is often depicted as having physical abnormalities (a disproportionately large head, a short torso, hard of hearing etc.) and is seen as a mythological figure with other monikers, including Hirugo himself. Today, the word Ebisu is written with characters meaning 'blessing' and 'longevity', but in some ancient texts his name was recorded using the former characters for 'leech', with the meaning of 'unable to stand' (Tada 2010: 33-53). Later, in the Edo period (1603-1867), the image of Ebisu changed dramatically, transforming from the deformed deity to the patron of commerce: his name is now a metonymy signifying commercial fortune as, for instance, in the Ebisu Beer logo. No longer a symbol of infanticide, Ebisu embodies business or family prosperity in modern-day Japan. This metamorphosis can also be seen in a different light. The deformed baby Hirugo was first expunged and then later divinized as the god of fortune. This mirrors an almost universal pattern of mythology in which the grudging spirit of the sacrificed is appeased by being elevated to a deity of blessing (Yokota 2015: 92).

According to Shinto philosophy, impurities (*kegare*) such as disabilities, traces of contact with death, menstrual blood or signs of rape, are considered crimes (*tsumi*) and need to be purified by performing rituals (*harae* or *kiyome*) (Miyata 2010). At the time of *Records of Ancient Matters* and *Chronicles of Japan*, deformity was probably seen as a kind of impurity that could not be redeemed nor hidden, and therefore constantly subject of people's judgement. In this context, Hirugo's birth is marked as misfortune for his lack of physical mobility, a condition deemed unfitting for a deity (Inao 2000). In brief, Hirugo's tale can be seen as evidence that in ancient society, disabled people were summarily disposed of or killed. In Japanese language the phrase *mizu ni nagasu* (lit. 'flush out in water') is synonymous with doing away with someone or something and the expression *mizuko* (lit. 'water child') is used to refer to a stillborn child abandoned to the waters. With Hirugo's case in mind, we can hypothesize that the subtext of 'flushing out' in his tale is reflected in the attitudes of present-day society toward people with disabilities, and we can conclude that disability was, and still is, regarded as an 'absurdity' to be feared and eradicated (Tsuzuki and Nonaka 1995: 226; Yokota 2015: 92; *Daihyakka Jiten*: entry *ko oroshi*).

There are numerous cases of deformities to be found in the two historiographies besides the story of Hirugo. For example, when Izanagi runs

away from the Kingdom of the Dead in which he has descended to try and save Izanami, he is followed by the Eight Ugly Females of Yomi (*shikome*), female demons whose faces are disfigured. These have also been represented in some later rolls, however here they are portrayed as creatures with almost human features but with clearly disproportionate skulls and noses (Aston 1972: vol. 1, 25)[8]. Moreover, in a further passage from *Chronicles of Japan*, we are introduced to the character known as Ryōmen Sukuna, a man with one body, two faces, four arms and just as many legs but lacking gastrocnemius or calf muscle (*hikagami*) and calcaneus or heel bone (*kakato*). The character of Ryōmen Sukuna is seen as a very interesting figure among scholars, and some have even put forward the theory that it could represent a case of conjoined twins (*ketsugō sōseiji*) (Ōbayashi 1991).

Nevertheless, after Hirugo, the best-known character is Katame-no-Kami (lit. 'One-Eyed God') presented in *Records of Ancient Matters* as Amatsumara (lit. 'Heaven Deity with One Eye') and in *Chronicles of Japan* as Ame-no-mahitotsu-no kami (lit. 'God with One Eye'). From the various collections of stories we gather that he is the deity of blacksmithing and that he has only one eye. However, in several episodes of Shinto myths we are presented with cyclops-like deities, including the famous scene in which Amaterasu, the Sun Goddess, hides in a cave and the entire world turns dark.

In Japanese folktales, Katame-no-Kami has been associated with the mountain deity. The figure is sometimes depicted as a one-eyed, one-legged giant wearing a straw raincoat. Despite his frightful appearance and his sheer force, Katame-no-Kami is in actual fact a very fragile creature that can be defeated even by humans. For instance, in the tale *One-Eyed Gorō* (*Me hitotsu Gorō*), a merchant is on board a ship headed home when a sudden rush of wind blows him to an unknown harbor. Once there, he starts looking for a source of fresh water, but he is suddenly taken aback by the appearance of a huge one-eyed anthropophagus ogre. The latter seizes the merchant and drags him to the cave to roast him and eat him. However, with a quick movement, the merchant grabs a burning fire brand and stubs him in the eye, blinding him. Then, adopting a ploy that is quite reminiscent of the trick performed by Ulysses onto Polyphemus, he hides among the horses and runs away.

The folklorist Yanagita Kunio (1875-1962) suggests that the myth of the one-eyed deity can also be read as reminiscent of the ancient custom of human sacrifice: selected individuals would have one of their eyes poked out, either to make it harder for them to escape or to enhance their sacredness by likening the victims to the one-eyed deity legend. Moreover, Yanagita compares this to the *yōkai*, or supernatural creature of Japanese folklore, known as *Hitotsume kozō*,

[8] Yomi (also Yomi no Kuni; lit. 'Land of Ochre Waters') is the land of the dead.

or 'one-eyed boy', a rascal *yōkai* that appears in much of Edo-period folklore. The creature is neither evil nor holy, rather he represents a troublesome mischief-maker behind the appearance of a young merchant apprentice who delights in scaring passersby by appearing suddenly and revealing his single large eye (Yanagita 2013; Foster 2015: 201 and following).

Although Hirugo is not deemed worthy of the pantheon of Shinto gods, this includes disabled deities or deities with deformed features, such as Ebisu and Katame-no-Kami. Nevertheless, differently from Japanese folklore characters bearing deformities, the deities do not benefit from any miraculous cure. On the contrary, they are either sent away like Hirugo or relegated to a mountain, like Katame-no-Kami, and reappear in other legends of Japanese mythology under a different shape. Therefore, from a narrative-prosthetic standpoint, their marked bodies' supernatural powers not only move the plot forward but also serve the story as a cultural metaphor.

3.2. Deformity in some Buddhist anecdotes

The introduction of Buddhism represents a turning point in the history of Japan. It was promoted by Emperor Kinmei (509-571) and reached the peak of its popularity with Empress Suiko (554-628), who governed the country together with her nephew Shōtoku Taishi (574-622). The latter played a key role in the introduction of Buddhism in the country and has since been considered one of its protectors[9]. He is the hero of the aforementioned episode of *Chronicles of Japan* on deformity. In the collection, we find what is believed to be the earliest mention of the sighting of a mermaid (*ningyo*) in Japan. According to the text, on the fourth day of the fourth month of the year 619, a «creature in the shape of a man» is believed to have been seen swimming in the river Gamō in the province of Afumi. In addition, in the seventh month of the same year, a fisherman in the province of Settsu cast his net in an artificial canal and "something shaped like a child, which was neither a fish nor a man, entered his net. Its name was unknown" (Aston 1972: Vol. 2, 147). Similarly to 'marvels' of the Classical European tradition, according to Japanese folklore, the sighting of a mermaid is an omen of misfortune. As a matter of fact, it is said that a few months following the sighting, the emperor's court suffered numerous deaths and other kinds of misfortune. However, this creature's adventures do not end here and this time cross paths with prince Shōtoku. In fact, legend has it that the prince met the mermaid by a lake in the Ōmi province. Thinking her peculiar features might be the consequence of negative karma, and thus feeling sorry for the creature, the prince ordered that a Buddhist

[9] Prince Shōtoku (or prince Umayado), in the late sixth century, lead an enormous national project to promote buddhism and commissioned the construction of several temples.

temple, the Kannonshōji temple, be built in the area so that the unhappy creature might reach Buddhahood (Kitō 2012 and Kuzumi 2011).

This episode is evidence that in Buddhism, deformity is essentially considered the product of negative karma gathered by a person during their previous lives (Suzuki 2004). Moreover, in the first collection of Buddhist anecdotes (*setsuwa*) to be written in Japan, *Record of Miraculous Events in Japan* (*Nihon ryōiki*, ca. 823), we find numerous instances of this, like the example of a deaf man whose body is covered in pimples and who is persuaded that it must be due to the sins he committed in his previous life[10]. The same text also informs us that deformity can be the price that must be paid for the crimes, especially crimes against Buddhism, that a person has committed in their current life. For example, the prince Uji is punished with an illness and consequent death for having beaten up a monk, another man is punished with paralysis and death for crimes committed against a monk and a woman is made to suffer an illness that burns her nipples for being lustful and not breastfeeding her children. On the contrary, other cases prove that faith in Buddha can cure a deformity. An example of this is the story of the woman whose 'big as a melon' cancer on her neck bursts after twenty-eight years and purulent blood pours out in the exact moment in which she receives tonsure. Or like the blind woman who gets her eyesight back while reciting *The Diamond Sutra*, thanks to Buddha Yakushi's intercession and the help of a monk.

The most striking case in *Record of Miraculous Events in Japan* seems to be the tale of a woman born out of a ball of flesh[11]. According to the story, a woman gives birth to a ball of flesh as big as a hen's egg. Persuaded it must be a bad omen, the parents place it in a bamboo box and hide it in a mountain cave. However, when they return to the cave seven days later, they are surprised to see that the ball of flesh has hatched and that a little girl has come out of it. Eight months later, the little girl has already grown into an adult, but she looks very different from other women: she does not have a neck nor a chin. The narrator proceeds to explain that, since her body has not been given a vagina but only an orifice to allow her to urinate, the woman is not suitable for marriage. Despite her severe deformity, the young woman is very wise and chooses to take vows and become a nun. The local fools, however, do not show any compassion for her situation and make fun of her by calling her 'fake saint'. It is not only the layman who are unpleasant towards her, the girl is mocked by

[10] It is a work in three books by the Chinese monk Kyōkai (or Keikai, ca. 750-823) between 810 and 823. The complete title of the collection is *Nihonkoku Genpō Zen'aku Ryōiki* ("Account of Miracles in Response to Good and Evil Deeds of the Land of Japan"), however it is best known as *Nihon ryōiki*. See Burton 1996.

[11] "On a Girl Born of a Flesh Ball Who Practiced Good and Converted People", in Burton 1996: 160-161.

some religious people too. Sometimes deities come to her defense, and those who made fun of her die of fear, on the spot. A monk even tries to turn her away from an important common prayer because of her deformity, but the young woman defends her right to take part in the prayer by stating that Buddha's teachings are available to everyone. It is at that very moment that bystanders notice the aura she generates and realize they are standing before a saint.

In twelve of the one hundred and sixty stories that make up the *Record of Miraculous Events in Japan*, the characters either have a disability or a deformity due to karma. However, the hero with the worst deformity is the woman born out of the ball of flesh. From the text, we gather that for a woman with such a body there can be no future in society and that entering the religious order is her only option. Yet, even in the monastery the woman is met with discrimination and must defend her right to her faith. For people suffering from disabilities or deformities, the text invariably offers a miraculous recovery, usually following acts such as copying a sacred text or performing an act of faith towards Buddha. We can observe here how disabilities and deformities are exploited in order to exalt Buddha's power and greatness and highlight the importance of faith. However, in the case of the woman born out of a ball of flesh, her deformity seems to serve an even higher purpose. As a matter of fact, it seems to make an accusation against those monks whose souls are corrupted and who behave in such a way as to disobey Buddha's teachings.

Similarly to Hirugo, who redeems himself by being reborn as Ebisu, the hero of this story also undergoes a total transformation, the passage from a human being trapped in a disabled body to a Buddhist saint. However, while Hirugo is completely powerless before his life's events, such as his parents' abandonment and his rebirth as the god of wealth and prosperity, the woman oversees her own path and makes the wisest choices, always supported by her faith in Buddha. In a nutshell, while the first character passively undergoes his transition, the second plays an active role in the making of her own destiny, to the point of clashing with the religious community in order to defend her faith and her right to practice it. As a matter of fact, according to Buddhism, the greater the efforts made by the faithful, the more rewarding is the *riyake*, the 'benefit' or 'grace'. In this regard, the transformation of the young lady into saint offers an important example (Reader and Tanabe 1998: 46).

However, in Buddhist stories, deformity does not always serve the purpose of prompting compassion or wonder among believers, it is also often used as a tool to entice them and dissuade them from acting against the law[12]. *Myōō*, Buddhist guardian deities, are represented with overly muscular bodies to appear deformed and horrible. Located at either side of a temple's portal, their

[12] In modern Japan, the term *gaki* has acquired a derogatory connotation and is used to refer to children who are considered to be tykes or brats.

terrifying appearance is aimed at reminding believers that the Buddhist pantheon is populated by superior beings who have the power to defeat evil demons and punish people who break the Law. As a matter of fact, during the late Heian period, Pure Land Buddhism (*jōdō*) was particularly popular and superstitions regarding demons and Buddhist Hell widespread. In addition to collections of anecdotes, the most representative of which is *Tales of Times now Past* (*Konjaku monogatarishū*, ca. 1120), visual arts provide us with the most detailed descriptions of the dynamics governing this world. For instance, we find representations of Hell and its deformed inhabitants in *Hand Scrolls Depicting Hell* (*Jigoku no sōshi*, 12th century), windows on the horrors suffered by those who gather negative *karma* during their earthly life. In *A collection of illustrations on the subject of diseases* (*Yamai no sōshi*, 12th century), four paintings depicting diseases such as periodontitis, food poisoning, crab louses, halitosis, are accompanied by captions explaining the pain that these diseases can cause. Another hand scroll, the *Illustrations of Hungry Demons* (*Gaki no sōshi*, 12th century), in which the iconography follows the descriptions provided by the hindu text *Garuda Purana*[13], portrays mainly *gaki*, hungry demons with a visibly enlarged abdomen, a long and thin neck and very tight mouth. Their appearance is particularly grotesque, and their expression moves to compassion: victims of many endless sufferings, they are often portrayed while ripping the flesh of those fallen in the battlefield.

4. Final remarks

The Nippon Foundation (*Nihon Zaidan*), an important organization that operates in the field of social innovation, has long been fighting against an important phenomenon known as *mitame mondai*. On their web journal, they have recently published an interview with the journalist and writer Iwai Takeki, author of the volume *Kono kao to ikiru to iu koto* (*Living with this Face*, 2019), an inquiry on difficulties encountered by people affected by deformities in contemporary society[14]. In this interview, Iwai underlines that the rights of people with deformity in Japan, although vital, are not currently sufficiently protected and invites to an important reflection on certain cultural perspectives, especially ones derived from superstitions and stereotypes depicted in folklore that have contributed to and somehow supported the current discriminating and marginalizing attitude to deformity.

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[13] Experts from the Tokyo National Museum date the *Illustrations of Hell* and *Illustrations of Hungry Demons* back to Emperor Go Shirakawa (1127-1192). However, since the original copies have been lost and we are in possession of later reproductions, there are still doubts surrounding the exact dates. See also Mizuki and Murakami 2005: 81-82.

[14] See https://www.nippon-foundation.or.jp/journal/2019/36659 [last access 20/09/2021]. See also Iwai 2019.

However, our analysis of Japanese tales has shown that, although deformity often becomes the cause of social estrangement and marginalization, commitment and intelligence will always create the possibility to reconnect with society and the community. Moreover, deformity in tales is often accompanied by a subtle irony that somehow casts out fears connected to disability. As far as the Shinto and Buddhist traditions are concerned, the ideas of *kegare* and karma seem to somehow invalidate the hostile approach society has adopted towards deformity. However, also in this case, Hirugo's transformation into Ebisu and the achievements of the woman born out of a ball of flesh offer new perspectives on the relationship between deformity and spirituality. A further reading of the sources that deal with the topic of deformity might in fact eradicate such negative, superstitious and discriminatory beliefs about people with disabilities, as well as do away with reinforced conformity to social norms that tended to exclude those whose bodies or minds were made differently.

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ONI REIMAGINED: THE CONVERGENCE OF CLASSICAL DEMON LORE AND MODERN MONSTERS

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The cultural history of oni spans over a thousand years, continuously evolving within Japanese tradition. Vanishing only to resurface in new narratives, oni exemplify the "Monster Revisited" concept—creatures repeatedly vanquished yet persistently reborn to reflect shifting fears and imaginations.

Building on Baba Akiko's seminal work, this study integrates modern yōkai studies and monster theory to examine how classical oni iconography is reconstructed in contemporary media. Through an analysis of visual symbolism, linguistic representations, and narrative structures, it explores *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaib*a (hereafter *Demon Slayer*) as an intertextual adaptation that draws from both Japanese classical literature and Western influences.

Demon Slayer exemplifies this process by blending Japanese sword lore with Western vampire motifs, creating a layered narrative that bridges multiple traditions. This synthesis aligns with Kristeva's intertextuality, wherein texts transform prior cultural elements. The visual and narrative construction of oni further reflects this approach, as hybridised iconography produces transcultural characters and themes. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that classical demon lore is not merely preserved but continuously reimagined, reinforcing the enduring presence of oni in contemporary culture.

1. Introduction

Oni (鬼) [demon, ogre] have long occupied a liminal space in Japanese folklore, embodying both fear and fascination. Once regarded as supernatural beings, their representation has evolved over centuries, shaped by historical transformations and artistic reinterpretation. While Edo-period conventions standardised their imagery, contemporary works, such as *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba* (鬼滅の刃) (Gotoge, 2016–2019, hereafter *Demon Slayer*), have revitalised their symbolism. By integrating classical *oni* motifs with modern storytelling techniques and cross-cultural influences, *Demon Slayer* offers a new vision of these legendary figures. This paper explores how the series reimagines *oni*, blending traditional iconography

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with intertextual elements to construct a hybridised mythos for contemporary audiences.

2. Oni's Evolution: Belief, Iconography, and Revival

2.1 Oni Beliefs and the Ancient Japanese Worldview

The cultural lineage of oni is complex, spanning over a thousand years and deeply embedded in Japanese traditions and society (Baba 1988; Barnes 1989; Foster 2015; Kabat 2015; Komatsu 2018; Nicolae 2015; Okuyama 2015; Reider 2010; Tanaka 2002). In ancient to medieval Japanese society, where the belief in supernatural beings such as oni was prevalent, it was thought that the social order and norms of the human realm differed significantly from those of the oni's liminal space. A mere glimpse of the oni's world or an encounter with these supernatural entities was believed to irrevocably transform a person's fate (Baba, 135). These interconnected beliefs, rooted in both fear and awe, are what I refer to as the oni belief (*oni shinkō* 鬼信仰) of ancient Japan, where Heian-period Japanese carefully avoided any contact with oni, fearing it could lead to death.

In Onmyōdō beliefs, our world (*kono-yo* この世) and the other world (*ikai* 異界) intersect on *yagyō no hi* (夜行の日) [nights of walking demons], a specific dark night. To avoid encounters with oni, Heian aristocrats stayed indoors (Tanaka 2002). Yet numerous accounts of oni sightings in such liminal times and spaces exist. For instance, the *mahitotsu oni* (目一鬼) [a one-eyed, man-eating oni] appears in the oldest extant Japanese literary text, *Izumo no kuni fudoki* (出雲国風土記, 733 CE). In addition, the well-known story of a woman being devoured by an oni appears in the mid-Heian period *Ise Monogatari* 伊勢物語, specifically in the sixth episode, which recounts the *oni hitokuchi*[2] (鬼一口) [the oni in one gulp] tale. The late-Heian period tale collections *Konjaku Monogatari Shū* 今昔物語集[3] [*Tale of Times Now Past*] and *Kohon Setsuwa Shū* 古本説話集[4] [*Collection of Old Tales*] recount encounters with oni in various fearsome and grotesque forms, such as those with three hands and one leg, one-eyed or three-eyed oni, and oni with the heads of horses or cows, as well as bird-like necks or deer-like appearances. Similarly, the early Kamakura-period *Uji Shūi Monogatari* 宇

[2] 伊勢物語第 6 段「芥川」(あくたがは). In Japanese folktales, *oni hitokuchi* (鬼一口) refers to the act of an oni devouring a human in a single gulp. This imagery is often used to emphasise the oni's immense size and formidable strength, vividly portraying its ability to kill or swallow a person whole with just one bite.

[3] 『今昔物語集』(巻 13 の第 1) 「修行僧義睿、大峰の持経仙にあうものがたり」

[4] 『古本説話集』「西三条殿の若君、百鬼夜行に逢ふ事」（下の第五一）「手三つ附きて足一つ附きたる者あり。目一つ附きたる者あり」

治拾遺物語[5] [*A Collection of Tales from Uji*] contains detailed accounts of oni sightings, including a *shugenja* (修験者) [Buddhist ascetic monk] encountering a group of a hundred non-human creatures. Among them were beings with a single eye, others with horns, and some with indescribably terrifying heads.

Medieval Japanese envisioned oni in a wide variety of forms, far beyond the modern depictions familiar to us today, imagining them as uncanny and terrifying creatures with diverse and monstrous shapes. Such a perspective aligns with Komatsu's (2018) claim that oni historically functioned as an umbrella term for what we now classify as 'monsters' (*bakemono* 化物), beings defined by their otherness and abnormal forms. The emphasis on their otherness is further reflected in their unsettling iconography in art and literature, where they are portrayed with grotesque and diverse forms. As reports of oni sightings spread, they began to take on concrete forms in medieval Japanese society, appearing in illustrated scrolls, folk tales, and Muromachi-period fiction (*otogizōshi* お伽草子).

For example, *Tsuchigumo Sōshi* [*Picture Scroll of an Earth Spider*], an early 14th-century illustrated scroll from the Kamakura period, portrays a gigantic earth spider (*tsuchigumo*), an ancient type of oni with animal origins, known for its ability to shape-shift (Reider 2013). The scroll depicts the *tsuchigumo* (see Figure 1) acquiring supernatural powers as it ages and launching an attack on Minamoto no Raikō (also known as Yorimitsu, 948–1021), a legendary folk hero and the leader of the Seiwa Genji clan [House of Minamoto]. Raikō ultimately vanquished the *tsuchigumo* in a decisive counterattack. The sword he wielded in this battle, Hiza-maru (膝丸), was subsequently renamed *Kumokiri* (蜘蛛切), meaning "Spider Slayer." This episode is documented in the Swords Chapter of the *Tale of the Heike* (*Tsurugi no maki* 剣の巻, *Heike Monogatari* 平家物語). As an enduring element of sword lore, the tale has been transmitted through generations and was later adapted into the medieval Noh play *Tsuchigumo*, thus preserving its legacy within the intricate cultural heritage of Japan. This tale of the *tsuchigumo* illustrates the enduring concept, dating back to antiquity, of powerful and fearsome monsters being vanquished by heroic figures.

[5] 『宇治拾遺物語』（巻一の十七）「修験者、百鬼夜行にあふ事」

Figure 1. *Tsuchigumo Sōshi* depicts a seven-shaku-tall (two meter) giant spider, symbolising the *tsuchigumo*'s monstrosity. Collection of ColBase.

Up to this point, I have primarily focused on the oni belief held by Japanese people from ancient to medieval times, with their monstrous and grotesque forms foregrounded. However, as previous studies on oni by scholars such as Baba (1988) and Komatsu (2018) have noted, their fearsome appearance constitutes only one aspect of their attributes. The essence of *oni*, often described as the antithesis of humanity, lies in their actions as villainous and malevolent predators, characterised by ruthless cruelty and an unrelenting capacity for violence. They are also defined by their superhuman abilities, including extraordinary strength and immortality, which place them beyond the reach of human power. Komatsu (2018: 6) notes that, while the physical forms of oni have evolved over time, their attributes of immense strength, mercilessness, and cruelty have remained remarkably consistent. Above all, oni are enduring symbols of terror.

2.2 Oni's Iconography in the Post-Early Modern Era

Baba (1998) examines literary representations of oni, particularly their inner worlds and emotions, identifying the peak of oni culture as spanning the Heian to medieval periods. Komatsu (2017: 99) similarly notes that belief in oni was strongest during the Heian period (9th–12th centuries), when they were perceived as real entities. However, Baba (1998: 288) argues that classical oni declined with the establishment of the feudal system in the early modern period. By the Edo period, their image had been standardised, reducing them to fixed stereotypes.

Baba (1998: 289) critiques this standardisation, arguing that it stripped oni of their former significance, rendering them mere relics of an archaic worldview. During this time, oni became confined to symbolic spaces, particularly the north-east direction (艮の方角, *ushitora* [ox-tiger] *no hōgaku*), commonly referred to as *kimon* (鬼門) [oni's gate], which has long been considered an

unlucky quarter. This belief persists today, as seen in *kimon-yoke* (鬼門除け), protective measures that have been observed for centuries, such as the notched north-eastern corner of the Kyoto Imperial Palace (Figure 2), which remains intact.

Figure 2. Left: The present-day Kyoto Imperial Palace. **Right**: 文久改正内裏御絵図 (Bunkyū Revised Illustrated Map of the Imperial Palace, 1868) (Kyoto City Library of Historical Documents)

[Note: The author circles the palace's north-eastern corner, highlighting its notched design.]

Building on this, Baba suggests that the symbolic confinement of oni does not erase their potential return. This supports Okuyama's (2015: 76) view of the north-east as a "dangerous quarter," where unguarded spaces allow evil spirits to slip through. Baba extends this metaphorically, implying that should oni regain their strength, they may once again emerge as symbols of fear and disorder.

A key figure in the Edo period's standardisation of oni was yōkai artist Toriyama Sekien, whose illustrations (Figure 3-right) defined the widely recognised oni archetype: a hairy creature with two horns protruding from its head, sharp claws gripping a human woman, and fangs bared as if about to devour her. His works cemented the image of oni as monstrous figures associated with the *kimon*.

Figure 3. Left (Text in drawing): 世に丑寅の方を鬼門といふ 今鬼の形を描くには 頭に牛角をいたゞき腰に虎皮をまとふ 是丑と寅との二つを合わせて この形をなせりといへり[6] **Right**: *Konjaku Gazu Zoku Hyakki* 今昔画図続百鬼 (Edo period), Toriyama Sekien 鳥山石燕. Public Domain.

Once established by Sekien, the imagery of oni was reproduced repeatedly, remaining largely unchanged to the present day. Komatsu (2015: 189) describes this shift as: "the loss of yōkai reality," arguing that as oni ceased to be perceived as real threats, Edoites (*Edokko* 江戸っ子) could safely play with monsters (*bakemono* 化物) without fear. This marked a transformation in the Japanese worldview, where yōkai, including oni, became objects of entertainment and popular culture.

Komatsu (2017: 98) highlights that horns remain the defining feature of oni, consistent with dictionary definitions describing them as humanoid, horned, fanged beings clad in pelt loincloths, feared for their strength and ruthlessness. However, since this publication, contemporary creators have expanded oni imagery beyond its early modern archetype, drawing inspiration from older portrayals spanning ancient to medieval times (Matsumoto-Sturt 2024). The following section will explore this evolution in greater depth.

2.3 Did Oni Perish?

Did oni truly perish? Both Baba (1988) and Komatsu (2018) have explored this question. Baba (1988: 288–291) argues that oni largely

[6] In popular belief, the north-eastern direction, known as *ushi-tora* (ox-tiger), is referred to as the *kimon* [oni's gate]. The typical depiction of oni features ox-like horns on their heads and a tiger-skin loincloth around their waists. This appearance is said to represent a combination of traits associated with the ox and the tiger, reflecting their connection to the *ushi-tora* direction. (English translation by the author)

disappeared in the early modern period but stops short of declaring their extinction. Instead, she suggests they transformed into living embodiments of demons—profoundly wicked individuals who create a real-life hell on earth. In contrast, Komatsu (2018: Ch. 2) predicts their resurgence, particularly in contemporary media like anime, comics, and films. He notes that the cultural and natural environments sustaining traditional yōkai and rural figures like *Yamamba* (山姥) have largely eroded in modern urban settings. Yet, rather than disappearing, yōkai have evolved into forms that reflect contemporary fears and anxieties. Monster theory scholar Jeffrey Jerome Cohen would likely echo this perspective, asserting that oni have not disappeared but merely receded into the shadows, awaiting their inevitable return. Across cultures, monsters are repeatedly defeated yet persist, reemerging in new narratives to challenge each generation. Cohen (2018: 62) describes monsters as revenant figures—temporarily vanishing but inevitably resurfacing, their paradoxical nature defying permanent destruction.

Both Komatsu and Cohen emphasise the adaptive nature of monsters. While Komatsu highlights the resurgence of yōkai in forms shaped by contemporary fears, Cohen focuses on their cyclical return over time. Their perspectives converge on a shared understanding: monsters, including yōkai and oni, are not static entities but dynamic reflections of cultural anxieties. This view aligns with Foster (2015) and Cohen (2018), who examine the evolving complexity of monsters (yōkai) in the early modern period, demonstrating how these entities are continually reshaped by religious, artistic, intellectual, and political contexts.

2.4 Oni and the Taishō Era: A Historical Backstory

In contemporary Japanese society, the memory of oni as malevolent, cannibalistic beings has significantly faded, leaving their once-terrifying image almost forgotten. However, after nearly three centuries in the shadows, oni re-emerged as gruesome, man-eating demons in *Demon Slayer* (Gotoge, 2016–2019), a manga that became a social phenomenon during the late Heisei and early Reiwa eras. This resurgence reflects predictions by scholars such as Komatsu and Cohen, who have observed that yōkai and monsters in the 21st century successfully adapt to and thrive within modern cultural contexts.

The world of *Demon Slayer* is set in the Taishō era (1912–1926), a period following the Meiji era that lingers in Japan's socio-cultural memory as a time of upheaval. Among these memories are devastating epidemics, including smallpox, cholera, and the Spanish flu pandemic, which claimed many lives. In this context, the Taishō era echoes the ancient belief in oni as *ekijin* 疫神 [plague gods], reinforcing their role as harbingers of disease. This association is reflected in the narrative, where oni transformation is depicted as a contagious process triggered by a single bite. The setting thus resonates with historical

epidemics and their link to oni mythology. Figure 4 illustrates how this belief persisted into the Taishō era. Issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs' Hygiene Bureau (内務省衛生局) during the Spanish flu pandemic, the posters depict oni as symbols of disease, with captions promoting sunlight and vaccinations as weapons against these *yakubyō-gami* 疫病神 [plague gods].

Figure 4. Source: 国立保健医療科学院 [National Institute of Public Health]

3. The Intertextuality of *Demon Slayer*

3.1 Oni as Vampires: A Cross-Cultural Perspective

Most of the oni in *Demon Slayer* are cannibalistic demons. These creatures cross the boundary between the supernatural realm and the human world to attack and devour humans, making them entities that must be repelled or destroyed. At the same time, the series reinterprets both their nature and visual representation beyond traditional depictions. This study examines how the creator of *Demon Slayer*, Gotoge Koyoharu 吾峠呼世晴, reimagines Japanese oni by integrating elements of Western vampirism, modernising their narrative while revitalising their visual and symbolic traits, which had remained largely unchanged since the Edo period.

A key example is the metaphor of blood infection, central to vampiric lore, which shapes the world of *Demon Slayer*. The series' antagonist, Kibutsuji Muzan 鬼舞辻無惨, is depicted as an immortal oni who has plagued humanity for over a millennium, the unintended result of a plant-based medicine in the Heian era. By framing demon transformation as a blood-borne infection, Gotoge establishes a definitive resolution: Muzan's defeat leads to the eradication of all demons created through his blood. This contrasts with the revenant nature of monsters described by Cohen (2018) and Komatsu (2018),

who argue that monsters inevitably re-emerge. *Demon Slayer* subverts this trajectory, offering a clear and final conclusion to the existence of oni.

To analyse vampire traits across cultures, two word-clouds were created from three randomly selected definitions (595 characters). Figure 5-left ranks words by score, with larger words indicating greater distinctiveness, while Figure 5-right shows frequency, highlighting commonly used terms. Words are colour-coded: blue (nouns), red (verbs), green (adjectives), and grey (interjections). The frequency-based cloud reveals the prominence of the verb "suck" (吸う *suu*), emphasising "sucking blood" as vampires' defining trait.

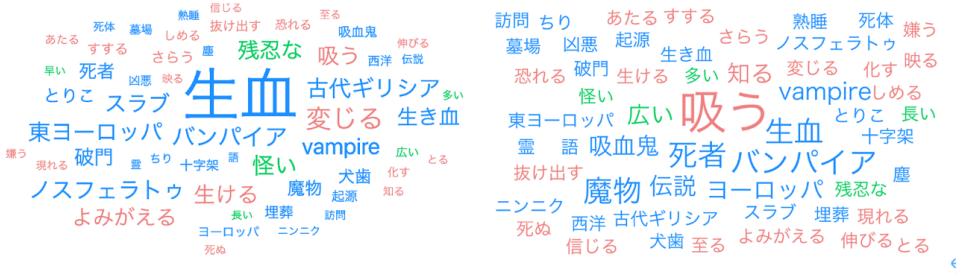

Figure 5. Left: Score-based (distinctive words with higher scores are larger)
Right: Frequency-based (words sized by their occurrence in the text)

Using the full text of the three selected definitions[7], 37 keywords were analysed with User Local's text mining tool for sentiment recognition. The analysis was based on five predefined emotions—joy, affection, anger, fear, and sadness—among which 'fear' emerged as the most pronounced. This indicates that the portrayal of vampires as "blood-sucking" beings clearly evokes a strong sense of fear in readers and viewers. Vampires are known for their immortality, superhuman abilities, and heightened senses, yet they are also defined by key vulnerabilities such as sunlight, garlic, and crosses. Gotoge retains the shared traits of strength and immortality between oni and vampires but adapts their weaknesses to fit a Japanese context. The fatal vulnerability to sunlight, a hallmark of Western vampire mythology described as "the incompatibility between sunlight and vampirism" (Levina & Bui 2013: 40), becomes central to *Demon Slayer*. Instead of garlic and crosses, Gotoge replaces these iconic weaknesses with wisteria flowers and swords, aligning them with Japanese cultural motifs. The Nichirin Swords (*nichirin-tō* 日輪刀) [lit. Sun Blades] in *Demon Slayer* are particularly notable in this regard, evoking the broader

[7] Text 1 (平凡社 百科事典マイペディア): 328 characters. Text 2 (小学館 日本大百科全書(ニッポニカ)): 181characters. Text 3 (平凡社「改訂新版 世界大百科事典」): 1309 characters.

tradition of demon-slaying blades in Japanese folklore. As shown in Figure 6, swords such as the National Treasure *Tachi meibutsu Dōjigiri Yasutsuna* exemplify the cultural archetype of the oni-subjugating weapon, deeply embedded in Heian-period narratives.

Figure 6. 太刀〈名物 童子切安綱〉 (*Tachi, meibutsu Dōjigiri Yasutsuna*) [Source: ColBase, Japan)]

Deeply rooted in Heian-period folklore, swords attributed to Yasutsuna (安綱) are closely associated with oni-subjugation narratives, most prominently the legend of Minamoto no Yorimitsu's defeat of the oni Shuten Dōji, as reflected in later visualisations such as Figure 7. Forged during the Heian period (794–1185), such swords have come to symbolise the archetype of the demon-slaying weapon within Japanese cultural memory. This archetype was subsequently visually codified in Edo-period *nishiki-e* prints, such as Utagawa Kuniyoshi's depiction of oni-slaying scenes (Figure 7), where the sword functions as a central iconographic device linking martial heroism with the subjugation of the supernatural.

Figure 7. A section of an Edo period *nishiki-e* 瀧口内舎人渡辺綱 (*Takiguchi Utoneri Watanabe no Tsuna*) by Utagawa Kuniyoshi (歌川国芳), (ca. 1827-30). MFA, Boston.

Text in drawing: 一條戻り橋の辺にて髭切丸の太刀を以茨鬼童子の腕を斬 [Takiguchi utoneri Watanabe no Tsuna uses his sword Higekirimaru to cut off the arm of the Ibaraki Demon near Modoribashi Bridge at Ichijō].

By weaving cultural and historical references into *Demon Slayer*, Gotoge bridges Japan's classical literature with Western influences. This synthesis reflects Julia Kristeva's (1980: 66) theory of intertextuality: "Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another." In *Demon Slayer*, this intertextual approach is evident in both the visual and narrative design of the oni. Gotoge blends diverse motifs—from traditional Japanese sword lore to Western vampire mythology—creating hybridised characters and narratives that resonate across cultural boundaries. For example, *Demon Slayer* introduces three unconventional oni: Nezuko, Tamayo, and Yushiro, which, according to Komatsu's (2018) analysis, could be considered *hensoku-teki na oni* (変則的な鬼) [untraditional oni]. Unlike traditional oni that prey on humans, these figures consciously abstain from consuming human flesh. Born in 1989, Gotoge likely encountered *The Twilight Saga*, which redefined vampire lore by portraying "virtuous vampires" (Levina & Bui 2013: 39) who resist their predatory instincts. This influence may have shaped Gotoge's portrayal of these unconventional oni, whose internal struggles to suppress their predatory impulses form a recurring theme throughout *Demon Slayer*.

3.2 Kibutsuji Muzan: Kanji as a Medium of Linguistic Symbolism

This section examines the kanji used in the name Kibutsuji Muzan (鬼舞辻無惨), the progenitor and most powerful of all oni in *Demon Slayer*, analysing the cultural and linguistic implications embedded within it and how these characters metaphorically shape his identity as an oni.

The surname *Kibutsuji* (鬼舞辻) is a coined term that does not exist in standard Japanese lexicon. According to the *Ōbunsha Kanwa Jiten*, the kanji 舞 (*mai*) [dance] originates from the pictographic character 無 (*mu*), meaning "nothing," "negation," or "prohibition," depicting a person dancing with ornamental sleeves. This etymology conveys the idea of "seeking something that does not exist" (無いものを求める, *nai mono wo motomeru*), a concept that parallels Muzan's relentless pursuit of the Blue Spider Lily. This elusive flower is essential to the medicine that enables him to overcome his vulnerability to sunlight and attain true immortality. For over a thousand years, Muzan searched in vain for this plant, but the final episode of *Demon Slayer* reveals that it blooms only for two or three days a year, and even then, only for a few minutes during daylight hours. Given that oni can only operate at night and perish in sunlight, the Blue Spider Lily was forever beyond Muzan's reach.

His futile quest encapsulates the idea of "seeking something that does not exist," reinforcing the symbolic significance of 無 (*mu*) in his surname.

Moreover, in addition to its primary meaning of "to dance," the character 舞 also carries an extended meaning in 舞ぶ (*moteasobu*), meaning "to manipulate or toy with someone." This definition implies treating others as playthings, tormenting weaker beings for amusement, or exerting complete control over them. When considered alongside Muzan's name—無惨 (*muzan*), a pre-existing kanji compound meaning "cruelty" and "mercilessness"—it suggests that the name may have been deliberately chosen to encapsulate his ruthless nature. The additional nuance provided by 舞ぶ (*moteasobu*) reinforces Muzan's defining characteristics, making his name an intricate linguistic representation of his monstrous identity. This multilayered interplay between kanji meanings suggests that Gotoge embedded profound cultural and linguistic symbolism into the name Kibutsuji Muzan, further enriching the narrative's depth.

3.3 The Crossroad as a Symbolic Space in Oni Lore[8]

Through the conceptual domain embedded in the kanji composing the name Kibutsuji Muzan, a landscape inhabited by oni emerges. But how does a landscape become a metaphorical space? Toponymic scholars (Turk et al. 2011) argue that place names reflect landscape conceptualisation and cultural beliefs, forming an 'intangible cultural heritage' shaped by language, cognition, and history. Landscapes, therefore, are not merely physical terrains but interpretative cultural constructs transmitted through language, artistic expression, and literature. Once a shared understanding of a landscape develops, later generations reinterpret it within contemporary contexts (Corbin 2002).

Since antiquity, Japanese people have imagined two distinct realms: this world (the real and visible) and the other world (the imaginary and invisible). The notion of a boundary between these realms—whether temporal, as in folklore narratives of transitions between life and death, or spatial, as in the concept of *ikai* 異界 (the other world)—has long been a source of fear and fascination (Komatsu 2017; Nicolae 2015; Foster 2015). Instead of being merely physical locations, these spaces serve as metaphorical boundaries where the imagined world of *ikai* intersects with tangible places in human society. Certain geographic features, such as mountains, bridges, mountain passes, slopes, have traditionally been perceived as sites where these two realms converge (Komatsu 2011: 164). Oni frequently appear in such locations, reinforcing their presence within cultural memory and storytelling traditions.

[8] This section expands on a conference paper presented at the 3rd EAJS Japan Conference in Japan (Matsumoto-Sturt 2019).

The name Kibutsuji Muzan 鬼舞辻無惨 itself reveals a layered conceptual domain that evokes a landscape inhabited by oni. The kanji 辻 (*tsuji*) means "crossroad," a metaphorical space often associated with liminality, supernatural encounters, and transitional states. In this context, *Kibutsuji* 鬼舞辻 can be read as "oni dancing at the crossroad," reinforcing oni's association with spaces of transition. Muzan's backstory further reinforces this liminal connection, as he was an aristocrat of the Heian period, when Heiankyō (now Kyoto) was deeply intertwined with classical oni narratives. Both literary and historical sources describe several locations in Kyoto as sites of oni encounters (Tanaka 2002), with one of the most well-known being *Nijō Ōmiya no Tsuji* [Nijō Ōmiya Crossroad]. This crossroad was infamous in classical texts for reported oni sightings. Additionally, in various legends, *Nijō Ōmiya no Tsuji* overlapped with *Awawa no Tsuji* (あははの辻), an abstracted toponym that symbolises a boundary where the human and supernatural worlds intersect.

The location of *Nijō Ōmiya no Tsuji* corresponds to the historical intersection of *Higashi Ōmiya* and *Nijō Ōji*, now within the grounds of Nijō Castle. Ethnophysiographic research suggests that toponyms serve as linguistic and symbolic markers, encapsulating cultural memories and beliefs about the landscape (Turk et al. 2011). Over time, accounts of oni encounters at *Nijō Ōmiya no Tsuji* reinforced its conceptualisation as a liminal space, a threshold between the human and supernatural worlds. This embedded the crossroad in cultural memory, solidifying its association with oni through language and symbolism. As fears surrounding *Nijō Ōmiya no Tsuji* grew, the imagined, border-straddling site of *Awawa no Tsuji* gained greater cultural significance as a metaphorical landscape. These inherited beliefs have ensured its continued presence in socio-cultural memory. While Kibutsuji Muzan is not explicitly linked to *Awawa no Tsuji*, the inclusion of *tsuji* (crossroad) in his name evokes the archetypal image of oni appearing at boundary spaces. Through this interplay of linguistic and conceptual associations, Muzan embodies the collective memory of oni-associated sites. Whether Gotoge intentionally integrated these historical and cultural references into the character's name is unknown, but it undeniably employs an intertextual framework that reinforces the enduring image of oni at crossroads in Japanese cultural consciousness.

4. The Emergence of Oni as an Embodiment of Hyper Reality

4.1 Mapping Characters: Conceptualising Visual Identities

Character design is a fundamental aspect of visual storytelling, influencing how audiences engage with fictional worlds. Modern multimedia storytelling, enhanced by digital technology, frequently integrates visual motifs from real-world cultures, history, religion, and fashion. In anime production, character design is a key phase, shaping human, animal, or robotic figures within a

fictional world. This process includes external features like clothing, hairstyles, and colours, expressive elements such as facial expressions, and deeper aspects like personal background and social status. Character designers use mind maps (see Figure 8) to structure visual research, exploring and refining design concepts to generate creative ideas (Muto and Kikuchi 2021: 348).

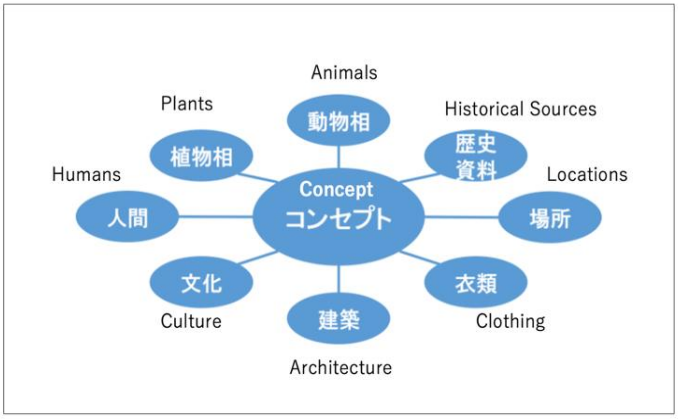

Figure 8. Mind map (Muto and Kikuchi 2021: 348). English gloss added by the author.

The following analysis integrates visual and iconographic approaches to examine four categories presented in Figure 8: Human (i.e. humans who transform into oni), Cultural, Clothing and Historical Sources. Particular attention is given to the symbolic significance of fangs, horns, eye colour and clothing in the world constructed by the creators of *Demon Slayer*.

4.2 Oni in the 21st Century: Fangs, Horn and Eyes[9]

Demon Slayer is categorised as a work of "fantastical storytelling" (Yoshida et al. 2022). One of the series' most notable achievements is its reimagining of oni, bringing them back into popular consciousness with an updated, sleek look that replaces many of the post-Edo features traditionally associated with them. As previously discussed, the terrifying visual attributes of oni have historically been inextricably linked to their monstrous behaviour. However, *Demon Slayer* marks a significant departure from this convention. The 21st-century revival presents oni with more human-like and refined appearances, moving away from their classic, fearsome image. Yet, despite their strikingly modernised look, these oni retain a fundamental aspect of their

[9] Sections 4.2 and 4.3 build upon a conference paper presented at the Monsters Re-visited: the Fantastic Creatures of Japan Conference in Kobe, Japan. (Matsumoto-Sturt 2023).

ancient identity: they remain cold, ruthless, and unrepentantly consume humans. This fusion of an elegant outward form with the predatory nature of traditional oni introduces a new layer of complexity to their portrayal. While visually distinct from their historical counterparts, they preserve the core characteristics that make them deeply unsettling figures in folklore. In this way, *Demon Slayer* offers a fresh yet faithful interpretation of oni, maintaining their essence while adapting them to contemporary aesthetics.

To examine this further, I analysed 37 oni characters from the series, focusing on their fangs, horns, and eye colour.

Figure 9. Hantengu in *Demon Slayer* (c)吾峠呼世晴/集英社/アニプレックス/ufotable.

The results revealed that, with the exception of the monstrous oni Gyokko, every oni had fangs. Of these, 89% (n = 32) featured pointed, so-called oni fangs, while the remaining four (n = 4) had irregular, jagged teeth resembling saw blades. In other words, as previously mentioned, these fangs are an essential characteristic of vampiristic oni and are naturally reflected in their character design. By contrast, hornless oni dominate the *Demon Slayer* world, with only three oni (approximately 8%) possessing the iconic horns. A simple count suggested nine horned oni, but upon closer examination, this number decreased to three, as six of them were avatars of Hantengu (半天狗). Moreover, my analysis revealed a common feature among horned oni: their eye colour.

Notably, all horned oni have red conjunctiva, indicating they are red-eyed oni. However, more importantly, oni with horns appear across a spectrum, from unranked oni such as the Swamp Demon to Upper Rank oni like Hantengu. Despite their small numbers, the presence of horns was not exclusive to stronger oni. Therefore, I conclude that *Demon Slayer*'s character design and oni iconography do not enforce the notion that horns are a necessary condition

for an oni to be perceived as such. This conclusion corresponds with my prediction, confirming that *Demon Slayer* discards the fixed Edo-period iconography of oni in favour of a return to the diverse depictions that thrived during the medieval era, when oni were at their peak.

At this juncture, it is essential to examine the exceptional case of Nezuko, particularly concerning her unique physiology. Nezuko's single horn, which grows and retracts, serves as an effective iconographic design that capitalises on the cultural memory of the oni horn in Japanese tradition. Typically, she is depicted as a cute, human-like figure without horns. However, when she enters combat mode, a horn emerges, transforming her into an oni. This visual transformation symbolises her dual existence as both human and demon. The horn functions as a clear visual marker of her awakened demonised state.

4.3 The Lantern Tale: A Narrative of Redemption

Daki[10] is a *kijo* (鬼女), or female oni, depicted as a tall woman with striking curves, pale skin, long lashes, and lime-green eyes that turn dark orange at the centre when she disguises herself as a beautiful *oiran* (a high-ranking courtesan). When Daki's true demonic essence emerges, her eyes take on a golden hue, reminiscent of the distinctive colour seen in the *deigan* (泥眼) Noh mask. In Noh theatre, masks with eyes adorned with gold mud (*kindei* 金泥) signify supernatural beings, including spirits of the dead, vengeful ghosts, deities, and demons (Yokomichi 1993 [1987]: 195–227). This transformation further accentuates her supernatural nature, amplifying both her power and otherworldly origins. Additionally, her pupils become vertically slit, resembling those of a cat, a feature distinctly alien to humans. With this gaze, her eyes seem to declare, "*I am beyond humanity,*" reinforcing her supernatural identity.

Is Daki truly the only oni with gilt eyes? To investigate this, I examined the 37 oni in *Demon Slayer*, categorising their eye colour as either golden or non-golden. As illustrated in Figure 10, the analysis revealed that while most oni lack gilt eyes, the most powerful Upper Rank oni are evenly split: half possess golden eyes, while the other half do not.

[10] Daki appears in the Entertainment District Arc of *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba* (ufotable, December 2021–February 2022).

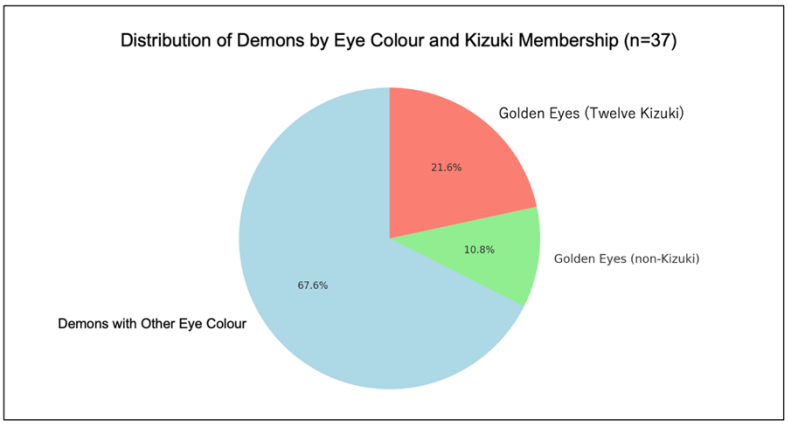

Figure 10.

Strikingly, oni with gilt eyes often reconnect with their human emotions in their final moments. This pattern extends beyond the highest-ranking oni to lesser ones like Teoni. At these moments, they recall past lives and relationships, reliving them through vivid flashbacks known as *sōmatō* (走馬灯) [lit. revolving lantern; life-flashing-before-the-eyes moment]. I refer to these sequences as "Lantern Tales" (*sōmatō tan* 走馬灯譚), capturing their near-death reflections and lost humanity. These recollections trace their transformation from humans, shaped by societal prejudice or overwhelming desires, who ultimately abandoned their humanity. Such emotionally charged moments parallel depictions of oni in *The Tale of Genji*, medieval literature, and Noh theatre, where oni embody extreme human emotions like jealousy, resentment, or sorrow. *Demon Slayer* thus reinterprets and revitalises medieval oni lore for a modern audience.

The Lantern Tale narrative consistently features an oni as the storyteller and Tanjiro, the series' protagonist and a demon slayer, as the empathetic listener. Through *Demon Slayer*'*s* visual storytelling, the audience relives these recollections as if unfolding in real time, heightening their emotional impact. This structure closely parallels reminiscence therapy, as discussed by oral history scholar Thompson (2000: 20). He asserts that recalling intense memories triggers emotional responses and that processing distressing memories often requires only a sympathetic response (Thompson 2000: 180).

In *Demon Slayer*, oni witnessing their own *sōmatō* are given a final chance to confront unresolved trauma—the painful memories of their transformation, severed from human salvation. Some Lantern Tale narratives parallel what Gubrium and Holstein (2016: 10) term "redemptive moves," where oni reflect on past suffering and regain insight. This shift marks their journey toward reclaiming lost humanity, framing the Lantern Tale as an

exploration of redemption. Figures like Gyūtarō[11] embody societal suffering and injustice, forced into a liminal existence that catalysed their transformation into demons. Yet, in their final moments, they display resilience, forgiveness, and trust, recovering the warmth of their former humanity rather than succumbing to despair. This redemptive process extends beyond the oni, offering a broader reflection on the human condition. Thus, the *Lantern Tale* becomes a vehicle for exploring empathy and understanding—not only for the oni but for humanity as a whole. It challenges perceptions of monstrosity and humanity, presenting redemption as a universal possibility. Through this lens, the narrative serves both as a tale of salvation for the oni and a reflective mirror for the audience.

4.4 Transformation into Oni: Agency and Fate

There were various reasons why humans turned into oni. *Demon Slayer* portrays both those who were forced into becoming oni and those who willingly embraced the transformation. The latter reflects Baba's (1988: 288–291) classification of modern oni as *gokuaku-nin* (極悪人) [the worst of the worst]—humans so wicked in life that they became demons in human form, creating a living hell. A prime example of this category is Hantengu, whom Baba (1988) classifies as *ijin-kei* (異人系), referring to humans who turn into oni due to their fundamentally corrupt nature. Hantengu's appearance alone establishes his identity as an oni (see Figure 9). With two signature horns, one of the most recognisable cultural icons of demons in Japanese tradition, there is no need for explicit narration to confirm his nature. His very form communicates what he is.

Another category, *hito-oni-kei* (人鬼系), is divided into two subtypes based on the timing of their transformation. The first consists of *onryō* (怨霊), vengeful ghosts who become oni after death, driven by lingering resentment or a desire for revenge. The second, *henshintan-kei* (変身譚系), refers to individuals who transform while still alive, their change triggered by overwhelming emotions such as jealousy, hatred, or desperation. A prime example of *henshintan-kei* is Kokushibō, a former samurai from the Sengoku period (late 15th–16th century) who was consumed by feelings of inferiority and jealousy toward his exceptionally talented twin brother. Desperate for strength, he ultimately chose to become an oni. While many oni lose their human memories, Kokushibō retains his, preventing him from experiencing the redemptive *sōmatō* sequence that other oni undergo in their final moments.

[11] In Episode 18 of the *Entertainment District Arc* ("No Matter How Many Lives"), Gyūtarō recalls his childhood, describing himself as weak and clinging to life like a hollow tree. He was ridiculed for his appearance and voice, called worthless, and treated as a target of scorn. Stones were thrown at him, and he felt as if his sole purpose in life was to be mocked by the world.

Instead, he is forced to confront the emptiness of his existence, realising that despite sacrificing everything, he has gained nothing. Accepting his fate, he stops regenerating and ceases to exist. Kokushibō's arc reinforces the idea of irreversible self-destruction—he became an oni of his own will and, in the end, relinquished that existence by his own choice. His deliberate lack of redemption sets him apart from other oni, underscoring the tragic finality of his transformation.

Kokushibō's story bears a strong resemblance to the fate of *Kanawa no Onna* (鉄輪の女), a character in *The Tale of the Heike*, whose psychological struggle is analysed in detail by Baba (1988: 191–195). This woman, having been abandoned by her husband, willingly forsakes her humanity and transforms into an oni in her pursuit of revenge. However, despite her transformation, her love for her husband remains unchanged. In the end, rather than achieving vengeance, she is left only with the reality of her own monstrous form. Both the medieval *kijo* and the modern oni, Kokushibō, undergo a deliberate transformation into demons, a key characteristic of what can be termed an "intentional metamorphosis narrative" (*ishiteki henshintan* 意思的変身譚). Baba (1988: 190) describes those who turn into oni while still alive as individuals deeply entangled in resentment, obsession, love, and hatred—an intertwining of emotions reflective of Buddhist concepts of *karma* (*gō* 業). Their insatiable desires and the burden of sins carried over from past lives manifest as the ultimate consequence of transformation into demons. If this notion holds true, then Kokushibō's backstory can be seen as a direct embodiment of this principle.

4.5 Visual Echoes of Classical Demon Lore

The concept of *katagawa ningen* (片側人間), or the 'half-human' motif, is a striking visual representation of hybridity and transformation in Japanese folklore. Komatsu (2018: Ch.12) describes this form as "the vertically divided unilateral composition," where human and non-human elements are asymmetrically split yet integrated into a single body. This structural imbalance provokes unease, as the fragmented human form becomes a site of horror and transformation. Such figures align with the broader monstrous tradition of beings that exist on the boundary between human and non-human.

In *Demon Slayer*, Gyokko exemplifies this monstrous hybridity. Unlike the more conventionally attractive, human-like oni in the series, his grotesque and unsettling appearance (Figure 11-left) starkly contrasts with theirs.

Figure 11. Gyokko (玉壺). c)吾峠呼世晴/集英社・アニプレックス・ufotable

Gyokko's unnatural anatomy—green lips replacing his eyes and additional eyes on his forehead and chin—defies human morphology, evoking lethality and visceral repulsion. When he enlarges and reveals his true form (see Figure 11-right), his body distorts further into a scaled aquatic humanoid, reinforcing his status as a chimera-like hybrid. From a theoretical perspective, monster theory offers a useful framework for analysing his representation. Monsters embody collective fears, anxieties, and desires, existing as uncanny entities that unsettle through their very presence (Cohen, 2018: 62). Perceived as both inconceivable and unclean, they evoke disgust alongside inherent danger (Carroll, 1990). Gyokko epitomises this duality—his grotesque, shifting form resists classification, making him a visual embodiment of horror.

The *katagawa ningen* motif also extends to the iconographic analysis of Nezuko in her combat state. Upon awakening, she undergoes a dramatic transformation: a single horn emerges from the right side of her forehead and vine-like markings spread across her body. Komatsu, almost as if predicting Nezuko's portrayal in *Demon Slayer*, explains that *katagawa ningen* best encapsulates the defining traits of an oni—such as horns and fangs—by asymmetrically placing them on one side of the body while leaving the other side unchanged. This asymmetry, he argues, constructs the archetypal image of a 'half-human' oni. It is plausible that Gotoge reimagined this motif from traditional oni folklore, such as the *Katako* (片子) tales of half-human, half-oni children, when designing Nezuko's transformation.

To conclude, the six strongest demons in *Demon Slayer* are narratively and visually balanced between two archetypes: one representing the cruel, monstrous oni of tradition and the other embodying demons who had no choice but to abandon their humanity. This duality adds depth to their characterisation

and may be a key factor in the series' widespread appeal. The interplay between these contrasting traits creates a compelling dynamic, encouraging audiences to engage with the characters on multiple levels. Visually, this duality echoes classical Japanese demon lore while integrating a mosaic of references to Western vampire and monster traditions.

4.6 Religious Iconography in Hantengu's Avatars

As previously discussed, *Demon Slayer* is rooted in a medieval worldview where oni are perceived as genuine threats. During this period, those who believed in their existence developed two primary methods of protection. One relied on Buddhist teachings and sacred incantations, such as the *Sonshō Darani*, believed to possess apotropaic power, as recounted in a tale[12] from the *Konjaku Monogatari Shū*. The other involved seeking the aid of heroic figures to eradicate oni. Given that *Demon Slayer* follows this tradition, it is interesting to investigate whether it incorporates religious motifs and, if so, how they are embedded in both the narrative and reimagined oni's iconography.

At first glance, the series appears largely devoid of explicit religious references, suggesting a world without divine influence. However, a closer examination reveals that while direct religious intervention is minimal, Buddhist concepts and motifs subtly shape the narrative and character development. Matsuzaki (2021), a *Jōdo Shinshū* priest, argues that although the series lacks overtly recognisable Buddhist motifs[13], it nonetheless embodies a profound Buddhist sensibility at a deeper conceptual level. He suggests that Kibutsuji Muzan's obsession with eternity and fear of transformation reflect *gashū* (我執), or ego-clinging—the relentless attachment to a fixed sense of self and resistance to impermanence. This contrasts with the Buddhist principle of *shohō muga* (諸法無我), which asserts that all phenomena, including the self, are devoid of inherent existence and permanence. Matsuzaki's interpretation from a Buddhist perspective corresponds with my linguistic analysis in Section 3.2, where *mu* (無) is understood as 'seeking something that does not exist.' Therefore, I agree that its engagement with Buddhist philosophy suggests the creator's understanding extends beyond surface symbolism, shaping the

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[12] The *Tale of Times Now Past*, vol.14, story-42. Fujiwara no Tokitsura, a young Heian nobleman, witnessed the *hyakkiyagyō* (百鬼夜行), a night-time procession of oni in Heiankyō. Fortunately, his nurse had sewn a copy of the *Bucchō Sonshō Darani* (仏頂尊勝陀羅尼) into his robe's collar, protecting him from its malevolent power, allowing him to escape. (Summary and translation by the author).

[13] One of the few explicit references to Buddhism in *Demon Slayer* appears in Season 4, Episode 4, where a demon slayer recites the *Amida Sutra*, one of the three Pure Land sutras, while fighting an oni. Similarly, in the final episode, the descendants of the demon slayers are depicted as reborn into the modern world, a premise implicitly rooted in Buddhist reincarnation.

narrative's fundamental themes and structure. However, while this perspective highlights the depth of religious imagery in *Demon Slayer*, Ishii (2002) takes a different stance, arguing that religious elements in popular media—such as rituals, garments, and institutions—often function merely as decorative motifs. This section examines whether religious imagery in *Demon Slayer* serves merely as aesthetic embellishment or carries deeper cultural and narrative significance within its visual storytelling. By analysing clothing, character-defining props, and symbolic attributes, it explores how these elements contribute to characterisation and narrative structure.

As discussed in 4.4, Hantengu is a *human-turned-oni* who lived outside societal norms, committed crimes, and was feared as an outcast. Despite this, his physical form is that of a frail, elderly man, perpetually trembling in fear, earning him the title Oni of Fear. Thus, he never engages in combat himself, instead relying on his extraordinary speed to evade capture. His swiftness suggests possible inspiration from *Shōshitsuki* (捷疾鬼), a demon associated with agility and identified with *Yakṣa* (*Yasha* 夜叉), supernatural beings from ancient Indian traditions feared for their anthropophagy—the consumption of human flesh. When cornered, Hantengu generates four clones, each embodying a primary emotion—joy (*ki* 喜), anger (*do* 怒), sorrow (*ai* 哀), and pleasure (*raku* 楽), and these emotion-driven avatars fight in his place. In digital culture, avatars allow users to customise their appearance and explore alternative identities, particularly in social media and gaming. Recognising their advantages, Gotoge employs this concept in shaping Hantengu's character. His youthful and dynamic avatars sharply contrast with his frail original form, allowing him to operate within the demon world through them.

Figure 12. Left: avatar 1 (anger), 2 (pleasure), and 4 (Joy). 鬼滅の刃©吾峠呼世晴/集英社 コミック 13 巻. **Right:** Tengu: *Gazu Hyakki Yagyō*, Toriyama Sekien. NDL Image Bank.

The iconography of the emotion-driven avatars, as summarised in Table 1, presents a visual narrative that reimagines classical Japanese supernatural

beliefs about oni and medieval *tengu* motifs in a modern context. The red oni (Figure 12-left), embodying anger, retains a humanoid form akin to Hantengu's original *hitooni-kei* (人鬼系) appearance, subtly referencing *Raijin* (雷神), the thunder god, through his use of a lightning-generating khakkhara (*shakujō* 錫杖). Karaku (Figure 12-left-middle), is unmistakably linked to *shugendō* (修験道), a mountain ascetic tradition deeply intertwined with Japan's religious landscape (Ellwood and Pilgrim 2016). His attire, particularly the *bonten yuigesa* (梵天結袈裟)[14] with its distinctive fluffy *bonten* (梵天), serves as a key visual marker, immediately recognisable as the garb of *yamabushi* (山伏), the ascetic monks of the mountains. From the medieval period onwards, *yamabushi* and *tengu* became conceptually intertwined, as *yamabushi* were believed to attain supernatural abilities (*genriki* 験力) through rigorous mountain training. This association led to the popular image of *tengu* as beings residing in the mountains, soaring through the skies, and wielding extraordinary powers.

This historical backdrop makes Karaku's use of the legendary *tengu* fan, a *yatsude no ha-uchiwa* (八手の葉団扇) capable of summoning powerful gusts, seamlessly integrated into his character design and ensures that it does not feel incongruous to the audience. Katsumata (2005), in his analysis of *tengu* depictions in classical texts, notes that the *karasu tengu* (烏天狗, Figure 12-right), or crow-like flying *tengu*, emerged between the late Heian and medieval periods. He further observes that the actions of *tengu*, such as abducting humans and animals, became increasingly associated with the notion of *ma* (魔), demonic forces that opposed Buddhist law. Positioned alongside the blue oni Avatar 3, whose *niō-dasuki* [15] (仁王襷) symbolises Japan's ancient, invisible supernatural entity, Avatar 4, Urogi (Figure12-left), emerges as a reimagined modern *karasu tengu*. Enhanced with greater offensive capabilities and superpower, he takes the form of a hybrid half-human, half-bird monster.

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[14] The attire of *yamabushi* is illustrated and explained on the website *History of Costume in Japan* by the Costume Museum (風俗博物館) in Kyoto. The depiction is based on the museum's historical research on Japanese dress (Accessed 10 June 2024). Note that the *bonten yuigesa* (梵天結衣袈裟), distinguished by its fluffy *bonten*, is primarily worn by Shugendō practitioners of the Tendai lineage and is not a universal element of *yamabushi* attire.

[15] The *niō-dasuki*, historically used in Shinto rituals, signifies a sacred presence. In *kabuki*, especially *aragoto* roles, it marks characters with supernatural abilities, distinguishing them from ordinary humans. Source: 歌舞伎文様考第 8 回「荒事—荒ぶる魂を現す文様」[*Kabuki Patterns Study, No. 8: Aragoto—Patterns Representing a Wild Spirit,* Kabuki Official Website *Kabuki-bito*. Accessed 5 October 2024.

	Main Body	Avatar 1	Avatar 2	Avatar 3	Avatar 4	Avatar 5	Avatar 6
Name & Emotion	Hantengu (怯) Fear	Sekido (怒) Anger	Karaku (楽) Pleasure	Aizetsu (哀) Sorrow	Urogi (喜) Joy	Zōhakuten (憎) Hatred	Kon no Oni (恨) Resentment
Origin/Icon	*Yaksha* (夜叉 *yasha*)	Red oni (赤鬼)	*Yamabushi* （山伏）	Blue oni (青鬼)	*Karasu-Tengu* 烏天狗 Avian humanoid （異形の鬼）	1. *Raijin* (雷神) 2. Ancient Indian War Deva (帝釈天)	Giant form of Hantengu
Religious motif	Ex-Human (異人系)	None	Shugendō （修験道系）	Ancient Kami (荒魂 *aramitama*)	Shugendō （修験道系）	1.Vengeful spirit 2. Buddhism (仏教系)	None
CD: clothing	*kinagashi* style *kimono* & *obi* 着流しの着物	Same as the Main Body.	1.*hakama* pants (*tattuke-bakama* 裁着袴) 2.*Yuigesa* (結袈裟) harness with white pom-poms.	1. monk's working clothes. （作務衣 *samue*） 2. symbolized supernatural power. (仁王禰 *niōdasuki*)	1. Legs covered in thick, black feathers. 2. Large chain resembling prayer beads.	A mosaic of elements inspired by Raijin, warrior-mode Buddhist statues, and fierce guardian deities of Indian origin.	Same as the Main Body.
CD: attributes	Two horns (All his clones have horns & fangs)	Khakkhara (*shakujō* 錫杖)	Fatsia/*yatsude* leaf-shaped *uchiwa* [Tengu leaf fan] (天狗の団扇)	Cross spear: *Jūmonji yari* (十文字槍)	1.Sharp kicking claws 2. Flying ability with large wings （飛行能力）	1.Interconnected floating drums, inscribed with 憎. 2. Double-Bladed Dagger	Same as the Main Body.

Table 1: Summary of the iconographic features of Hantengu and his emotion clones[16]

Avatar 5, Zōhakuten 憎珀天 (Figure 13-middle), the collective embodiment of all avatars, appears as a boy of around ten, with sharply spiked hair and two horns protruding from his forehead. His hair evokes both *dohatsu* (怒髪), the 'hair of rage' symbolising intense fury, and *enpatsu* (焔髪), the flamed hair often depicted in Buddhist statues of wrathful deities. He wields twin curved blades, reinforcing his aggressive persona. His design prominently features five linked drums (*renko* 連鼓) arranged in a circular formation on his back, visually recalling *Raijin*, the thunder god. However, unlike traditional depictions of *Raijin*, each drum is inscribed with the character '憎' (*zō*, hatred), suggesting vengeful wrath rather than divine authority.

As Komatsu (2018: Ch.10) notes, oni often signal their arrival with thunder and lightning—a motif reflected in Zōhakuten's dramatic entrance. However, as Figure 13 illustrates, Zōhakuten's sleek attire contrasts sharply with traditional depictions of *Raijin* (雷神, Figure 13-Right), who is typically half-naked, demon-faced, and encircled by linked drums. Given this contrast, I turn to the name Zōhakuten 憎珀天 as the starting point for analysis, as it provides crucial insight into the character's design. To begin with, the inclusion of *ten* (天) [heaven] in his name suggests a connection to Buddhist deities, many of whom originate from ancient Indian gods, including Taishakuten 帝釈

[16] CD stands for Character Design.

天, also known as *Indra* in the *Rig Veda* as a thunder god. These deities were later incorporated into Buddhism as *tenbu* (天部), guardian figures who protect Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. This protective role aligns seamlessly with Zōhakuten's function within the narrative—fighting to defend Hantengu's true form. Moreover, his name evokes associations with *tenbu* retainers (*kenzoku* 眷属), such as the flesh-eating Rākṣasa (*Rasetsu* 羅刹) and Yakṣa (*Yasha* 夜叉), reinforcing his demonic attributes.

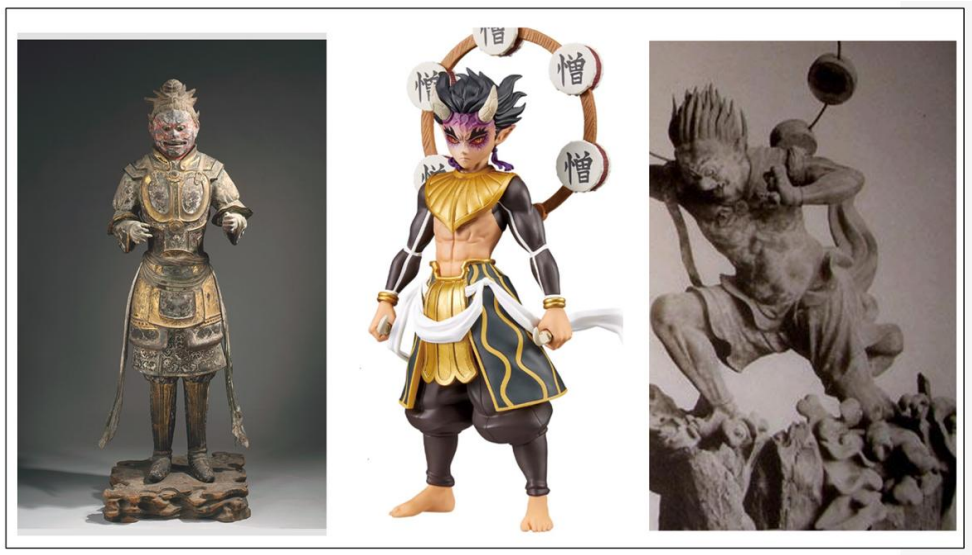

Figure 13. Left: 鳩槃荼像 [Statue of *Kubanda*], Kofukuji, Nara, Japan. **Middle:** Zōhakuten figure by BANDAI SPIRITS. **Right**: 雷神像 [Statue of *Raijin* in Sanjūsangen-dō, Kyoto, Japan]. Photograph by K. Ogawa, public domain.

Visually, Zōhakuten is adorned with elaborate armour (*kacchū* 甲冑), including a radiant golden corselet (*kyōkō* 胸甲), a front plate (*maedate* 前楯), and a waist guard (*yōkō* 腰甲) decorated with motifs from Hantengu's *kimono*. He also wears golden armlets (*wansen* 腕釧) and an ethereal, floating white sash (*tenne* 天衣) draped around his waist. This ensemble closely resembles the armoured iconography of warrior deva, such as the martial figures among the *Hachibushū* (八部衆) at Kofukuji (Figure 13-Left), sculpted in 734. These elements suggest that Zōhakuten's design draws inspiration from classical depictions of guardian deities in Buddhist art, as well as the traditional iconography of oni as *Raijin*, distinguished by a defining attribute of the thunder god—the *renko* [interconnected drums]. Zōhakuten's iconography merges elements of *Raijin*, the thunder god, and the warrior deva, embodying both divine authority and martial power. This synthesis underscores that

religious imagery in *Demon Slayer* is not merely ornamental. While Ishii (2002) rightly argues that such imagery does not indoctrinate viewers, he assumes that these representations lack deeper intent on the part of the creators. However, I contend that these motifs and character-defining props carry historical and cultural significance, enriching the audience's interpretative experience regardless of religious motivations. Through this layered visual language, Zōhakuten emerges as a hyperreal figure—his fictional nature obscured by an intricate network of cultural and religious references, creating a heightened sense of realism. This construction aligns with Baudrillard's concept of the hyperreal (Lane 2009: 81-98), wherein representation does not simply reflect reality but constructs its own, appearing more real than the historical and mythological sources that inform it.

5. Conclusion

The evolution of oni from classical mythology to contemporary media highlights their enduring role as cultural symbols, continuously reshaped through shifting artistic and narrative traditions. While early modern representations solidified a standardised image of oni, *Demon Slayer* disrupts this static framework, blending traditional demon lore with cross-cultural influences, particularly Western vampiric motifs. This intertextual synthesis reinforces oni's ability to transcend historical boundaries, ensuring their continued relevance in modern storytelling.

At the core of this transformation is *Demon Slayer*'s reconfiguration of oni through visual and linguistic means. The concept of *katagawa ningen* (片側人間) underscores their fragmented, hybridised nature, while Kibutsuji Muzan's name evokes supernatural crossroads, positioning him as a liminal figure in cultural memory. Likewise, Zōhakuten's iconography, blending elements of *Raijin* and warrior *deva*, demonstrates how religious imagery in the series carries deeper cultural and narrative significance beyond ornamentation. Ultimately, the resurgence of oni in contemporary media affirms their role as evolving cultural constructs rather than relics of the past. Instead of fading, oni are continually reimagined to reflect shifting fears, desires, and collective imaginations.

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TRANSFORMING AND TRANSLATING MONSTERS: ADAM COOLEY AND THE ART OF YŌKAI IN THE INTERREGNUM

Kathryn M. TANAKA[*]

Introduction: The Time of Monsters

In 1918, a flu pandemic raged across the world. In Japan, poet Yosano Akiko (1878-1942) chronicled the social disruption caused by a pandemic that quickly became global, documenting failures of the Japanese government to institute measures to protect its citizens (Beichman, n.p.). Yosano wrote of the unequal medical access exacerbated by gaps in wealth, and the fear that isolated people from their communities (ibid.). Death was ever-present, as Yosano wrote: "Now we are surrounded on all sides by death. In Tokyo and Yokohama alone, four hundred people are dying every day" (ibid.).

In recent years, scholars have connected popular dissatisfaction with government responses to the flu pandemic to the rise of fascism, in particular the strengthening of the Nazi party, in Germany (Blickle, 1). The years between the end of the pandemic and the rise of fascism were a time of political, economic, and social instability, a time that philosopher Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) referred to as an interregnum. According to Gramsci, the interregnum is a time of crisis and transition, where the previous ruling class has lost their ability to maintain social order through consent and shared meaning, but must rely instead on force and repression to control the masses (Gramsci, 1975, 32). He wrote: "…this actually means that the great masses have become detached from traditional ideologies, they no longer believe what they previously used to believe, etc. The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born: in this interregnum, morbid phenomena of the most varied kind come to pass" (ibid., 31-32). For Gramsci, who wrote while arrested and imprisoned for his opposition to Benito Mussolini's fascist politics, these "morbid phenomena" were the rise of authoritarianism and reactionary movements as old hegemonic orders collapsed (ibid.). The interregnum is not only societal breakdown, but it is also a suspension of ideological coherence in which pathogens, monsters, or symbols proliferate without stable anchoring or control. There is a breakdown of meaning as well as order.

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The parallels between a global pandemic followed by the rapid rise of populist authoritarian movements in the first half of the twentieth century and the present-day have been widely commented on in the popular media. The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic exposed institutional fragility, increased economic precarity, and undermined public trust of institutions (Alteri et al.). Fundamentally, the pandemic highlighted inequalities and structural breakdowns in the current political, economic, and social systems. Within that context, in an era of increasingly polarized rhetoric and systemic rupture, philosopher Slavoj Žižek's transformation of Gramsci's words into a succinct quote proved resonant.

This began when Slavoj Žižek rendered Gramsci's words into a new translation, or transformation, and subsequently shared his interpretation of the quote on Twitter in 2013. As Christopher Hobson pointed out, Žižek's rendition of the quote was picked up by pundits and spread across the internet (Hobson, 4).

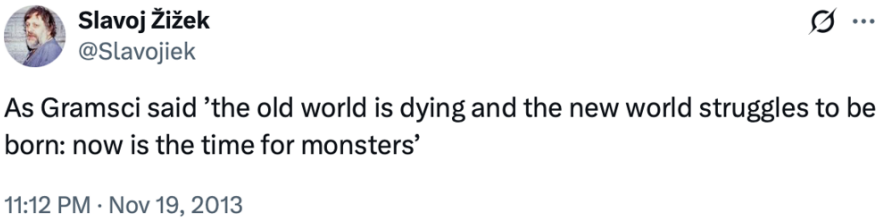

Image 1. Žižek's tweet of his translation of Gramsci.

Žižek himself admits that his translation helped popularize the evocation of Gramsci over the last 15 years: "Let me begin by admitting my role in the global spread of Antonio Gramsci's remark from his Prison Notebooks: "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms [fenomeni morbosi] appear." Indeed, I am responsible for a slightly shorter, and, dare I say, pithier iteration: "The old world is dying and the new world struggles to be born. Now is the time of monsters.' Whether you ask Blue Labour thinkers or lazy journalists or Robert Jenrick, they all agree on one thing – we are living in Gramsci's interregnum. On 16 November, the phrase "a time of monsters" even made it to the front page of the Daily Mail…" (Žižek, 2025, n.p.)

Žižek's strategic transformation of "morbid phenomena" into "monsters" marks a fundamental shift in meaning in this quote that perhaps drives its present ubiquity. "Morbid phenomena," in the first English translation, points to pathology, an intellectual analysis of a society that is ailing. Žižek renders these phenomena as "monsters," able to be easily associated with villains or creatures we can blame for contemporary societal breakdown: political figures, social

norms, economic systems, or ideologies. That is to say, whereas Gramsci is describing how crises unfold and our world becomes an interregnum, Žižek's interpretation allows us to identify the causes of social breakdown and associate them with monstrous symbols. In translating pathology into monstrosity, Žižek created a media meme that resonated and took on a life of its own, becoming a symbolic shorthand to share the fears of the present. (Hobson; Oltermann).

If Žižek's translation of Gramsci renders our present crises and fears legible through the language of monsters, contemporary artists who literally paint monsters become part of this translation process, turning legibility into visibility. In particular, the work of American contemporary artist Adam Cooley (birth year unconfirmed) and his series of Japanese yōkai paintings, should be understood not only as acts of cultural translation but also as visual interpretations of the monsters and fears that inhabit the interregnum. This process of translation makes systemic crises relatable, understandable, and perhaps, something to overcome. Within this context, Cooley's yōkai series both follow Žižek's shift from pathology to monster, but they also act as translation themselves, rendering yōkai transnational and vaguely familiar, but also strange. Through selected works from Cooley's series, this paper explores how social rupture produces symbolic monsters and how those monsters circulate as meaning, or representations of ruptures and fears, in our current interregnum.

Yōkai are indeed the ideal beings of the interregnum whether one follows Gramsci or Žižek, as they are liminal beings that defy easy definition and slip between domains; Komatsu Kazuhiko describes them as "creatures, presences, or phenomena that could be described as mysterious or eerie…" that inhabit "three "domains": yōkai as incidents or phenomena, yōkai as supernatural entities or presences, and yōkai as depictions" (Komatsu, 12). Yōkai cross boundaries: lines between self/other, life/death, the human world and the supernatural (ibid., 164-66). This is relevant because, as Komatsu argues, boundaries divide the world into civilized center and unknown periphery, and "boundaries are where order meets disorder or anti-order" (ibid., 167). Boundaries can be spatial and temporal, but yōkai can defy them all—and the boundaries collapse as meaning is challenged in the interregnum.

Adam Cooley spent nearly three decades living and working in Japan before returning to the United States, a transnational existence that directly informs his *Monstrous Dreams: Yōkai of Japan* series. Cooley notes that he began developing the yōkai works shortly before leaving Japan and expanded the series upon returning to the United States, where it formed the basis of his exhibition *Monstrous Dreams: Yōkai of Japan*, at Revolution Gallery (Cooley, interview). Cooley explains:

"I think I started them a little bit before I left [Japan]… and then when I moved back to the United States I started working on them more intently. [That was] tied to the first exhibition here in the United States. It was the 60th anniversary

of sister city ties between Buffalo, New York, and the city of Kanazawa. And I was asked to create a piece that would be unveiled at the event."

Ultimately, Cooley created the 16-foot wood panel folding screen "Buffalo Dreaming" for the Japan Culture Center of Western New York for the event (Japan Culture Center of Western New York). After the opening, Cooley continues, "While I was there, the next day or so after [the event], I had an opening at a separate gallery, which was called Revolution Gallery. They loved the concept when I originally proposed it a year or two in advance. They said they'd like to have that, and it would be a nice tie into the city's huge celebration. So that was it. And that was *Monstrous Dreams: Yōkai of Japan*, that exhibition, which I have just continued."

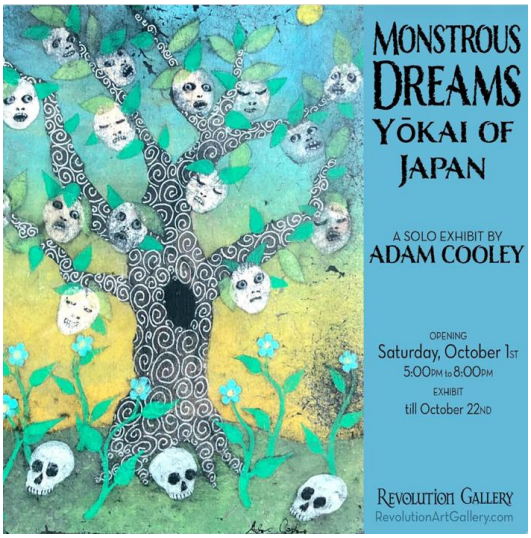

Image 2. Cooley's first yokai exhibition promotion from Revolution Galler y (2022).

Cooley has described himself as "existing in the underground/outsider art world," a position at the margins of hegemonic power structures that amplifies "the power of art to challenge social norms and to express the marginalized voices that are often overlooked in mainstream society" (Cooley, Facebook post, 5 April, 2023). For him, art is expressive, connective, and translative, and nowhere is that clearer than the yōkai series, born out of his Buffalo-Kanazawa dreaming. Both "Buffalo Dreaming" and the yōkai series emerged from transnational exchange, positioning Cooley's art as a form of cultural translation between Japan and the United States. This can be seen literally, in the fact that "Buffalo Dreaming" was separated, with one half kept in Kanazawa and one in Buffalo (Japan Cultural Center of Western New York). But the same motive underpins the yōkai series; Cooley sees his art as an act of translation for his audiences (Cooley, interview).

At the same time, Cooley's yōkai are not intended to be allegories of contemporary politics or the monsters of the interregnum. Yet, like the monsters, and like outside art, yōkai appear in liminal spaces, in the margins of hegemonic power, in times of disruption between the human world and what lies beyond it, and it is hard not to see reflections of rupture in some of his yōkai. In short, yōkai are fundamentally monsters of the interregnum. If Gramsci's notion of the interregnum describes a historical moment of hegemonic rupture filled with pathogens causing social ills, and Žižek's translation of Gramsci transforms that rupture into monstrous symbols, then Adam Cooley's self-positioning at the margins of dominant culture and his transnational yōkai series situate him within this same field of transformation and translation, where liminal beings become visible symbols of crisis.

Yōkai of Epidemic and Precarity

Perhaps the clearest example of Cooley's yōkai reflecting contemporary fears about social disruption is in a series of monsters he drew that can be related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although his oeuvre includes other yōkai associated with pandemic, such as Kudan, Jinja-hime, Itsumade, Yogen no Tori, and more, of particular interest here is Amabie and Korori. Amabie entered global consciousness associated with the COVID-19 pandemic as part of the Amabie boom (Tanaka, 2022). Cooley associates Amabie with "prophecy and protection" especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Cooley, Facebook post, 4 December 2023).

Image 3. Cooley's *Amabie* (2023)

While many of the Amabie images during the pandemic featured a cute, character-like Amabie, Cooley takes pains to highlight Amabie as a yōkai. Indeed, Cooley's Amabie exemplifies the yōkai's traditional function as an image meant to circulate during times of epidemic to ward off illness. In this piece, the figure operates both as an image and an icon in that the monster fully occupies the painting and is suspended above the water, looking at the viewer (Tanaka, 2023). Its presentation recalls the historical role of Amabie as a prophetic being who promised that sharing her image would offer protection from illness when displayed during times when disease spread. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Cooley's choice to include Amabie in his yōkai series reflects a form of horizontal meaning-making that emerges when institutional authority fails to respond in ways that satisfy the public. Cooley is obeying the edict of the yōkai, and literally sharing its image.

Positioned between sea and sky, Cooley's Amabie occupies a liminal space that is amplified by the gradient background. Commenting on another piece, Cooley has stated: "The background, with its gradient, evokes twilight or dawn, transitional times that hint at change" (Cooley, Facebook post, 9 March 2025). The gradient background here functions in a similar way, as light appears to be fading;and liminality is further underscored by the inclusion of a yellow orb that appears in in the sky that can represent the sun, the moon, or the time of the gods. In Japan, the color gold is associated with the sun, but also with supernatural power (Tanaka, 2022, 224). Gold can represent deities and otherworldliness.

Gold, or gold-colored yellow, is also deeply significant in Cooley's work; he has stated that he is interested in alchemy and chemistry, and that in his art he uses "both real gold and a combination of zinc and copper, - which looks very close to gold. But I can cause reactions with it unlike true gold, so I use both" (Cooley, personal communication, 12 February 2026). In the case of Amabie and his other yōkai, he often uses paint that is layered with other colors to achieve the look of gold to further change the effect in some cases. In the case of Amabie, the yellow-gold of her beak and the orb in the sky are prominent and appear brighter than the other colors in the painting.

In Cooley's painting, the yellow-gold in the sky may indicate liminal time and influence of the supernatural; and where Amabie's eyes are traditionally said to be gold-colored, Cooley has instead added bright yellow to her beak, and in dots on her hair and body. This serves to render Amabie slightly strange or uncanny as a departure from tradition. In addition, by highlighting Amabie's beak with the yellow, Cooley could be understood to locate Amabie's power into her speech, highlighting her healing promise. By shifting the bright yellow-gold color away from the eyes and onto the mouth, Cooley makes Amabie's supernatural powers more visceral; her speech becomes material healing.

The beak and the teeth are also an important intervention into popular depictions of Amabie. While cute depictions of Amabie that circulated online during the pandemic often downplayed the monstrous nature of the yōkai and depicted the creature as akin to a mermaid, the beak and its visible teeth resists domestication and cuteness. While the body has elements of fish and the legs have elements of octopus, or perhaps an amphibian, the beak is reminiscent of a goose or duck. Amabie becomes a chimera in Cooley's work, not easily definable and sitting uncomfortably between species.

Again, sharp yellow-gold lines at the edge of the beak both mark this beak as uncanny and draw attention to the feature as both an organ of speech that can utter prophecies that save humanity—but the teeth remind us that yōkai can never be completely domesticated and helpful. There is still the potential for bites. Here, Cooley preserves the ambivalence of the yōkai and reminds the viewer that in folklore protection and danger often go hand in hand, and if Amabie provides hope for healing and a restoration of social order she does so without abandoning the unsettling qualities that mark her as a creature of liminality, blurred boundaries, and a society disrupted by illness. In this way, Cooley's Amabie remains ambiguous, a symbol of reassurance that refuses complete domestication in uncertain times.

If Amabie becomes a yōkai of uncertain hope that order can be reestablished in the interregnum, Cooley's Korōri is a pandemic threat. Cooley gives the history of this peculiar yōkai in his description of the piece: "Monsters are often representations of either real or subconscious fears and the Japanese yokai Korōri (虎狼狸) is no exception. Korōri (虎狼狸) appears as a chimera-like creature composed of elements of the tiger, wolf, and tanuki. It was believed that the Korōri would sneak into houses and infect the household members with cholera and then later would feed on the dead bodies of the infected, as cholera was spreading through late 19th century Japan. During the Edo Period, the word for cholera in Japan was Korori. One spelling used the kanji for tiger (虎 *ko*), wolf (狼 *rō*), and tanuki (狸 *ri*) which resulted in the development of this terrifying yokai" (Cooley, 20 July 2024).

Image 4. Cooley's *Korōri* (2024)

Where Amabie's posture in the painting is passively floating, displayed for the viewer's gaze, Korōri's raised head and exposed teeth are more active. The motion is highlighted in the motion of the paws: tipped with sharp yellow claws, Cooley depicts Korōri midstep, advancing, nose in the air, stalking. As Cooley says, this is a terrifying and predatory yōkai on the prowl.

In addition, like Amabie, Korōri is a beast that blurs boundaries. During the 1862 cholera epidemic, the disease was imagined as a chimera, as Cooley depicts it, with the head of a tiger, the body of a wolf, and the testicles of a tanuki (racoon dog). By the Meiji period, this association of tiger, wolf, and tanuki with cholera became so prevalent that this yōkai entered popular discourse, similar to Amabie during the COVID-19 pandemic '(Tanaka, 2022). And while Amabie was used as a talisman of protection when social order broke down, korōri was depicted as a threat, surreptitiously entering homes, hovering over sufferers, or attacking medical men (ibid.). Thus, korōri is a yōkai of transgression, and this is echoed in Cooley's resistance to clean separations or lines in his chimera. The swirls that seem centered on the body of the wolf twist onto the tiger's stripes and cover the testicles of the tanuki, spilling across species boundaries and visually transgressing bodily integrity. The movement of the swirls, like the movement of the legs, mark korōri as encroaching and threatening. The exaggerated exposure of Korōri's teeth evokes an unsettling, almost Cheshire cat-grin, transforming epidemic death into a visible, stalking presence rather than an unseen collapse.

The movement is offset by the chill of the blue orb in the sky; rather than a yellowish golden light against a gradient background that reflects off the body and beak of Amabie, the background and sky of Korōri reinforce the darkness

with the ground disappearing into the sky. Taken as a pair, these images represent a fascinating set of binaries; if Amabie is protection, Korōri is threat, and if Amabie is meant to be circulated and provide a social suture, Korōri is something that infects and festers. In both cases, the social crises they represent is embodied, and interregnum as epidemic rupture creates the space for yōkai to flourish.

Yōkai of Instability and Transformation

If epidemic yōkai symbolize the monsters of the interregnum as biological rupture, Cooley's shapeshifting creatures move the focus from contagion to instability of form and identity itself. Biological and social crises can lead to crises of identity, to transformation. Two examples of yōkai that also speak to transforming identities in Cooley's oeuvre are Tanuki and Ogama, both of which are based upon real animals: the racoon dog and the giant toad. As yōkai, however, both of these creatures are *bakemono*, or shapeshifters.

Image 5. Adam Cooley's *Tanuki* (2022).

The Tanuki image is quite different from Amabie and Korōri. While Korōri advances beneath a cold, distant moon and Amabie hovers against a liminal gradient of sea and sky, Tanuki faces the viewer directly, framed by a warm circular disc that reads almost as a halo. His feet are firmly on the ground, and delicate pink flowers soften the scene. Again, a yellow- orb appears in the sky, following the celestial motif established in other paintings in this series. In Tanuki's case, however, this is amplified by the circles around his eyes, in his testicles, and around his nose and mouth. The coexistence of the yellow-gold circles, one that seems distant and again appears celestial and yellowish-golden, one creating a halo around Tanuki's head, and the others on his body create a tension between the divine and the corporeal.

The yellow-gold here is thus of great importance. Tanuki's eyes, like those of other liminal figures in Cooley's series, mark the creature as inhabiting a threshold between worlds (Tanaka, 2023). Yet the yellow-gold also appears around the mouth, lined with Cooley's uncanny teeth, and in the exaggerated testicles, grounding transcendence in materiality and bodily excess. As I have argued elsewhere, the association between tanuki testicles and gold likely originated in the Kanazawa area, where goldsmiths used tanuki skin in the production of gold leaf (ibid.). Because of this association with gold, tanuki also were connected to ideas of wealth and prosperity.

In Cooley's image, by literally layering the yellow-gold over the layers of paint in the testicles, Tanuki's anatomy becomes a site where the corporeal, supernatural, and the economic converge. However, the substitution of the tanuki's traditional accoutrements that the tanuki carries, the abacus, the promissory note, or the jar of saké for a lantern and a large bottle complicates an association of Tanuki with economic orders. The lantern's association with ghosts and specters in Japanese culture makes the tanuki appear more uncanny while also hinting at potential illumination and visibility. The lantern, because it also appears in festivals, may also highlight the carnivalesque and performative nature of the trickster, shape-shifting Tanuki.

Traditionally, tanuki are mischievous, rotund, and sporting oversized testicles, a yōkai of bodily excess (Foster, 36). The small, pink flowers that may also subtly echo corporeal imagery, coupled with the lantern and bottle anchor the painting in the grotesque body and revelry in the carnivalesque rather than in supernatural power. In Bakhtinian terms, Tanuki embodies the inversion of hierarchy represented by the carnival, wherein hierarchy is suspended and authority parodied through the celebration of the grotesque and corporeal. Tanuki inhabits a liminal space between humanity and the supernatural, shapeshifting and changing his form to walk amongst people. In the context of the interregnum, Tanuki becomes a figure of shapeshifting identity, less an embodiment of overt threat than of mutable identity, and instability. When society has sought to control the body through regimes of discipline and order, then the carnivalesque, excessive, uncontainable body that revels in its corporeality becomes subversive to the controlled body of the bourgeoise (Stallybrass and White). Thus, if Amabie offers uncertain protection and Korōri embodies contagion, Tanuki suggests something more unstable: the subversion of hierarchy through masquerade, grotesque corporeality, and excess. Tanuki's body, with its yellow-golden face and testicles, refuses the discipline of social hierarchies that are breaking down.

The second shapeshifter Cooley takes up is Ogama. Whereas Tanuki is carnivalesque, setting hierarchies on their head, Ogama is quiet, stealthy, and dangerous. In his description of the piece, Cooley elaborates: "Ogama (大蝦蟇) is a giant supernatural toad like creature often found in the mountains. Like

many other animal yōkai they have the ability to transform or disguise themselves like Tanuki or Kitsune. What sets them apart from other yōkai (and makes them perfect for a pride event) is their ability to exhale or project rainbow like energy/ vapor from their mouths, entrapping prey, and then drawing them into their waiting jaws" (Cooley, 23 July 2024).

In Cooley's image, Ogama takes up most of the frame, grounded and unmoving. As in earlier works, an orb appears above the head of the creature, yet here it does not underscore the supernatural nature of the being but instead appears small against a mottled and unclear background that seems to suggest a marsh. Where Tanuki inverts hierarchies and creates social instability through excess and corporeality, Ogama instead is grotesque in the vivid contrast of rainbow and toad that sucks the spirit out of humans (Kusano, 60).

Cooley notes that "…as a kid I remember watching a massive toad consume an equally massive nightcrawler. So when painting this piece, I wanted the rainbow energy to have that same wormy like appearance" (ibid.). This rainbow, which Cooley describes as "perfect for pride" upsets expectations. In pride, rainbows are often associated with celebration, community, and support, which are all very positive meanings (Wolowic et all). But unlike Tanuki, where the grotesque body functioned to subvert hierarchies, for Ogama the grotesque becomes a system of capture, of bodily transgression, with his breath transgressing his body and consuming his prey. Through the rainbow, the boundary between self and other, human and yōkai are collapsed. Ogama's spectacle is its breath, which becomes a trap to attract, target, and absorb, breaking down bodily barriers.

Image 6. Cooley's *Ogama* (2024)

Like Korōri, the Ogama image suggests movement, but this movement is not in the yōkai itself. Rather, the movement is exclusively in centripetal rainbow whisps, curling and twisting of the rainbow around Ogama, a visible breakdown of barriers between the body of Ogama and its prey through absorption. In addition, like the other yōkai, Ogama also features unsettling teeth that suggest latent violence. Similar to the others, it is easy to read these teeth as a threat, yet they are obscured by the rainbows winding around the figure of the toad. The painting thus foregrounds the visual appeal and attraction of rainbows (a collection of spirits consumed) while simultaneously creating deep unease and ambivalence with the predatory function of the rainbow emission. If tanuki uses spectacle to destabilize hierarchy and expose its cracks, then Ogama uses the spectacle as a system of capture. In the figure of Ogama, the monster is not repression but incorporation and absorption into a monstrous body.

Yōkai of Gendered Anxiety and Social Disorder

In a 2026 interview, when asked where he allows himself to depart from the history or the folklore in his art, Cooley replied: "I think a lot of the yōkai I create, they're not frozen in ice. It's not like the yōkai that people were experiencing three hundred or two hundred or even one hundred years ago are really the same fears. They're brought up by societal fears about something like death, or disease, or women being secretive. But I think… I can create them to reflect certain modern things. I think that especially around the women-centered ones, I can put a twist on them to make them a little bit more relevant. Or not necessarily relevant, but the perspective has changed" (Cooley, interview). Women yōkai are prominent and significant in Japanese lore, with female yōkai often illustrating the dangers of breaking social norms or acting on forbidden desires.

Cooley's yōkai series features multiple women: Yuki Onna, Yamamba, Jigoku Dayū, and so many more, but here two figures are important to this discussion: Ubume and Jorōgumo. These two figures represent vastly different anxieties around gender and sexuality; Ubume represents reproductive breakdown, the spirit of a woman who died in childbirth and an infant that turns to stone. Jōrogumo, on the other hand, devours men in an erotic spectacle.

Image 7. Cooley's *Ubume* (2024)

The maternal body and maternal failure have always been a deep source of social anxiety. Ubume, as Cooley describes her, is a more sympathetic than terrifying as a yōkai: "Ubume (産女) are a traditional Japanese yokai or [a] spirit of a woman who has died during childbirth, usually appearing either as a normal-looking woman carrying a baby, a bird or as a distraught, sobbing, blood soaked, long haired woman and will typically try to give a passerby her bundled child then disappear. As the passerby holds the baby, the child becomes heavier until they realize they are holding a large rock in place of the baby. For the most part coming across Ubume was usually a very bad thing but in some areas of Japan it was considered lucky.

"When creating Ubume (産女) I wanted to try to incorporate as many aspects of the original yokai as possible. I think this monster, like Medusa, are important because they portray how terrible things for woman were (and still are) in terms of equality and societies perceptions and notions of motherhood. When I look at Ubume I don't see a monster, when I look at her I feel pity and I see society as the monster" (Cooley, 30 August 2024).

Cooley's last line, "When I look at Ubume I don't see a monster, when I look at her I feel pity and I see society as the monster" is incredibly important. It highlights the fact that Ubume is not monstrous because she is a yōkai; she is monstrous because society made her so. Ubume is hegemonic breakdown writ on the female body, a failed childbirth and a baby that becomes a rock: heavy, inert, dead weight. Cooley's work reframes the yōkai not as aberration but as indictment, situating maternal suffering within broader structures of inequality and expectation.

Cooley's image of Ubume reflects his sympathy. Here, we again have teeth but rather than threat they seem to be a reflection of pain or opened in a cry. This effect is amplified by the dark rings around distressed eyes. Compared to the passive or blank expressions of the other yōkai, Ubume is very emotive. Furthermore, the lower half of her body, often depicted as bloody and traumatized, is here engulfed in flames. Indeed, the flames bleed into part of the red draping covering the lower half of her body. The body in flames appears to suggest chaos, especially when Ubume is more traditionally depicted soaking wet and in water from giving birth there (and her hair here does appear wet). This departure from tradition may suggest upset hierarchies or a woman being burned by a society that has failed her, but it may also suggest transformation from a corporeal being to a spirit as the fire becomes a part of the Ubume figure.

And yet, in Cooley's image, the distress of Ubume is offset by the almost serene expression on the rock rendered as stone *jizō*, recalling *mizuko jizō*, a Japanese Buddhist Boddhistva statue who offers protection to babies who could not be born. Whereas Ubume's eyes are unfocused, staring into a void, the eyes of the stone baby stare directly at the viewer. The blue moon and dark background also reflect a sense of calm against Ubume's distress, as does the single red bird tinged with white in the tree calmly watching the scene unfold.

Adam Cooley (2026, written communication) identified the bird in the image as Kokakuchō (Chinese: Guhuoniao, 乳母鳥). According to yōkai scholar Michael Dylan Foster, the small ubume-dori, or ubume "bird is a creature that flies but becomes a woman when its feathers are removed," underscoring an "ontological instability—is it a woman or a bird?" (62). In Cooley's painting, Ubume is split and is both; Cooley's bird becomes a fragmented manifestation of Ubume, with the red and white feathers reflecting the wraps of both the mother and the baby. Thus, in this image, we have different representations of motherhood: motherhood as displaced, careful and watching; motherhood as violence and burning; and motherhood as a weight or burden. In all of these cases, motherhood has failed, and the social order that has failed to reproduce itself. The leafless, ghostly tree reinforces not only the appearance of Ubume, who is associated with changes in trees, but it also reflects this failure of reproduction of life (Kusano, 45).

In addition to motherhood, however, the bird also represents danger; according to some sources, the bird would transform into a woman and slip into homes to suckle the babies at her breast, poisoning them with her milk (Aramata and Ōya, 48). Thus Ubume's fragmentation demonstrates, at the level of the maternal body, the instability of the interregnum and the poisonous nature of an unproductive female body. If the interregnum marks a moment in which the old order is dying and the new cannot yet be born, Ubume almost literally embodies this dangerous moment of suspended fertility. The fatal childbirth and the infant transformed into stone have made reproduction and continuity

impossible. In Gramsci's terms, Ubume becomes not a monster but a "morbid symptom," a monstrous manifestation of social structures that have failed and cannot sustain a productive society.

If motherhood is one aspect of womanhood, the second, more dangerous aspect often represented by yōkai is that of seduction or erotic entrapment. Jorōgumo, like Tanuki and Ogama, is a shapeshifting yōkai, a spider who transforms into a beautiful woman (Kusano, 170). Colley's art stages her transformation. The female body in this image is theatrical, her face and hair made up in a manner evocative of a geisha. She is stretched across the painting in a pristine kimono, doll-like, yet occupying the space with confidence. However, behind the figure the legs of the arachnid and its webs reveal her dual nature. She is not split, as was Ubume; the dual nature of the spider and the woman is fully integrated and inherent to her being. Her web is woven to entrap and devour her prey, men.

Image 8. Cooley's *Jorōgumo* (2022)

If Ubume represents reproductive and maternal anxiety, Jorōgumo rejects maternity for her own desires. Instead of anxieties around reproduction, Jorōgumoro presents sexual anxiety and fear of women who exist outside domestic gender norms. In the image of Jorōgumo, her erotic agency is outside of hegemonic control. Her web is not chaotic, but careful, symmetrical, and done with intent. In that sense, Jorōgumo does not embody chaos, agony, or disorder; she represents instead a subverted social order wherein men become prey. One of the stories from Shizuoka tells of Jorōgumo hiding by a waterfall, and when men stop to rest she binds their legs with her web and pulls them into the basin (Murakami, 2005, 336-337). Although there are numerous legends of Jorōgumo entrapping men in her web throughout Japan, it is easy to associate

the green of the kimono and the blue of the image here with the story of the waterfall.

Fundamentally, seductive yōkai that transform themselves from a dangerous creature such as a spider to a beautiful woman, such as Jorōgumo, become a mirror for social anxiety, in particular patriarchal anxiety, around female autonomy and desire. Where Ubume is a victim of reproductive expectations, Jorōgumo is feared because of her rejection of it and her unabashed display of her body and desires. Jorōgumo is a threat not because she subverts the social order, but because with her web she builds a world wherein she can exist on her own terms. Jorōgumo becomes a symbol of erotic capture, wherein the threat is not force but fascination. Jorōgumo uses desire as a trap to lure men into her world.

Yōkai of Distortion and Ideological Chaos

The yōkai we have discussed in this paper represent different fears and breakdowns within the stresses of the interregnum. If, in their most reductive forms, Amabie is protective, Korori contagion, Tanuki carnivaleque instability, Ogama predatory spectacle, and Ubume and Jorōgumo gendered anxieties, then Akashita can be understood as part of the final breakdown and systemic corruption. As Cooley explains: "Akashita emerging from a storm of ink-dark clouds, this ancient yōkai reveals itself only in part—a snarling face, clawed hands, and a huge writhing red tongue unfurling like a curse, the full form of this creature remains a mystery. Rooted in Edo-period lore, Akashita is a harbinger of misfortune. Its appearance in *Gazu Hyakki Yagyō* by Toriyama Sekien places it atop a sluice, hinting at a link to water and possibly flood-related disasters. Some scholars interpret the name as a metaphor—"aka" (filth) and "shita" (tongue)—symbolizing the dangers of reckless speech or inner corruption. With this piece, I wanted to explore the idea of the tongue as both a weapon and a warning—where speech becomes spell, and silence, salvation and on the filth that rises when the mouth runs unchecked" (Cooley, 2025 April 17).

Unlike the other yōkai discussed here, Akashita is not grounded. The form hangs, like a black mass, covering the top half of the painting. Below him is not land, but an unstable and churning sea. As Cooley says, the image is easily read as the literal embodiment of a storm, half hidden as it wreaks chaos. The sluice is also significant in representing a systemic failure that no longer holds back forces of nature. Things have broken down. Akashita is a form of *rasetsu*, mythological demons that appear in darkness and wreak havoc, destruction, and death (Murakami, 2000, 6).

Image 9. Cooley's *Akashita* (2025)

The mouth and tongue are also deeply significant here. Unlike the small, dull teeth we have seen in the other yōkai here, these teeth are massive, pointed, and clear threats. The tongue is massive and oversized, with the swirls seen on korōri spread across its surface. Where Žižek transforms "morbid phenomena" into monsters, Akashita and the tongue present speech as the morbid phenomena that creates the monsters; in Akashita, the mouth is the source of all evil (Murakami, 2000, 6). Cooley's description of "I wanted to explore the idea of the tongue as both a weapon and a warning—where speech becomes spell, and silence, salvation and on the filth that rises when the mouth runs unchecked" almost too clearly connects to breakdowns of trust in institutions and media that mark our current moment In this image, as in our present moment the noise of the storm and the words without stable authority or ethical restraint overwhelm social order. Akashita, through its corruption and violence wrought on the world around it, destabilizes that very world.

Finally, the spectral bones visible in the hands of the yōkai are an additional threat. If the tongue is the corruption or potential salvation of speech, the bony claws shift the reading into the register of threat. In the image, the hands remain near the nebulous figure of the monster, but they contain the threat of deadly, grasping action. Again, in the current moment, it is tempting to understand these spectral hands as weapons to enforce the distorted will of the tongue, an invisible hand of hegemonic power shaping our world made visible (Žižek, 2012, 43). As a whole, this yōkai is a potent embodiment of the monsters in our interregnum.

Conclusion

The interregnum is not only a time of monsters but a time in which ideologies that structure society have broken down beyond repair. Gramsci does not promise restoration; he insists that coercive force cannot fully resurrect a dying order. Skepticism, reduction, and cynicism may dominate the surface of the interregnum, but beneath them lies possibility: "The problem is this: can such a serious rupture as the one that occurred after the war between the popular masses and the dominant ideologies be "healed" by the simple exercise of force that prevents the new ideologies from becoming popular? Will the interregnum, the crisis whose historically normal solution is blocked in this manner, necessarily be resolved in favor of a restoration of the old? Given the character of ideologies, such an outcome can be ruled out… The death of the old ideologies manifests itself as skepticism toward all theories and general formulas; as the single-minded pursuit of the pure economic fact (profit, etc.) and of a politics that is not only de facto realistic (as it always is) but cynical in its immediate manifestation… But this reduction to economics and to politics signifies precisely the reduction of the highest superstructures to what is closest to the structure; in other words, a possibility [and necessity] of creating a new culture" (Gramsci, 33).

The possibility of a new culture does not mean leaving the yōkai behind, but may mean instead incorporating new monsters that speak to our time and our concerns. Here, again, Cooley's art may show us the monsters in our interregnum. For example, one of Cooley's recent works is the Lighthouse Keeper. As Cooley explains: "This is The Lighthouse Keeper. He might not have a traditional lighthouse or know exactly what he's doing, but he's fully committed regardless. Above his hands he holds two bright cones of flames, the boats are out, and he's holding it together… sort of. Like much of my work, this piece came out of that weird, enjoyable section of my imagination where my real art studio exists. He wandered in without even knocking on the door, with his same glum face. I sent him out wading in water with two flaming balls of fire illuminating the darkness and then after all of his hard work I thought he deserved a painting. I like making things that feel strange but familiar—like a half-remembered dream" (Cooley, 2025, October 1).

In Japanese folklore, there is a mysterious flame called *shiranui* that appears above the waves in times of trouble or unrest, that is said to guide wayward humans, particularly those lost at sea. In folklore, these lights are believed to come from the sea god Wadatsumi, and Japanese mythologies including the *Nihon Shoki* and *Higo no Kuni Fudoki* mention these lights as guiding the legendary Emperor Keikō when he conquered southern Kyushu (Kusano, 171 and Murakami, 191). Cooley has recently completed a rendition of the *shiranui* for his yōkai series. In his image, a dark sky is broken by cloud-like shapes that appear to be illuminated with an eerie orange glow.

The flames, red and yellow, appear to flicker over calm blue seas. The waves are gentle, rolling, but disrupted by the swirling pattern we see across so many yōkai in Cooley's series. In Korōri, the swirls bleed across species and anatomical boundaries; here, they are embedded in the water from which the Shiranui appear. In both cases, the swirls mark an instability, whether of bodily integrity or atmospheric conditions. The instability, for the Shiranui, is part of the environment, part of the world in which they appear.

The flames hover above the swirls in the water. Like the seas, they are also calm: they are large enough to be noticeable, but they do not rage, there is no halo of light they are casting off. They persist, dancing quietly above the waves, but their light seem almost contained. The flames do not dominate the image, but remain embedded within the calm and quiet of the entire composition. They suggest an orientation or a direction to the viewer, but they do not command control. Like many folkloric spirits, they are ambiguous; they might be an illusion or a misdirection.

Image 10. Adam Cooley's *Shiranui* (2026)

While in Japanese folklore, the origins of these *shiranui* flames are unclear, Cooley's Lighthouse Keeper painting echoes some of this mythology and renders guiding flames are orginating in a creature that resembles a yōkai. The Lighthouse Keeper stands in the water, holding aloft two flames, with a soft but discernible light emanating off his palms into the sky. The blues in the sky and the sea gave a sense of peace, similar to the Shiranui image, but the

Lighthouse Keeper is more active. Whereas the Shiranui appear over unstable waters, the Lighthouse Keeper appears on water so still it becomes a mirror. And whereas those who seek the light of the Shiranui are not in the image, the boats surrounding the Lighthouse Keeper are guided by the flames.

Image 11. Cooley's *The Lighthouse Keeper* (2025)

In Cooley's description, the Lighthouse Keeper is "not traditional;" and he does not "know exactly what he's doing, but he's fully committed regardless" (ibid.). Yet, as Cooley says, "he is holding it together … sort of" (ibid.). The Lighthouse Keeper is not monstrous, but is instead small, slightly awkward, with an almost confused expression, and yet he is persistent and fearless. In that sense, the Lighthouse Keeper is a transition: the monster of our interregnum; he is in transition, finding his place, and the source of fragile, improvisational illumination lighting a path to shore.

Like the rest of Cooley's yōkai, the Lighthouse Keeper does not restore order, but instead functions to translate the instability and loss of meaning in the interregnum into symbolic form. In doing so, the yōkai and the Lighthouse Keeper become part of the cultural work that occurs in the interregnum as the new order struggles: they cannot solve the crises but they can help us understand them, and perhaps, resolve them for ourselves. That the Lighthouse Keeper speaks deeply to our present moment is reflected in how popular the piece proved to be; Cooley has stated that "The Lighthouse Keeper was my fastest selling piece.., The gallery posted it [online] and a collector bought it in under a minute of the post going live… the gallery said it was their fastest sale ever" (Cooley, personal communication, 19 February 2026). This rapid sale suggests that this figure of resonates with people in this cultural moment.

Although the Lighthouse Keeper is of course not a yōkai nor part of the yōkai series, he is part of Cooley's artistic interpretations of our present moment and the monsters that inhabit it. Not only is Cooley translating Japanese monsters into international culture, but he is also transforming dreams, as reflections of our contemporary moment, into yōkai that provide light to the lost, and symbolize the possibility of a birth of something new. In the interregnum, the hard work of providing precarious illumination, pointing toward a new order struggling to be born is precious indeed.

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KAMISAMA HAJIMEMASHITA: CULTURAL MEMORY AND WORLDBUILDING A 'TRADITIONAL' JAPAN IN ANIME

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In the 21st century, art depicting yōkai (fantastic creatures of Japan) can be seen in adaptations of anime (Japanese animation). Scholars have traced the evolution of yōkai art in anime and film from their historical influences. However, through worldbuilding, the components that make-up fictional universes, anime can show how portrayals of yōkai exist within the 21st century as a reflection of traditional 'pre-westernised' spaces. Key elements in the worldbuilding that have remained static since the original narratives and visual appearances are: clothing of wafuku (Japanese style clothing), background settings of shrines and the pre-Taisho period, and references to yōkai narratives.

Through study of cultural memory, a collective memory shared by a society, these signifiers show how yōkai remain a static reflection of older Japanese periods. *Kamisama Hajimemashita* (2015-2017) is an example of a supernatural anime. The worldbuilding aspects work alongside the narrative themes to present a companionship between yōkai and humans, removing nostalgic loneliness and longing from the characters, and restoring traditions. The narratives express a newer cultural memory, linking yōkai with traditional culture, and presenting humans as the ones who must keep older traditions alive in 21st century society.

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Introduction

In the 21st century, *anime* (Japanese animation) is a popular medium for portraying supernatural stories. The characters, settings, and narratives often reflect societal ideas; however, this reflection is not always intentional from the creators. Within these elements of the worldbuilding[1], *anime* with *yōkai* 妖怪 (monsters from folklore) are often connected to traditional Japanese culture (a pre-westernised Japan) through signifiers of cultural memory. This is a cultural

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[1] Worldbuilding is the process of creating fictional worlds and the different aspects that make up that world.

nostalgia where *yōkai* become visually linked to a past Japan because of the signifiers that surround them.

Yōkai is an academic umbrella term originally coined by Inoue Enryō (井上円了 1858–1919) to refer to mysterious creatures and phenomena from folklore. This can refer to phenomena, beings, or visual depictions of the 'mysterious' (*kaii* 怪異) or 'strange' (*fushigi* 不思議) (Komatsu 2017, 12). In current society, '*yōkai'* refers to creatures or phenomena from folklore or oral tradition, and so, the term implies that they are pre-modern things (Komatsu 2017, 26). The pre-modern implication has developed from how artists throughout the 20th century linked *yōkai* to Edo period (1603 – 1868) artists and encyclopaedias[2]. For example, Mizuki Shigeru (1922-2015) kept this traditional image of *yōkai* alive (particularly in his *manga* and *anime*) by redrawing those that were well-known and keeping their image in the Japanese cultural memory throughout his lifetime.

The word 'traditionality' refers to "behaviours and beliefs that are infused with special meaning or value in the present because of a sense of continuity with the past and so with the future" (Foster 2015, 11). Thus, these are not 'traditions' as repeated instances, instead it refers to a past 'traditional' Japan, folk traditions or traditional culture of the pre-modern. It is specifically the idealised 'past' Japan (pre-1868) which is being reinvented, revived or continued in the present day.

In addition, cultural memory is socio-cultural as it is part of a collective experience of memories that shape the future through a group's (society's) understanding of the past. Wulf Kansteiner (2002) suggests that cultural memory encompasses visible elements that are a reminder of significant events, even those that the individual did not personally experience. This preserves a collective history and transmits the memory through generations so that they are not forgotten or lost over time (Kansteiner 2002, 182). In addition, media can "create images of the past which resonate with cultural memory" (Erll et al. 2008, 389), through a continuous process of remembering and forgetting as the memories of a society also develop and evolve (Prutzer 2016, 107). Thus, these visible elements that trigger memory can be continuing traditions or repeated images that are recognisable to a society. For example, an element of Japanese cultural memory is how images of *yōkai* commonly have a 'pre-modern' aesthetic because of how often they are depicted in that way.

So, these elements of cultural memory can be investigated through semiotic signifiers, or signs, in the world-building. Film and visual semiotics in

[2] One of the most popular *yōkai* artists from the Edo period is Toriyama Sekien (1712-1788) who compiled four *yōkai* encyclopaedias (Komatsu 2017, 23; Foster 2009, 56; Papp 2010, 33; Shamoon 2013, 122).

anime can explore cultural symbols. For example, a character with horns and a club, without any other monstrous features, can be recognised as an *oni* 鬼 (ogre-like demons) in Japan. This is cultural memory, as the specific elements, or signs, of 'horns and club' link to '*oni'* in the culture of Japan. Thus, the image of the *yōkai* can change, the story can change, but if certain features and visual signifiers remain, the *yōkai* is recognisable because of Japanese cultural memory. These images also evoke cultural nostalgia, a feeling or longing with sentimental attachment for a shared past which is restorative (Boym 2001) as ideas from the past are recreated in the present day.

In addition, world-building discusses the idea of the primary and secondary world. The primary world is reality, the world that exists around us. In contrast, the secondary world is outside of reality, such as an *anime* world, existing within the realms of fiction and the imaginary (Wolf 2012, 32). In the present day, this connection of *yōkai* (as phenomena), the traditions of Japan, and a sense of loss, can still be seen in various media. This article will demonstrate the connection between the past, *yōkai*, and cultural memory by analysing the world of *Kamisama Hajimemashita* season 1, episode 1 (Daichi 2015-2016), to show how *yōkai* link to 'traditionality'.

The intent of this study is to specifically investigate how this nostalgia works in tandem with Japanese folklore in a present-day *anime*. The *yōkai* characters are the embodiment of nostalgia in the fictional world they exist, and this has been built up over decades of *yōkai* being connected to Yanagita Kunio's idealised pre-western Japan. This study does not look at the author's intent or audience response (domestic or international), instead it discusses the visual components of the *anime* that create a traditional image for *yōkai* through repeating elements that exist in cultural memory.

Background

In pre-Taisho artwork, *yōkai* wore human clothing and lived in human environments. That is, the common and popular clothing of the time was *wafuku* (Japanese clothing), and *yōkai* existed in both rural and urban spaces, without a clear separation to humans. In the Edo Period, *yōkai* became part of mass consumerism and popular culture as images were sold at markets and encyclopaedias became widespread. Thus, *yōkai* reflected society of the period. However, the Meiji and Taisho periods saw the rise of *yōfuku* (western clothing), yet many people still wore *wafuku*, and so did *yōkai* in their depictions. At this time, *yōkai* were used in political ways, for mass discontent and anger at authorities, as well as a reaction to the increasing westernisation. For example, the Tengu Insurrection (1864-65), which was an uprising against the shogunate to give power to the Emperor, the Osaka monster riots (late Edo, early Meiji), that likened the disobedient masses to 'monsters', and the circulation of Namazu-e 鯰絵 (images of a mythological catfish that causes earthquakes) to show

dissatisfaction towards authorities after the 1855 Ansei Earthquake (Figal 2007, 31; Papp 2010, 41-42). These *yōkai* depictions reflected the chaos of the time.

Throughout the first half of the 20th century the widespread distribution of *yōkai* art began to fade out and be overtaken by scientific thought, largely because of the work of Inoue Enryo who attempted to eradicate supernatural folklore in the name of science (Foster 2016, 141). At this time, artists depicted the same familiar *yōkai* that had been seen previously, still showing current society while using the elements already established in previous centuries. Therefore, it could be suggested that these reiterations were a starting point for the current 'elements' that make their image recognisable in visual media.

However, at some point classical *yōkai* stopped reflecting current society, and began to only reflect the pre-modern era seen in this earlier artwork. There are two people who caused this shift. The first is Yanagita Kunio 柳田國男 (1875-1962), the creator of *minzokugaku* (folklore studies in Japan), which spanned from the 1920s to the 1980s. Yanagita opposed Enryō's eradication of *yōkai*, and instead worked to bring them back to society. He believed that *yōkai* were an authentic Japan and had value as "cultural commodities evocative of an idealized past rapidly being displaced by Western industrial modernity" (Foster 2016, 141), often representing a pre-western Japan as a 'better' Japan and recognising a sense of loss of 'true Japaneseness'. His work was influential in creating a nostalgic image around *yōkai* as they were a part of Yanagita's idealised past. Therefore, Yanagita's research was the first instance of cultural nostalgia becoming important to *yōkai*, because of how he linked them to a 'traditional' non-western Japanese society that he believed was being lost, and not to the 20th century.

The second reason *yōkai* stopped reflecting the present-day, and instead embodied the past through cultural memory was because of Mizuki Shigeru. His works, from the 1950s onwards, are said to be solely responsible for *yōkai* growing in popularity as they "became infused with nostalgia as icons from a more innocent, prewar Japan that had already disappeared" (Foster 2015, 61). In fact, his works are what stabilised the *yōkai* image into cultural memory, stopping them from evolving for many decades.

Mizuki's beliefs reflected Yanagita's, that is, Mizuki believed that old Japan, and the ancient ways, were better than modern. Many of Mizuki's stories were based on *yōkai* folktales, in particular the franchise *Gegege no Kitaro* which has been remade seven times (as of 2024) since its first run in 1968 and remains Japan's longest running *anime* series. Zilia Papp (2010) did an analysis of this series and made four categories for how *yōkai* are depicted in episodes. These are episodes with: representations based on Sekien, sources from Muromachi to the Meiji period, original *yōkai* characters, and social commentary episodes where *yōkai* are secondary to the plot (Papp 2010, 64). Overall, his *yōkai* were primarily influenced by pre-modern *yōkai*, as suggested

by Shige Suzuki (2011) who states that "Mizuki's aesthetics seem to be rooted more in traditional Japanese visual culture, largely due to the fact that Mizuki often draws on pre-modern folktales and visual traditions, such as Edo period Buddhist emaki picture scrolls and ukiyo-e woodblock paintings, in creating his manga" (Suzuki 2011, 230). Therefore, the wide range of *yōkai* that he depicted have a close connection to pre-modern Japan, and many scholars have analysed his works for how they reflect past *yōkai*, their impact on society and tourism, as well as his influences.

Yōkai have evolved and changed with society. The original depictions of *yōkai* were "evolved from expressing fearful aspects of life such as death or disease to the grotesqueness and outcast status associated with criminals, foreigners and, later, enemies of the state" (Papp 2010, 47). However, in contemporary society, *yōkai* characters are anywhere from horrific, to beautiful to cute. Some 'new' *yōkai* reflect current society, and yet, their overall image and the elements surrounding the worldbuilding of *yōkai* remains linked to their traditional depictions, keeping this connection to an imagined past society.

Theories

In folklore-related *anime*, *yōkai* have symbolism that acts as a reminder for the past, with their repeated representations creating a cultural memory that evokes a nostalgic idealisation for tradition within contemporary media.

Nostalgia, in general, has been discussed by Svetlana Boym (2001) as 'restorative nostalgia', relating to one's own experience, implying the restoration or bringing back of one's past, and 'reflective nostalgia', as a longing for a time or place (sometimes outside of the person's own experience) that one wishes to go back to but never can. This longing for something lost, or an idealised place and time that may not have existed in the state it is remembered, can be experienced by an individual, or by a community.

Cultural memory creates a nostalgia that can be restorative or reflective, specifically relating to the community, as it shows an idealisation of society that the individual has not experienced, but links to known traditional culture. In *anime* studies there is also memory relating directly to media because individuals remember certain symbols or images when they are portrayed the same way. Authors and creators may not intend to build a character to look a certain way, but through their own media consumption, they have a predetermined idea of how they may look. It may or may not be intentional, but aspects of traditional Japan are often brought forth in Japanese media, and this builds memories in viewers over time connecting to personal nostalgia and collective knowledge in society.

That is not to say everyone will instantly recognise a cultural memory. For example, characters from the popular game and ongoing series Pokémon (1996-) may be recognised even internationally because of their widespread acclaim,

and their elements may even be recognised across different media. However, not everyone will be cognizant that many Pokémon are linked to *yōkai.* Outside of Japan, the image may be prominent, but in Japan there may be a deeper understanding to characters, such as why 'Lotad' is a water-type – as it was influenced from the *yōkai* called a *kappa,* which lives in rivers and lakes.

Yoshiko Okuyama (2015) has commented on how recognition of folklore is a part of Japanese culture, stating that "to native-born Japanese audiences, myths, and legends are so much a part of their cultural view that no director or screenplay writer bothers to explain in the original story itself" (Okuyama 2015, 31). Thus, a person or group may develop a memory associated to the culture or traditions these elements evoke because of their constant repetition, and this includes international audiences who see a lot of media associated with another culture. So, it is these deeper meanings that are important, as the re-occurrence of elements across the media reaffirm the connection.

Method

This study analyses visual signifiers and motifs[3], through worldbuilding[4], but this also incorporates film analysis. I investigate the semiotics that are encompassed within the *mise en scène*, "the totality of expressive content within the image" (Sikov 2009, 6). This includes the character features, time, landscape in the composition, "the precise arrangements of objects and characters within the frame" (Sikov 2009, 19), and the plot or narrative that has been built around these features.

Furthermore, everything animated has been designed with prior thought. Ian Condry (2009) observed *anime* creators and the worldbuilding involved, as the "combination of characters (*kyarakutā*), premises (*settei*), and world-settings (*sekaikan*) generally came prior to the writing of the story per se" (Condry 2009, 3). This suggests the aspects that create the fictional world as a whole. *Anime* have specific character designers and a team of animators which allows research into the way scenes look because the on-screen visuals have been chosen for a reason; they are important to suggest meaning behind the story. The *anime* in this study creates an atmosphere of a Japanese past within the designs, creating a motif of the 'past' to signify *yōkai* characters.

What the author intended is never fully known, even from interviews their perception may have shifted from when they actually created the story. Therefore, Stefan Ekman and Audrey Taylor (2016) suggest that "a more

[3] In this case, motif refers to any recurring idea or element used to evoke a place, character, or group of people that is "created through the use of imagery, language, structural patterns, and other narrative elements" (Okuyama 2015, 27).

[4] The original idea for *anime* analysis through worldbuilding comes from my PhD supervisor Dr. Yoko Matsumoto Sturt.

dynamic approach focuses on the interplay between elements and the world. It takes into account the entirety of the world constructed, including the interplay between all its elements and the possible interpretations available to the critic who analyses it" (Ekman and Taylor 2016, 14). This they refer to as 'Critical Worldbuilding' as "elements are interrelated in a complex structure of implications that extend the world and affect the understanding of other elements and their relations" (Ekman and Taylor 2016, 15). On this note, the literary view can also be applied to visual media such as television, movies, and animation, as the elements of media crossing can be 'read' with discourse analysis (Tannen et al. 2015, 43; Fiske 2010). This study follows this approach of world-building that interprets these elements in tandem.

Data sets

Visual semiotics is a subcategory of social semiotics which John Fiske (2010) discusses in television through the 'social codes' of reality, representation, and ideology. A 'code' is a system of signs shared by members of a culture and these can spread because reality already holds recognisable codes within a culture (Fiske 2010, 4). In this sense, the code is part of a cultural memory. This is similar to the system of conventions made up of signifiers (the thing or code) and signified (what is being represented) making up film semiotics (Okuyama 2015, 21). Fiske's (2010) social codes are 'reality' referring to appearance, dress, make-up, environment, behaviour, speech, gesture, and sound. 'Representation' is the camera, lighting, editing, music, and sound. Finally, 'ideology' refers to the ideological codes of a society seen in the media, such as individualism, race, class, capitalism (Fiske 2010, 5). I analyse these three categories within the world-building as 'character design', 'world design', and 'narrative themes.'

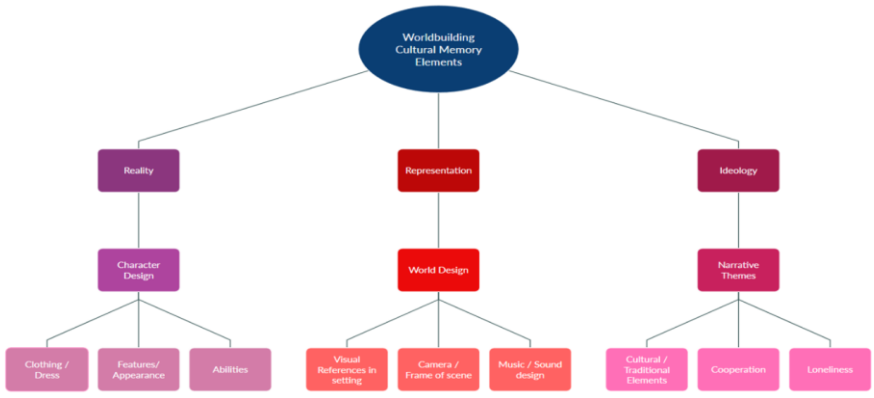


Figure 1: The codes used to analyse the different categories of cultural memory elements in the worldbuilding.
Created with NVIVO Analysis Software.

These three categories investigate the codes of clothing, features, abilities, settings that relate to folklore, Shinto or Buddhist locations, nature/urban paradigm, and narrative themes of loneliness, traditions, and reconnection (through unity and cooperation). A flow chart of these categories and codes can be seen in figure 1. Therefore, these three categories and the nine codes from them will be used to investigate the re-occurring cultural memory elements related to *yōkai* in past representations up to the present day. This study uses qualitative and empirical collection methods of studying *anime*, investigating the 'reality' of semiotic signifiers in the worldbuilding of the characters and settings, followed by a systematic analysis of the representation using visual and discourse analysis of the *mise en scène*, composition, and appearance of characters within a scene, and finally analysing the narrative of the scene and how this adds to the traditionality and a passive nostalgia.

For data collection, I used the video analysis software NVivo as a data sampling method to code the *anime* episode using specific classifications. I investigated the multimodal aspects through videos and transcripts of the audio. This research uses 'information coding' that "establishes categories that are relevant and valid" (White and Marsh, 2006, 31), this allows the data to be separated into easy to manage sections within NVivo and analysed separately to draw out the themes.

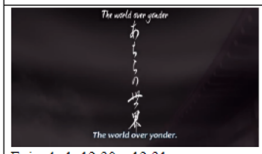
Frame	Transcript (Japanese / English)	Actions	Sound	Camera Movement	Themes
 Episode 1, 12:30 – 12:31	あちらの世界 The world over yonder.	The words *Achira no Sekai* appear vertically on the screen. A layer of fog with the outline of trees on the left and the roof of a building on the right.	The sound of a drop of *hyoshigi* or some kind of clackers, followed by quiet drums	The camera slowly pans down until the shot ends	The narration uses a third person voice over that reflects folklore stories to further the story. The previous scene was daytime and so there is a sudden contrast.
 12:33 – 12:37	草むらの陰や 井戸の中ー この世のあらゆる闇が その入り口 In the shadows of grassy fields and in wells. All the dark places in our world serve as entrances	The shot shows three figures walking through a forest. Kotetsu (left) holds a lantern, standing in front of Nanami (a human) who looks left and right, with Onikiri following behind. There is a well behind them.	The drums continue while the narrator speaks. There is a sharp sound reminiscent of horror films, building suspense in the scene.	There is a tracking shot, as the background changes but the characters remain in the centre of the screen.	Nanami wears *yōfuku*, a purple coat and scarf with a skirt and brown boots, while Onikiri and Kotetsu wear *kosode* with bright blue and purple *obi*. The frame has an opaque effect that shows the fog in the forest.

Figure 2: A dataset for *Kamisama Hajimemashita* episode 1.
The layout comes from Anthony Baldry and Paul Thibault's (2006) multimodal transcription and text analysis templates; however, it incorporates different aspects of the worldbuilding.

I put this data into tables, as seen in figure 2, using a template from Anthony Baldry and Paul Thibault's (2006) multimodal transcription and text analysis (Baldry and Thibault 2006). However, it has been modified to allow for a deeper understanding of how specific signifiers are occurring throughout the

scene. This research uses the visual data of the videos, images, and transcript to obtain specific analysis, combining media studies and semiotic studies through the lens of worldbuilding to create a more in-depth analysis of the worldbuilding in *anime*.

Case Study: *Kamisama Hajimemashita*

This case study will trace the cultural memory relating to traditionality in the worldbuilding of *Kamisama Hajimemashita* (English: *Kamisama Kiss*, Japanese: 神様はじめました) season 1, episode 1. These elements will be viewed through the three categories of character design, world design, and narrative themes through a juxtaposition of the past and the present, and the loneliness or belonging of *yōkai* in current society. This study is one example; however, these themes are not unique to this *anime*.

In episode 1, Nanami[5] (the protagonist) walks through a forest with the will-o-wisps (*onibi-warashi* 鬼火童子[6]) Kotetsu and Onikiri. She goes to the Otherworld looking for Tomoe the fox *yōkai* (*yōko* 妖狐) and confronts him in the red-light district where he states that he will stay in the Otherworld, however Nanami makes Tomoe her familiar and they return to the human world together.

Character Design:

In this episode, Nanami wears *yōfuku* (western-style clothing). A light purple jacket, black top, scarf, skirt, and brown boots because she is a 16-year-old girl living in the 21st century. Therefore, in the *anime*, Nanami mirrors humans in the primary world (real life outside the *anime*). Her clothing contrasts with the *yōkai* in the episode. For example, the 'will-o-wisps' Kotetsu and Onikiri wear white *kosode (*short-sleeved *wafuku)* with bright blue and purple *obi*. They also have features that show knowledge of past *yōkai* depictions, suggesting that known cultural memories were used in the character creations. Kotetsu and Onikiri are shrine servants, serving the *kami* (Shinto deities). Their white clothing gives an impression of spirits, as it is uncommon to wear fully white *wafuku* unless getting married, or in death. White is a colour of purity, something associated with the creation story of Shinto mythology[7], and reflected in how people purify themselves with water when entering a shrine. Therefore, as shrine servants, the colour of the will-o-wisp's *kosode*

[5] Nanami is a human who has been granted the powers of a 'Land Kami' (Tochigami 土地神).

[6] *Onibi-warashi* is translated as 'will-o-wisps' but refer to *oni* fire (鬼火), a phenomenon of lights written about in the *Wakan Sansai Zue* (1712) during the Edo period.

[7] Purity is highly important to Shinto as one of the creators, Izanagi no Mikoto, purified himself in a river, and in his washing, he created the three well-known *kami* Amaterasu, Tsukuyomi, and Susanō (Picken 2011, 127).

represents the pureness of *kami*. The juxtaposition of *yōfuku* and *wafuku* in these characters show that the *yōkai* do not fit in within current society, instead they reflect purity within Shinto culture.

Furthermore, these two *yōkai* show further cultural memory from traditional Japanese culture as they wear masks (*kamen* 仮面). Onikiri's mask has a white face, parting of hair in the centre, and small dot eyebrows, and this shows inspiration from make-up common in earlier time periods of Japan such as *hikimayu*[8] 引眉 during the Heian period (794-1185). In addition, the mask has inspiration from Noh theatre 能, indicating the expressionless face of o*nna-men* 女面[9]. Onikiri's true emotions are never shown as they are hidden behind the mask. Nogami (2005) stated that Noh masks categories are: old men, old women, middle-aged men, middle-aged women, young men, young women, children, blind men, gentle gods, powerful gods, formidable gods, fairies, supernatural beings, monsters, and wild animals (Nogami 2005, 28). Six of these mask categories are connected to the supernatural, and so in cultural and media memory, Noh masks have a connection to spirit and *kami* characters. In this *anime*, Onikiri's mask is not an exact match, however, the hair parting, *hikimayu* eyebrows and white face are reminiscent of *onna-men*, which links Onikiri's design to the traditional Heian aesthetics and supernatural associations of the Noh theatre mask.

Kotetsu's mask has a green outline around the side of their face with one eye closed and one open. This singular eye relates to *yōkai* such as *hitotsume kozō* 一つ目小僧 (the one-eyed goblin) common in the Edo and Meiji periods (Papp 2010, 59). In contrast to Onikiri, Kotetsu's mask does change expressions as though it is a face, however, both of their true faces are hidden underneath. This added mystery shows an unknowability around these character's faces, as their true selves are hidden, adding to their image of *'yōkai'* despite their child-like statures. Furthermore, Kotetsu's mask has a connection to Mizuki Shigeru's character Kitaro (from *Gegege no Kitarō*), who is also a child-sized character with only one eye. It has been noted by researchers that this reflected Mizuki himself, who lost an arm during the war (Foster 2008, 13; 167), a motif also noted in his war manga (Wang and Seaton 2022, 132). Therefore, both aspects of folklore and a link to Mizuki suggest a progression of cultural memory, with the one-eyed characters connecting to *yōkai* from folklore, and becoming popular through Mizuki's depictions.

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[8] One's eyebrows are shaved and drawn on with ink. 「引き眉眉毛をそって、墨で描いた眉」(Matsumura, et al. 2001, 1066). Sometimes resembling dots or smudges rather than an eyebrow shape.

[9] *Onna-men* is an overall term for Noh masks that resemble women.

The other *yōkai* in the scene are more popular, the *yōko* and *tanuki*. In folkloric and media representations both can shapeshift into humans. However, in this series, they are anthropomorphic, with their animal features separating them from humans. For example, the brown circles around the eyes of the women giving them a 'raccoon dog' (*tanuki)* image, and they all have animal ears and tails.

In the red-light district of the Otherworld, the *yōko* Tomoe lounges between two *tanuki*[10]-themed women, with all three wearing *wafuku*. Tomoe shows a level of seduction that is often associated with *yōko,* as suggested by Okuyama (2015) they often masquerade as seductive temptresses to deceive humans (Okuyama 2015, 180). His clothing opens to show his chest as he lounges and the colours are white and purple, suggesting a combination of pure and regal[11]. Furthermore, it is implied that the women are prostitutes, and the clothing design is inspired by *geisha* (female entertainers[12]). For example, they wear multiple layers of *wafuku*, with *kanzashi* (簪) hair ornaments, white faces, and red lips. Their *kimono* reveal the nape of their necks, a show of sexiness that is associated with *geisha*[13] (Dalby 2001). These combined visual elements add to their aesthetic while they pour Tomoe drinks[14]. In present-day Japan, *geisha* follow traditional forms and are not associated with the red-light district, however, the depiction in this *anime* shows an association with the image of prostitutes or *oiran* (high rank courtesans) that matches the location within the otherworld. Therefore, these *yōkai* reflect the cultural memory of older time periods through their clothing and their connection to traditional and folklore culture associated with sexy *yōkai*.

These character designs add to the worldbuilding of the scene, setting up a contrast between humans and *yōkai*, and showing a connection to traditions and folklore elements from cultural memory.

World Design:

The world design continues to show cultural memory, further building up the *anime* world. As the characters walk through the forest to the otherworld, a camera shot shows cultural memory through *yōkai* and horror influences within the *mise en scene.*

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[10] *Tanuki* are called 'raccoon dogs' in English and are common throughout Japan.

[11] White in Japan is considered sacred as it denotes innocence and purity (Cheng 2009, 1927). The combination of white and purple creates a regal image in Japanese clothing (Dalby 1993, 259-260).

[12] A *geisha* is a person skilled in entertainment 芸者「遊芸に巧みな人。」 (Matsumura, et al. 2001, 460).

[13] Young women do not show much of the nape of their neck, it is lowered as a woman gets older, however *geisha* women have the collar far back as a show of seduction (Dalby 2001).

[14] It is common for *geisha* to serve drinks to others, particularly men.

Kotetsu holds a lantern, standing in front of Nanami, with Onikiri following behind. The lighting of the shot is dark, and there is mist surrounding them, with the shadows of trees surrounding on both sides, in addition there is a well on-screen. This pathway into the unknown and uncertain realm mirrors Foster's (2015) 'zone of uncertainty' that creates meaning, as *yōkai* were created from the unknown and liminal spaces where it is harder to understand (Foster 2015, 89). These themes come up in the dialogue as the narrator states:

あちらの世界 The world over yonder.

草むらの陰や 井戸の中— In the shadows of grassy fields and in wells.

この世のあらゆる闇が その入り口 All the dark places in our world serve as entrances

この世と あの世のはざまにある Lying between our world and the netherworld

もののけたちの世界 it is the world of the supernatural.

闇をのぞいた人間が— The place they say humans unexpectedly stray into.

ひょっこり迷い込　　むという— When they peer into the darkness.

隣り合わせの… [...] Existing alongside our own world, it is... [...]

あやかしの世界 The world of spirits!

(Daichi 2015-16. season 1, episode 1, 12-30-12:52)

Therefore, there is a connection to folklore established in reference to darkness (*yami* 闇) and entrances (*iriguchi* 入り口), as a physical boundary that separates two worlds. For example, the lighting and muted colours of the scene show nighttime. In folklore, *yōkai* exist at night and in the forest, for example foxes and badgers (Casal 1959; Lillehoj 1995; Nicolae 2015). The mist adds mystery, as forest roads at night have been said to create a fear of the unknown as they become travel routes for supernatural monsters (Komatsu 2017; Nicolae 2015). The reference to wells (*ido* 井戸) and the shadows (*kage* 陰) along the entrance show physical and spatial boundaries because temporal spaces are where *yōkai* appear and are associated the unknown (Figal 2007, 22). Wells are often used as a cultural element for the supernatural and have been seen in the horror genre such as the film *Ringu*[15] (1988), creating an eerie atmosphere for this shot, while shadows symbolise the unknown.

As the episode continues, the setting changes, and they enter the otherworld where there is pre-modern Japanese architecture, and the music uses traditional Japanese instruments. The camera zooms in, showing that at the edge of the forest there are red city gates, and as they approach there is a sound

[15] In *Ringu* (1988), there is a well-known shot of the ghost character, Sadako, climbing out of a well.

resembling *hyōshigi*[16], followed by quiet drums. The next camera shot comes from an outside perspective from behind the characters, looking down a long street with red buildings on either side and a lantern in the centre. The word used in the scene is 遊郭 *yūkaku*, (Daichi 2015-16, season 1, episode 1, 13:04-13:12) meaning the licensed red-light district, and it is significant that this place exists in the Otherworld as they were abolished in 1946. Thus, the image of the Otherworld resembles a past era of Japan, with a continuing licensed red-light district (*yūkaku*) that was historically established during the Edo period despite the *anime* series being set in the 21st century.

In addition, the lighting of the otherworld is red and yellow. The colour red in these streets denotes the 'red-light district' setting. However, Cheng (2009) suggests that the combination of yellow and red signify danger "on behalf of blood and fire" (Cheng 2009, 1928), and a combination of red and black "not only exaggerates the frightened atmosphere but also has the irritating quality in the vision in light and shade contrast" (Cheng 2009, 1929). Both combinations of these colours are within this scene, creating an eerie atmosphere as the glow is unnatural compared to scenes from the human world.

Figure 3: Photograph taken by the author in a publicly accessible area at Toei Uzumasa Eigamura
(Toei Studio Park), Kyoto, Japan (2023).
A model of the red-light district in Edo-Tokyo (1603-1868) called Yoshiwara Street 吉原通り.

[16] *Hyōshigi* (拍子木) are Japanese clackers, or clappers. It is two pieces of hardwood or bamboo connected by a thin ornamental rope. They are often used in Japanese traditional theatre, such as kabuki.

The 'past Japan' image in this scene is similar to figure 3, a photograph I took at Toei Studio Park in Kyoto, Japan, which shows a model set of a *yūkaku* called Yoshiwara Street 吉原通り, described as a re-creation of a small portion of the red-light district area in Edo (Tokyo). The red colours in the Otherworld match those from Toei Studio Park, both with two-floored buildings, slotted windows (*renji mado*) in which light could shine out of, and a bright red colour (although the *anime* has a more vivid colour saturation).

Toei Studio Park is the idealised Edo period used in filming various *jidaigeki* (period films), such as films by Kurosawa Akira. Dorman (2016) suggests that "throughout the history of Japanese cinema *jidaigeki* has served as an image of an authentic and at times romanticized Japanese society", and Kurosawa's work especially expressed this (Dorman 2016, 174). Therefore, the sets from the studio park, such as that of figure 3 can also be regarded as this romanticised Japan reflected through the same aesthetics. The world design of the Otherworld in *Kamisama Hajimemashita* (2015-2017) is, thus, presented in a way that directly reflects the idealised cultural memory of the past as the world design seems to step back in time, and into fantasy, as they enter this *yōkai* realm.

The audio and music also draws on elements associated with traditional Japan, including narrative voice-over, and the use of instruments often regarded as traditional. As the characters enter the forest, a voice over is given by a third person narrator which is used to further the plot, as though a folk story is being told to the audience. Along with this, traditional instruments are used to accompany *yōkai* as a motif[17], with drums and the flute sound of a *shakuhachi* 尺八 playing to signify the Otherworld, and accompanying Tomoe on screen through a strumming *koto* 琴, emphasising the premodern elements of the Otherworld and *yōkai*. In this sense, the music is a signifier adding to the Edo architectural choices by using instruments of the period.

Therefore, the otherworld is a temporal zone that is reached through a boundary of the forest, and it shows a past Japan from the *yūkaku*, architecture and music.

Narrative Theme:

The worldbuilding in the characters and world create a space for the narrative. This episode focuses on a plot of 'home' and 'belonging', continuing to show traditionality through the implication of *yōkai* belonging to the past.

The episode begins with Nanami losing her house and becoming homeless. However, she meets a *tochigami* (land *kami*) who turns her into a *kami* and she

[17] A musical motif is a piece of music that represents a certain concept or idea and may reoccur throughout a series to show a particular theme.

begins to live at a Shinto Shrine. Throughout this first episode, Nanami begins to belong to the world of *yōkai*, instead of among humans.

In the red-light district of the Otherworld, a conversation about 'home' begins. Nanami stands outside of the room, with her eyes in shadows, hiding her emotions[18]. However, her shoulders are hunched forwards, and she looks down with clenched fists, a possible sign of discomfort or anger. As the scene continues, Tomoe states:

別に潰れてもよい I do not particularly care if it [the shrine] goes to ruin
(Daichi 2015-16, season 1, episode 1, 13:29)

The camera pans upwards to Nanami's face as she looks up, showing her eyes and full expression, and suggesting she is affected as he continues:

俺の知ったことか　　It is no concern of mine
神使などあんな面倒な仕事 辞めて清々したわ Good riddance to that tedious job of being a familiar
(Daichi 2015-16, season 1, episode 1, 13:32-35).

Nanami's face expresses her frustration and anger at Tomoe's words, and his intention to abandon his 'home' (the shrine). She enters the room.

The next camera shot has Nanami looking straight on, her fists clenched in a rigid posture, and expression angry, with her eyebrows slanting downwards. Her anger is evident in her voice, and she is also shaking. The shot is also on a Dutch angle, this means it is tilted to the side, a camera effect often used to show something is out of place or off. The use of the Dutch angle in this scene highlights Tomoe's emotions shock as he feels off-kilter. The situation of a human shouting at a *yōkai* is likely unexpected to the characters, and perhaps to the audience, so Tomoe feels shaken. Nanami states:

帰る家があるのに— You have a home to go back to.
あの社は Is that shrine
あんたにとって— something you
そんなに簡単に捨てられるものなの？ can abandon so easily?
大事な家じゃない It's your precious home, isn't it?!
(Daichi 2015-16, season 1, episode 1, 13-51-13:59)

The words 'precious home' (*daijina ie* 大事な家) show that Nanami's frustration comes from her own experience of losing her home. However, the situation surrounds Tomoe who left the human world because he was waiting

[18] The eyes are important indicators of emotion in anime, so when they are hidden, the character's emotions are less clear. "In Japanese storytelling and culture, emotion is the key to all stories, and the eyes are the most important way to determine any character's emotional state" (Brenner 2007, 41).

for the previous Land *Kami*, Mikage, to return. In the episode, he is lonely and somewhat abandoned as Nanami came to the shrine in Mikage's place. In response, Tomoe went to the Otherworld, and he gave up on the human world 'home' he had been living in for many centuries.

There is cultural memory in this concept as, in Japan, shrines are embedded in traditional values associated with Shintoism. Thus, Tomoe leaving the shrine could reflect the absence of *yōkai* in a present-day Japan. Mizuki Shigeru suggested that '*yōkai'* do not exist within the new technological world, as they are linked to the pre-technological Edo period and so have in a sense 'vanished' from Japan (Mizuki 2011). Within this *anime* as well, Tomoe is intrinsically linked to the past, and the home he leaves is in the 'human world'. So, it could be suggested that he is in fact, returning to his 'true home' of the Otherworld – represented as an Edo period-themed Japan. He has returned to this 'past' where *yōkai* are abundant.

Furthermore, when Tomoe speaks during the scene, we once again have the music motif, this time chiming bells turn into the strumming *koto*. The reoccurrence of these traditional instruments emphasises the narrative by further showing how *yōkai* are connected to the pre-modern period. Thus, the use of these traditional elements in the music, clothing, and architecture in the worldbuilding, adds to the narrative theme as the Edo period is linked to both the location, and to Tomoe, suggesting that he is 'at home' within the Otherworld, and no longer alone as he was in the contemporary space of the human world.

However, the episode goes further, bringing Tomoe back into the human world. At the end of this episode, Nanami and Tomoe come together again, and Nanami creates a forced bond with Tomoe (making him her familiar) to bring him back to the shrine. In doing this, she re-establishes the shrine as 'home' within the human world, bringing *yōkai* (through Tomoe but also Onikiri and Kotetsu) back to the present-day as she personally connects with them. She also removes Tomoe's loneliness (in the form of isolation from others at the shrine) within the human world by stating that they will go back together, using unity with the spirits to her advantage. Therefore, Nanami also returns to the human world, but brings *yōkai* with her and begins to live at a Shinto Shrine for the rest of the series, suggesting that she has moved into this *yōkai* space within the human world now that she is a *kami*. With this, the episode gives an idea that even if *yōkai* are in the past, or have left the human world, they can return through human actions and a connection to the supernatural.

Discussion

The ideas of character design, world design, and narrative in this case study have importance as they show the cultural memory evident within the *anime Kamisama Hajimemashita* (2015-2017). The elements create a 'passive cultural nostalgia' for a past Japan, suggesting that *yōkai* are inherently part of

this idealised traditional world. These factors link to current Japanese society in the following ways:

Ian Condry (2009) discussed the importance of *anime* study through the character design elements (Condry 2009, 3). Through character design, the colour, clothing, and physicality together make up a character's personality and existence within the fictional world. This directly applies to the details and symbols of world-building as characters make up a strong connection to the worlds in which they exist. In addition, clothing is a visual signifier (Okuyama 2015, 169) and is used as an important distinction between characters that represent a past Japan, and those that present current Japan in the period that the *anime* is set. For example, *anime* often presents *kimono* 着る物 (wearing-thing) using comparisons of characters wearing '*wafuku'* and '*yōfuku'*. In the Edo period (1603-1867), Japanese people encountered the Western-style clothes and the term *wafuku* (traditional Japanese costume) was used to differentiate traditional costumes from the Western clothes (*yōfuku*). However, in present day Japan '*wafuku'* refers to all types of *kimono*, including outfits for sports such as *kendo* in which they wear *hakama*, or in ceremonial times (Dalby 2001; Valk 2020), such as the coming of age ceremony for women (wearing long sleeved *kimono* called *furisode*), marriages (wearing white *shiromuku*), funerals (wearing formal, black *mofuku*), or in the case of lighter *kimono*, *yukata* worn for summer festivals.

Liza Dalby (2001) suggests that "although kimono is, profoundly, Japan's national dress, by no stretch can it be considered what Japanese normally choose to wear" (Dalby 2001, 125). *Wafuku* and *kimono* were common dress in pre-Western Japan, so, *wafuku* clothing is a signifier relating to 'traditional Japan' because of the image of an idealised 'home' and true or native Japan established by Yanagita. Therefore, in the context of these *anime*, the human characters wear *yōfuku* (western clothes) as is the norm, however, the *yōkai* characters wear '*wafuku'*. Since *yōkai* wear *wafuku*, they can be considered as a representation of a past Japan, and it gives these characters a deeper connection to the pre-Taishō era in which this clothing was the norm, juxtaposed to the human characters who wear 21st century clothing.

When looking at *yōkai*, there is a memory of the Edo period, and this can trigger nostalgia due to the disconnect between 'traditional' Japan, and current Japan. Foster (2016) suggests that the Edo period is often used when presenting *yōkai*, as it is when they first became more common and visible in artwork and literature (Foster 2016, 134). The image of this Edo past is reflective nostalgia, often the idealised image of the period, rather than a historically accurate one. As discussed by Paul Sutcliffe (2013), the Edo period seen in any nostalgic depictions of Japan is not the 'true' Edo period, but instead showing the concept of "a Japan that existed prior to American influence" (Azuma 2009, 22; Sutcliffe 2013, 184). In this sense it is an idealisation of a pre-westernised Japan,

reflective of the past rather than restoring it. The nostalgia of the 'Edo Period' was created due to a sense of modernisation and a desire to go back to the pre-modern, as Edo was "the site of authentic Japan" (Sutcliffe 2013, 183). The reiteration of showing an idealised Edo period can be suggested to show a longing for the imagined view of a pre-western Japan that the era represents.

Another example of a visual signifier that connects to *yōkai* theory is through the world settings, and this is in the presence of shrines and older Japanese houses, or rooms, when relating to *yōkai*. The features of these can be important in showing the world and folklore being presented in the narrative because of the connection between *yōkai* and shrines. For example, "shrines are dwellings for kami" (Djokoto 2013, 2) and are often used as a physical feature dividing the human world and the *yōkai*, this shows a shift between the mundane world and the Otherworld in the *anime*. Therefore, this can establish whether or not the secondary world in the *anime* is based on the real world, or if there are elements of fantasy, folklore or myths, creating a mythical world within the reality of the fictional world.

Okuyama (2017) studied the use of symbolic images presented in the narrative and how 'a word, an image, or a concept is used to "represent" something more than it is, such as a politically coded message, to the receiver of the tale' (Okuyama 2017, 4). The 'narrative' can be understood "as the semiotic representation of a world, populated by characters and displaying change over time, as well as a sense of causality" (Çalık Bedir 2021, 297). Through generations of influences on folklore in *anime*, Foster (2016) notes that *yōkai* "became infused with a deep sense of nostalgia as desired icons from a more "innocent" and "authentic" pre-war Japan" (Foster 2016, 142). Thus, the coded message in the *anime* is that of nostalgia for an imagined past, and the traditionality of *yōkai* even in the present day. The various signifiers used with the image of *yōkai* characters show them as a symbol for this idealised traditional past. Thus, passively, through these different elements of worldbuilding, the cultural memory of *yōkai* evokes a past Japan, showing tradition and the past as a positive aspect.

Conclusion

In conclusion, worldbuilding and semiotics can be used together to analyse the reoccurring cultural memory, and traditionality of *yōkai* in *anime*. There is a 'passive cultural nostalgia' (existing but not necessarily intended) caused by the continued presence of a cultural memory surrounding the image of *yōkai* reoccurring in the worldbuilding. In the 21st century, *yōkai* still have an image associated with Japan's cultural past, a 'traditional' image. There is also a longing and restoration of this past in the narrative but shown through the *yōkai* characters, their worlds and narratives surrounding them.

This study focuses on the singular example of *Kamisama Hajimemashita* (2015-2017) and the categories of character design, world design and narrative

themes split into specific codes to investigate cultural memory. *Yōkai* characters embody traditionality through a longing for the distant cultural past in the worldbuilding. This research draws from media, memory, *yōkai* and nostalgia studies, and further research could relate to globalisation as studies could investigate how *yōkai* change across cultures who do not have the collective memory or cultural background knowledge.

By using worldbuilding and film semiotics in future *anime* research, *yōkai* characters can be discussed as signifiers for a signified ideal Japanese past, or as a contrast to this study for how *yōkai* may be portrayed different to the cultural memories often associated with them. These concepts will pave the way for a deeper understanding of collective memory and cultural nostalgia in Japanese and worldwide media.

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FROM HUMAN TO DIVINE AND BACK: METAMORPHOSIS AND PRAYER AT NAGATA SHRINE

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This chapter is an ethnography of the *tsuina-shiki* Setsubun ritual performed at Nagata Shrine in Kobe. While most Setsubun (the day before the beginning of spring according to the traditional agricultural calendar) rituals focus on expelling evil and exorcizing the demons that embody it, the tsuina-shiki from Nagata Shrine is a one-day long folk performance (a designated Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property) whose purpose is to welcome the messengers of the gods—not representatives of evil and misfortune as it seems to be the case with *oni* (demons), but benevolent otherworldly creatures who bless and work to prevent the calamities in the coming year. From early in the morning, when they perform a purification rite in the sea, to late in the evening, after several grueling hours of dancing while holding burning torches, the demons (*oni-yaku*) undergo repeated metamorphoses that reassert their divine status, of beings that transcend the human condition and place themselves in a liminal state between the two worlds. The ritual itself is a form of ascesis, of offering the gods their pain and endurance, a convincing performance which manifests the sacred within the community, and at the same time reasserts the permanent connection between the sacred and the profane.

1. The Gods Come Dancing

The last decade saw a re-discovery of Japan and a "Japan boom" fueled not only by economic reasons (Japan has suddenly become financially accessible to the regular traveler), but also by a human desire to rediscover "Paradise Lost," to reconnect with a magical "Golden Age." The digest version of "Seven Years in Tibet" is "Ten Days in Japan"—matcha—kimono—Buddhist temples—spiritual update completed. As a cultural anthropologist who has built a life in Japan, I have conflicted feelings about this phenomenon: on one hand, I like the fact that Japan is appreciated on a global scale, even amidst all the plagues that have befallen the world; on the other, I cannot help but wish that the superficial veil of mysticism and instant illumination would fall off the image of the Japanese archipelago, and a deeper understanding of its cultural phenomena would prevail.

The magical mystical Japan does exist; unfortunately, it cannot be found in a cup of green tea, even when it is served against the exquisitely manicured background of a rock garden. This introduction to my chapter borrows its title

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from Irit Averbuch's book *The Gods Come Dancing. A Study of the Japanese Ritual Dance of Yamabushi Kagura* (1995), because I could not find a better expression to indicate the meaning of the sacred dances performed at Japanese festivals. I had the honor of sharing such an event with professor Averbuch in 2007, when we spent a cold night in a village in Kyushu witnessing the descent of the gods during Shiiba Kagura[1]—a momentous occurrence for me which fueled my fascination for Japanese ritual. The Japanese gods come at night, wearing masks, and dancing to the hypnotic sound of drums and bells. Their arrival is something to rejoice and at the same time, something that even the audiences have to sacrifice for: the wait is long, always outside, always in the cold, always in an uncomfortable position. The final moment of communion with the divine beings is one of ecstasy, but before ecstasy comes pain, endurance, ascesis—the highest form of sacrifice that can be offered to the deities in the 21st century: a small but no insignificant part of the human body and soul.

Tsuina-shiki, the *Setsubun* ritual performed at Nagata Shrine in Kobe, represents such a celebration where some humans transform into gods through ascesis and prayer, while the larger community welcomes them with more or less significant offerings of similar endurance and pain.

Nagata Shrine Demons by Adam Cooley

[1] Shiiba Kagura is a set of dances performed as an offering to the gods from November to December in various villages from Kumamoto Prefecture. Designated as an Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property.

2. Setsubun and the Masked Visitors

Setsubun[2] is an annual festival taking place in February, on the day before the beginning of astronomical spring (usually February 3rd or 4th, but in 2021 and 2025, due to astronomical adjustments, Setsubun was celebrated on February 2nd, something that had last occurred in 1897). While the actual rites may (and often do) differ depending on the geographical location, as well as the host institution, several elements are omnipresent: demons (embodied by masked fathers, older brothers, members of shrine or temple communities) who must be expelled, scattering beans and eating some of them for good luck, and as a fairly recent addition to the array of practices—eating an *ehômaki*, a thick sushi roll that must be consumed in complete silence while facing the direction deemed lucky for that year. One of the most prominent rituals performed on Setsubun is *tsuina*:

"an exorcism rite in which participants read out a type of proclamation to kami called a *saimon* and then, armed with bows-and-arrows and clubs made of peach tree, chase away figures dressed in demon masks in order to drive out the pestilence and other disasters they were believed to carry. For this reason, the event is also referred to as *oniyarai* ("demon dispatching") and the like. The ritual was introduced from Tang China and originally held on New Year's Eve (*ōmisoka*)." (Endo Jun, *Encyclopedia of Shinto*)

The main characters of tsuina-shiki are the demons—menacing masked figures embodying all the evils of this world, who must be expelled so that order can be re-established in the world. A typical example can be observed at Yoshida Shrine in Kyoto, where three demons (red for anger, yellow for envy, and blue for melancholy, and all together a representation of Ekijin—the God of Plagues) are defeated by another masked figure: Hôsôshi, a mysterious figure apparently imported from the Chinese tradition, who, according to the *Ryû no Shûge* Chronicles (833), drove away pestilences and epidemics, and played an active role in the funeral rites of members of the imperial family and high-ranking ministers. (Gras 2003: 35)

[2] Originally, *setsubun* indicated the day before the beginning of each season, but in time it came to mean only the days before the beginning of spring/ new year according to the lunar calendar.

Tsuina-shiki at Yoshida Shrine, February 1, 2025[3]

Oni-yarai, the ceremony of banishing demons, is performed at shrines and temples all over Japan on Setsubun, with a more contemporary example taking place in the commercial and entertainment center of Osaka, the Kita Shinchi district, where demons are expelled by *yamabushi* (humans who acquire magical powers through mountain asceticism) who blow their conch shells to remove any trace of evil from the atmosphere, and by the participants, who throw beans at the raging demons. Smaller scale rituals are performed in most households with young children, kindergartens and elementary schools, where fathers usually dress up as demons and are chased away by screaming children who throw beans, or, as was the case of little girl in a viral video from 2026, even use toy machine guns to fight evil.

Oni-yarai in Kita Shinchi, Osaka, February 3, 2025

[3] All the photos included here, unless otherwise stated, were taken by the author.

Two concepts must be discussed here before going any further with our descriptions of the *tsuina-shiki* from Nagata Shrine: demons (*oni*) and masks. Oni are analyzed in detail by Yoko Matsumoto-Sturt in chapter 7 of this collection, and by Noriko T. Reider in her 2013 work *Japanese Demon Lore*, which is why I am going to refer here to a single definition of oni, the one I consider most appropriate in this context. Most Shinto practitioners (priest of various ranks I interviewed on different occasions) refer to *kami*, the Shinto gods, as being neither good nor bad. The influence they have on the world depends on their current moods, that is why they need offerings and entertainment: so that they would always act benevolently towards humans. A priest from Osaka Tenmangu explained the nature of the God Tenjin (the divine aspect of Sugawara-no-Michizane): he was a creature of tremendous power, which at first manifested through raging storms and impossible to contain fires, but properly harnessed, that power could be directed towards the welfare of humans. If we do not approach the Japanese pantheon from a purely dualistic perspective, then we can agree with Origuchi Shinobu's view that oni are *marebito*, visiting deities, who descend into villages when spring fertility rituals are performed (*Oni no hanashi* 1995). Origuchi divides the fantastic creatures of ancient Japan into four categories: kami (deities), oni (demons), *tama* (spirits), and *mono* (highly abstract and difficult to imagine beings). Within these categories, he associates oni with the visiting kami who descend from the top of the mountains once a year to bless the fields and their beneficiaries when the new year begins—they are the visitors who come in spring. This does not mean that oni are inherently good; they can represent evil (as described above), or they can be beneficent, such as the Namahage[4] oni, who visit the houses of the villagers as some kind of scary Santa Claus who asks directly whether there are any "crying children or lazy wives" in the household.

[4] Oga Peninsula in Akita Prefecture is the most well-known for the Namahage matsuri, but they appear in Yamagata as well. A New Year ritual where masked beings descend from the mountain and visit the village household, to bless and make sure people will work hard in the year to come.

Namahage visitors, holding the "naughty and nice" ledger, and a big round mochi cake signifying prosperity in the coming year. Oga Peninsula, February 2011

One thing all these otherworldly visitors have in common is the mask—a universal element of human cultures that stirs ancestral feelings of reverence and fear in the hearts of the onlookers. My first acknowledged encounter with the Mask happened in Japan, and a Japanese researcher, Professor Shunsuke Okunishi (my dissertation advisor) made me aware that I had lived surrounded by masks my entire life. In 2011, professor Okunishi visited my home district (Vrancea, Romania) because he wanted to collect data on a ritual peculiar to the small mountain village of Nereju: masked men would show up to dance and play various games at funerals. As an anthropologist in training, I was utterly impressed both by the existence of such an unusual practice so close to home, and by how much it resembled the *kagura* (sacred dances dedicated to various deities) I had attended in Japan. Later, professor Okunishi described the dance in a lecture from May 2017, comparing the Romanian funeral attendants to the masked Hôsôshi introduced above, and to the similarly masked dancers who perform kagura dances in Kyushu. His lecture was innovative in presenting the ancient cultural roots of the practice, and the connection to a common cultural substratum, but the presence of masks is something ubiquitous in human culture, across historical ages and geographical borders. Masks seem to be as old as human culture—an indication that we all crave temporary metamorphoses, moments of escape from the daily life by becoming someone else, or, in extraordinary cases, by transcending the mortal world and re-asserting the connection with the divine.

Mask from Nereju
(personal collection; similar artefacts are on display at the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka)

According to A. E. Crawley, "the use of masks in one form or other and for various purposes has been practically universal in all stages of culture" (1955: 483), and with the visual data currently available, repeatedly testing his theory poses no difficulty: similar masks, used for similar purposes (to indicate the temporary descent of a deity, and its taking possession of the human body, or manifesting itself through it) appear in winter celebrations across Europe, and are famous in Japanese ritual practices such as Setsubun (the topic of this paper), kagura, or Namahage (the Akita end-of-the year festival where "demons" visit humans to make sure they are duly hardworking and well-behaved). The National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka opens its permanent exhibition with a display of several masks: a Romanian one (very much like the one in the illustration above), the head of a lion from the Japanese *shishi-mai* (lion dance), and an Indonesian one, asking visitors if they find any commonalities. To use a contemporary urban expression, once you see it, you can't unsee it. What was a discovery for a young researcher becomes a fact that does not need further proof once the corresponding elements are aligned: in most cultures of the world, supernatural creatures, be they omnipotent deities, evil or benevolent demons, or beings situated somewhere in between, periodically enter the human realm with the help of masked humans. Whether the humans are mere actors not entirely aware of their sacred role, or shamans who consciously summon the spirits, that is less relevant to the role of the mask.

The mask is there, a portal from the other world, and a magic "face" which supports the immersion of the sacred into the profane (through the descent of the spirit), and the transformation of the profane through divine possession.

3. Fire, water, and the Dancing Demons

While most Setsubun rituals seem to focus on exorcizing demons, Nagata Shrine in Kobe is a place where people go to be blessed or cured by the visiting oni, and as such the all-powerful beans[5] are not used. According to the shrine records, tsuina-shiki dates back to the Muromachi Period (1338~1573), and continued uninterrupted until 1945. The social circumstances after World War II led to its temporary suspension until 1950, when it started again, under the leadership of two local community organizations. In 1970 Hyogo Prefecture designated it as an Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property. In 1995, the year of the Great Hanshin Earthquake, the shrine sustained considerable damage, and the event did not take place, but it was organized again the next year, when the local organization, Nagata Shrine Tsuina-Shiki Support Organization, received help from other groups similarly involved in the preservation of traditional folk arts[6]. The brochure provided by Nagata Shrine explains that while in general tsuina-shiki is a ritual of expelling demons, the one they host is different because the oni are not evil creatures but messengers of the kami (similar to those from Namahage).

The seven demons who take the stage at Nagata Shrine appear as some of the most complex representations of divine visitors I have encountered in my twenty-year experience of fieldwork at Japanese matsuri (festivals; celebrations of local deities) and kagura. On Setsubun day, they undergo several transformations and perform in a way that is as close to *kamigakari* (divine possession in the Japanese shamanistic tradition) as possible. The ceremony begins with a ritual purification in the sea: the seven men who will embody the

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[5] Regarding the *mame-maki* (bean throwing) practice on Setsubun, Shunsuke Okunishi writes: "One of the rituals met with nowadays as well is "scattering beans" although it is now performed on some elevated grounds at Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples by famous artists or renowned people. While shouting "Out with the demons! In with good luck!" they take out parched beans from special boxes and throw them to the people who try to catch as many as they can. According to folk belief, the person who eats the number of the beans corresponding to his / her age + one is protected against illness and does not catch a cold. The ritual of spreading beans shows variations according to the ethnographic areas, but it is worth mentioning that it was originally held at home by the head of the family.
There is here a striking similarity with the custom of driving away the spirits of the dead in ancient Rome. In his work Fasti, written in the 1st century after Christ, Publius Ovidius mentioned a custom alike that took place during the festival called Lemuria. While spreading beans, the head of the house would shout: "Out with the spirits of the dead!" (2017: 125)

[6] Information received from Nagata Shrine Tsuina-Shiki Support Organization during a 2014 interview.

oni go to Suma Beach at around 7am, take off their clothes (all of their clothes, to the great surprise of the young researcher I was in 2011, when I first attended the ritual) and bathe in the sea. The connection with the sacred here is clear: the human vessel that will host the deities must be devoid of all pollution, and sea water (which contains salt and is directly connected to the other realm—as first indicated in the *Kojiki* Chronicles, 712, where the god Susano-wo-no-mikoto is given dominion over the Sea Plain, a symbolic other world) is one of the most powerful purification elements[7]. We must notice here one important aspect: the men purify themselves in their human quality. They have been chosen to play the demon parts during the Setsubun, and they may not approach the sacred while tainted by their human passions and weaknesses. Bathing in ice-cold seawater on a February morning represents an act of asceticism and the single way to approach the sacred. The purification ritual on the seashore is merely the first step towards complete purification; the next is taken when the men perform *suigyō* ("purification through water") within the shrine precincts, this time using water from the shrine well. (Tamas 2019: 91-92)

Once the pollution accumulated during the entire year is removed, the seven ritual protagonists (*oni-yaku*, those who play the oni part), accompanied by elementary school boys playing the role of attendants who carry their swords (*tachi-yaku*) pay a formal visit at a local temple, Fukujûzenji, where they also hold a short training session in holding the torches they will dance with. This is their first immersion into the sacred—although the connection between the shrine and the local temple (belonging to the Rinzai Sect) has been obscured by time, we can safely assume that it is a residual practice from the period before the Meiji Restoration, when there was no clear separation between Shinto and Buddhism, and many rituals were performed by priests from both religious traditions. The oni-yaku train almost naked, suggesting that their transformation from human to divine is just beginning.

[7] Yanagita Kunio (1968) considers that the magical powers attributed to salt come from the connection between salt and seawater, as seawater was always present in old rituals and used both as a purification instrument and as an offering to the gods. (Tamas 2019: 78)

Purification at Suma Beach, February 3, 2011

Praying and training at Fukujûzenji, February 3, 2011

From Fukujûzenji the oni-yaku and their attendants (members of the Nagata Shrine Tsuina-Shiki Support Organization and the tachi-yaku) head towards the shrine to the sound of *hora-gai*—conch shells used as musical instruments in both Shinto and Buddhist traditions, to eliminate any evil that might contaminate the ritual space. They wear a black *haori*-type jacket (the formal type) over plain white trousers and simple straw sandals; the trousers and sandals are reminiscent of the attire of Buddhist priests when they undergo ascetic rituals, a fact which suggests their transitional state between mortal and divine status, between the world of the living and that of the spirits. The most interesting element, however, is their head covering: a piece of white cotton cloth called *hoguri*, which renders their faces almost invisible. In her 2011 ethnography, Miyoko Takase (p. 65) does not indicate any other role for this unusual head covering, but during my 2011 fieldwork, I was told by one of the participants that it is shaped in such a way as to suggest female genitalia. While I was unable to confirm this statement with any other sources, it is not an

entirely implausible theory considering the fact that the oni costume includes a set of exaggerated male genitalia. Sacred beings are not necessarily male or female, they can be both or transition back and forth from one to the other.

Hoguri wearing oni-yaku on their way to the shrine, February 3, 2011

Once within the shrine precincts, another set of ablutions is performed so that every trace of humanity is removed before they enter the *oni-muro*—the special changing room where they don the oni costumes and masks.

Ablutions at the shrine and return to the human world, February 3, 2011

Everything that happens from morning until around 1pm, when the oni appear, can be seen as a type of initiation journey: the practitioners must undergo a series of trials (hard training which is done for months before the actual event, abstaining from certain foods such as meat and spices for two weeks before Setsubun, bathing in sea water) before they are deemed worthy of donning the masks which confer them divine attributes. Their journey begins in water and ends in fire, as lit straw torches await them once they make their appearance, in color-coded clothing (different colors for the different oni), tied with pieces of twine to suggest a super-humanly muscled body, with a big ball of cloth attached to the waist. Miyoko Takase (2011: 65) suggests that the term *kimotama*—something that indicates extraordinary power—would be more appropriate than *fuguri* (testicles), yet both appearance and local lore seem to agree that both the hoguri and the kimotama are stylized representations of the feminine and masculine elements that combined lead to the fertility of both humans and fields.

The formally acknowledged sacred objects are the masks, which in many cases (such as the masks used for Hana Matsuri in Toei, Aichi Prefecture, or those used for Shiromi Kagura in Shiromi, Miyazaki Prefecture) are seen as *go-shintai*[8], objects where the spirit of the deity can descend and dwell temporarily. The oldest (and maybe original masks) are kept in the shrine museum, and the masks currently in use were created by a Noh mask artisan in 1986, with the support of Kobe Board of Education. Below are the original masks of the seven oni from Nagata Shrine.

From left to right: Ichiban Tarô Oni (“The Eldest Son”), Aka Oni (“The Red Demon”), Ao Oni (“The Blue Demon”)

[8] A physical object serving as an object of worship at shrines, and in which the spirit of the kami is believed to reside. (*Encyclopedia of Shinto*)

Uba Oni (“The Old Woman”), Hôsuke Oni (“The Fool”)

Oshiri Kujiri Oni (“The Bottom Gouging” Oni), Mochi Wari Oni (“The Mochi Breaking” Oni)

Mr. Masakatsu Fujiwara, head priest of Nagata Shrine, holding the new Mochi-wari Oni mask against the original (photo from 2014)

Unfortunately, there are no written records or orally transmitted tales to tell us the story behind the demons' unusual names. They are all fierce in their movements, and only the Mochi Wari name has a clear explanation: at the end of the ceremony, when total darkness has descended on earth, Mochi Wari Oni breaks twelve big round mochi (rice cakes) symbolizing the twelve months of the year, in an attempt to break all evil and misfortune from the coming year. The rest of the oni remain surrounded in mystery—and maybe this is how it should be considering their divine status. Once they exit the oni-muro, all trace of humanity is gone: they move with exaggeratedly large steps, holding flaming torches, and never letting their arms down by their sides (two helpers are always around to support them when they are not dancing).

Oni awaiting their turn to dance (2011 and 2026)

For about five hours, from 1pm until dusk on a winter day, the oni take the stage, barefoot and waving straw torches, and dance to signify the coming of the gods. Once a dance set is over, they bless the participants. When I first attended tsuina-shiki in 2011, this blessing was more spontaneous, but in 2026 those who wanted to benefit from the touch of the oni had to pay a small fee (¥2000) and line up in a designated space.

Oni blessing—from the stage in 2011, and directly on stage in 2026

4. Dance as ascesis and ecstasy

The most spectacular part of tsuina-shiki is the dance of the demons: they appear on the stage individually, only to be joined later by one, two, up to four more protagonists, and move to the continuous sound of the hora-gai. The conch shells prepare the air where they will move, and call down the spirits. The oni's movements are slow and exaggerated: they stomp, squat, stand, and proceed slowly from one end of the stage to the other. Their motions, just like the solemn *mai* ("dance") performed in Noh theater or in kagura, are deceptively simple and only someone who has never tried copying them would assume a minimal effort level. The oni dance can be seen as a form of ascesis: it involves long hours of sustained physical exertion (advance training does not reduce the toll on the body), which leads to pain born as an offering to a higher being. Although brief, their performance reflects what Andre Lalande defines as asceticism: "a moral method of ignoring both pleasure and pain, and of satisfying to the least possible degree the instincts of the animal life or the natural tendencies of sensitivity. […] Especially in the religious moral life, [asceticism] represents a quest for pain as atonement or mortification, considered useful for the evolution of the soul and pleasing to god[9]." (1962: 18) Mortifying is the body is one way to achieve ecstasy—that particular state of mind which makes communication with the divine possible. Mircea Eliade, in his monumental work *Shamanism. Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, talks about

[9] Author's translation from French.

prophetic trances induced by monotonous, repetitive music, and dancing: "These first ecstatic experiences of the prophets serve as the model for all the adepts of the Ghost-Dance Religion. These, too, after long continued dancing and singing, fall into trance and visit the regions of the beyond, where they meet the souls of the dead, angels, and sometimes God himself." (1964: 143)

What happens during tsuina-shiki at Nagata Shrine is an instance of transcending the borders between worlds, and not only at a symbolical level. Whether the performers themselves believe to be possessed by a divine spirit or not, to be able to communicate with an "other world" while dancing is a matter of individual belief and faith, but the external factors objectively contribute to the achieving of a trance-like status characteristic to shamanistic practices all over the world. Japanese tradition defines this as kamigakari: "Kamigakari refers to the possession of a person by a kami or other spirit. […] Kamigakari, or spirit possession, is generally accompanied by a physical and mental transformation. To induce that state, other people present produce sounds using a koto, bell, *shakujō* staff, or other implements, continuously intone incantations, and voice loud cries of encouragement." (Kentaro Suzuki, *Encyclopedia of Shinto*) On stage, the dancers play multiple roles: performer offering their dance to the deities, vessel for the descending spirits of the gods, messenger of the gods, standing in and facilitating the communication between realms, and visiting god embodied, who bestows blessings on the believers.

Once night falls and temperature drops, the audience who has been waiting patiently with barely enough space to switch from one foot to the other (the event is highly attractive not only to the local community, but to amateur photographers as well, who come early to secure the best spot for capturing an unforgettable image of the oni) starts sharing in the mystical emotion. The external elements contributing to this are the torches burning in the darkness, the repetitive motions of the dancers, the uninterrupted sound of the hora-gai, and the closeness to the performers and other participants. Not just as a researcher, but as a direct participant, I could compare the experience to that of a prayer performed by tens of Nichiren priests gathered at Hokekyôji Temple in Chiba Prefecture for Aragyô—one hundred days of ascetic practices. I participated in the event in December 2007, as part of the parishioner group who went to visit their priest, Mr. Nobutoshi Kanayama from Gatsuzôji Temple in Sakai, Osaka Prefecture. Being surrounded by tens of priests who were chanting while clapping their bokken (literally, "wooden sword," a ritual implement consisting of a wooden prayer tablet hit rhythmically with a rosary-type of tool) while kneeling on a hard floor in a very cold room was as close to a mystical experience as a lay person can get.

Intentional or not, the dancing oni do open the gates between worlds and allow the regular mortals a glimpse into the fantastic.

Dancing demons, February 3, 2026

What the oni-yaku and their attendants do acknowledge is the fact that they are working for the gods, and as such what they do is not a mere performance, but an offering. In July 2024 I attended an Ise Dai Kagura performance which, contrary to what I had been accustomed to when it came to a group designated as a National Important Intangible Folk Cultural Asset, was less than stellar. The audience had been informed that some of the performers had just made their debut on stage, but at a later event (February 2, 2025), the group leader explained that, since they were working more for the gods than the humans, the artistic quality was secondary to effort quality. As long as the performer gave his all to honor the gods, that mattered more than a flawless execution. I was able to observe a similar phenomenon during the 2025 tsuina-shiki: the Ao Oni was obviously less experienced than the other, made several mistakes positioning himself on stage, and showed visible signs of exhaustion during the last part, when they had to dance with three torches instead of one. Yet the attendants showed no leniency: the show had to go on as planned, and he was continuously encouraged not to give up. Although at the end the organizer thanked the audience and stated that they had done their best to offer us a spectacular performance, its intrinsic meaning was not for a moment that of entertainment, but that of pure ritual.

This aspect becomes apparent during the final act, when Oshiri Kujiri Oni and Mochi Wari Oni meet in a mock battle, followed by the symbolic breaking of the mochi. Again, the dancer exerts maximum effort in a climactic performance which, despite the slow tempo, keeps the audience breathless. One of the most impressive aspects is the Mochi Wari Oni's endurance feat: he remained standing, his arms above his head, for approximately twenty minutes, and repeated the deed once more before striking the final (symbolic) blow that

would break the twelve mochi representing the twelve months of the year. Once evil is clearly expelled from the community, the gods return to their usual distant indifference towards the human world, and the oni-yaku retreat to some well-deserved rest. The precarious moment between years (spring actually means the beginning of the new year) has been successfully overcome, the intrusion of evil and chaos averted, and order restored for one more year.

The anthropologist can also go home, after one fantastic day and evening in the company of the gods, the entire day perfectly summed up by the statement of one elderly lady in the audience: "I'm glad I was here tonight, with the kami-sama!"

Mochi Wari Oni in standing position and breaking the mochi

5. Conclusions

Although my direct experience is, obviously, limited, I think it is safe to conclude that tsuina-shiki at Nagata Shrine is one of the most complex Setsubun rituals in Kansai, closer to a full (all night) kagura performance than any of the shorter oni-yarai rites. This particular example of tsuina-shiki is not only a combination of folk art and ritual offering to the deities, it is a living example of multiple transformations and transitions. The performers move not only in between worlds, from sacred to profane and back, but also change status and even gender. They are human and male in the morning, when they purify themselves by bathing in the sea, and assume temporary female characteristics during the last leg of their initiation journey (moving from temple to shrine, another formal transition between religious traditions). Once within the shrine precincts—the sacred stage of the divine manifestation, they remove all traces of humanity through a double purification (water from the well and fire when they exit the oni-muro) and become visiting gods. Despite the fact that they are repeatedly defined as "messengers of the gods," it is clear that this is an expression of ritual politeness. Once the masks (themselves sacred objects, goshintai, where the divine spirits can dwell) are on, the dancers'

metamorphosis is complete and they assume an otherworldly identity which is re-asserted throughout the day, through their unusual movements (stomping, squatting, waving flaming torches, never letting their arms down) until the final moment of the ritual performance, where the entranced dancer becomes a true vessel for the spirit of the descending deity.

Nagata Shrine's tsuina-shiki has uncontestable value from the perspective of folk arts (that is why it is a designated Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property of Hyogo Prefecture), and at the same time it represents a rare moment in the life of the community, when the intrusion of the sacred into the profane, the extra-ordinary into the ordinary of the daily life is complete, and people can catch a brief glimpse into the world beyond.

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