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The Persistence of Yōkai

by Zack Davisson

Abstract

This article examines the evolution and cultural persistence of yōkai—Japanese supernatural entities—across Japanese history, with particular focus on their transformation through key cultural periods and the role of influential creators. It demonstrates how individual creators served as cultural mediators, actively shaping and preserving yōkai traditions while adapting them to contemporary media formats, and how traditional yōkai narratives maintain cultural relevance through continuous reinterpretation and adaptation to new storytelling media. This resource contributes to our understanding of how traditional folklore elements survive and evolve through deliberate creative intervention, ensuring their continued resonance with contemporary audiences both within Japan and globally.

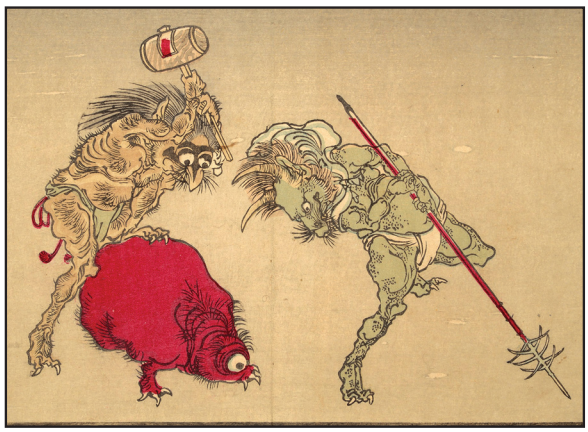

Figure 1: "Kyōsai's Pictures of One Hundred Demons" by Kyosai Kawanabe. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Musem of Art, New York.

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Introduction

On August 19, 2025, the Japanese animated fantasy film *Demon Slayer: Infinity Castle* (*Kimetsu no Yaiba: Mugen Jō-hen)* sold out the historic Le Grand Rex Theater in Paris, France—the single largest movie auditorium in Europe—claiming the fourth largest opening box office in movie history. It sits only behind *Titanic* (1997) in the number three spot, Studio Ghibli's *Spirited Away* (*Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi*; 2001) in the number two spot, and at number one another entry in the same series, *Demon Slayer: Infinity Train* (*Kimetsu no Yaiba: Mugen Ressha-hen;* 2020). This means that of the worldwide top-opening films of all time, three out of the top four are based on Japanese folklore, on yōkai. [i]

What are Yōkai?

Yōkai are complicated—perhaps impossible—to define. As a term, it encompasses phenomena of nature, embodiments of human emotion, sacred creatures and stories, cautionary tales, folklore native to Japan as well as imported from other countries, and creatures and tales that are the pure invention of artists and writers created with a commercial profit motive. Scholars widely disagree on the exact definition. In his book *Pandemonium and Parade,* Michael Dylan Foster—whose article, *Folklore, Popular Culture, and Hometown Yokai in the Twenty-First Century*, appears in this issue of *Education About Asia*—describes yōkai as an ongoing conversation between many discourses, some of which are symbiotic and some of which directly contradict each other. Some voices are louder than others at times. But none are definitive. (Foster, *Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Japan*, 2008)

The term yōkai came into general use during the Meiji period (1868–1912) when Japan ended its self-imposed exile of the Edo period (1603–1868). The Meiji period was a time of social upheaval as Japan mingled ideas and technology with other countries for the first time in over two hundred and sixty years. Science met superstition. Wishing to move their country into modern times, scholars produced work discouraging belief in Japan's popular supernatural traditions and encouraging people to embrace science and industry. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, philosopher Inoue Enryō began writing essays debunking Japanese supernatural beliefs, for which he used the term yōkai. Inoue pioneered the field of *yōkaigaku*—yōkaiology—with the goal of using an analytical framework to catalog, examine, and explain any phenomenon that could be classified as yōkai. However, the roots of yōkai were far too deep to be so easily dismissed.

Japan's Legacy of Monsters

Yōkai have inspired artists and delighted audiences for centuries. Every region of the county has its own local legends, sometimes unique and sometimes variations. Early on, some were collected in *fudoki*, ancient reports on provincial culture, geography, and oral traditions that were presented to the centralized government as reports of their outlying provinces. Scholars and writers over the years have captured other tales for future generations.

Yet the lore of the folk has not always arisen from the folk. Although usually described as "folklore," there has often been a commercial motivation behind the creation of yōkai. The persistence of yōkai in Japan has depended on the work and passion of specific artists, who have taken up the metaphorical torch and kept it lit, passing it down from generation to generation. There have been times when yōkai popularity has waxed and waned, and even times when the government has tried to stamp it out. But the voices of artists such as Toriyama Sekien (1712–1788) and Mizuki Shigeru (1922–2015) have ensured yōkai's cultural transmission to modern times, while artists such as Gotōge Koyoharu (*Demon Slayer*) are introducing them to the world.

From Invisible to Visible: The Role of Artists in the Creation of Yōkai

For much of recorded Japanese history up until the Heian period (794–1185), depicting yōkai was difficult, as the supernatural at that time was considered invisible, formless, and lacking in individual shape and

Figure 2: *Tsukumogami* (artifact spirits) from the *Hyakki-Yagyō-Emaki* (the picture scroll of the demons' night parade), author unknown, Muromachi period. Wikimedia Commons.

identity. The oldest known use of the term "yōkai" in Japan is found in the *Shoku Nihongi* (*Chronicles of Japan*; 772) where a ritual designed to clean out accumulated yōkai in the Imperial Court is described. This yōkai was akin to negative energy. Its presence was inauspicious and could cause illness and calamity. In later works, such as *Konjaku Monogatari* (*Anthology of Tales Old and New;* 12th century)—a collection of folklore tales from China, India, and Japan—there are tales of encounters between humans and *yurei* (ghosts) and *henge* (animals that have obtained supernatural powers, usually through preternaturally long life). These encounters are often depicted as the supernatural creature appearing to look human in every way. The climax of the story is when the spirit creature is revealed. This changed during the Muromachi period (1336–1573) when artists began depicting yōkai for the first time.

The transformation from invisible to visible creatures was largely due to an emergent belief that on certain nights of the year a cacophony of maleficent creatures would walk the streets of the cities hunting for prey. A story in the *Konjaku Monogatari* tells of aristocrat Fujiwara no Tsuneyuki meeting a horde of one hundred *oni* while out on a midnight stroll with his mistress through the capital city of Kyoto. Oni at the time were not clearly defined creatures; they had no distinct form or function. Fortunately, Tsuneyuki had a Buddhist sutra sewn into his clothing, which repelled the creatures. Stories such as these gave rise to the belief of *Hyakki Yagyō*, or *Night Parade of One Hundred Oni,* commonly called in English *Night Parade of One Hundred Demons* localizing oni as demons. Court sorcerers called onmyoji (yin-and-yang masters) used geomancy (an ancient practice of divination) to predict when the night parade was likely to manifest and warned people to stay inside those evenings.

There was little visual description of these maleficent creatures, though. The closest thing we get was in the *Uji Shūi Monogatari* (*A Collection of Tales from Uji*; 13th century) where it is said they "have features such as a single eye." Asymmetry, such as a single eye, is common in descriptions of supernatural creatures, as it opposes the typical and abundant bilateral symmetry of nature. Anything asymmetrical can be seen as inherently unnatural.

As belief in the Hyakki Yagyō spread, so did the occasion for commerce. Artists saw the opportunity to create and sell works depicting this widespread belief. One of the most important roles of artists was giving visual designs to yōkai. Around the thirteenth century, illustrated scrolls began to appear, depicting

the hundred oni of the Hyakki Yagyō. Forming the template of what would become yōkai, these creatures appeared as mottled caricatures. Some wielded implements that would have been common at the time, such as mallets and mirrors. Some were living versions of inanimate objects, such as musical instruments or cooking pots. Many had animal features, such as beaks and horns, combined with human ones. They were all kinds of colors, shapes, and sizes. They occupied no space, as there were no backgrounds; just a parade of monsters heading in a single direction, each revealed as the scroll was unrolled. However, they were not random.

There are currently eighteen surviving Hyakki Yagyō scrolls. All of them are thought to be copies of older works. The scrolls follow one of two patterns, with the same creatures appearing in the same order, with only slight variation. The oldest surviving scroll is known as the *Shinju-an* scroll and is speculated to have been painted by artist Mitsunobu Tosa (1434–1525). This system followed on *Shinju-an* is the most basic, with fewer yōkai. Another system has more flourish and a larger cast of creatures. The oldest known example of this is the *Hyakki Yagyō Emaki* held at the Kyoto Municipal University of Arts.

We do not know the identity of the original artist or artists who created these initial templates for the visual design of yōkai. None of the creatures depicted have names or stories. Did they at the time? Were they so well known that a child could have named everyone one of them and told you all about them with the same glee that kids today describe their Pokémon cards? Why was it so important for subsequent artists to copy the scrolls in those exact orders? Was that relevant to the mythology? We can guess, but we can never know. All we have are the pictures. It would be up to the work of later artists to give lasting identities to these compelling character designs.

The Edo Period and Toriyama Sekien

Yōkai art and storytelling declined in the next few centuries as Japan became embroiled in civil war. The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries saw the country in almost continual upheaval as rival lords fought to consolidate power. The victory of Tokugawa Ieyasu ended the wars and gave rise to the Edo period (1603–1868), a time of relative peace and flourishing of the arts. The Edo period was similar to the Italian

Figure 3: Fuguruma-yōki from the *Gazu Hyakki Tsurezure Bukuro* by Toriyama Sekien. Wikimedia Commons.

Renaissance, a time of vast cultural transformation in Japan where Japanese culture was forever changed. Kabuki theater, sushi, geisha—all of these have their origins in the Edo period.

In 1775, Toriyama Sekien, artist of the Kanō school, created *Gazu Hyakki Yagyō*, or *The Illustrated Night Parade of a Hundred Demons.* It was to be the first of his "e-hon tetralogy," a four-book series of illustrated yōkai. E-hon were books that used printing technology to create mass-market illustrated manuscripts. Sekien intended the book as a parody of reference works that were being created at the time, such as Terajima Ryōan's *Wakan Sansai Zue* (*Illustrated Sino-Japanese Encyclopedia*; 1712) that attempted to catalog all the flora and fauna of Japan, yet included yōkai such as *kappa*, among the most ubiquitous of Japan's yōkai, small water creatures that live near oceans and rivers with an indented bowl on their head that holds water, the source of their powers, and *mujina,* a cryptid creature that takes various regional forms across Japan.

Figure 4: *Kawatarō* (aka *kappa*) from *Wakan sansai zue* by Terajima Ryoan. Wikimedia Commons.

As the name implies, Sekien intended for his book to be in the lineage of the Hyakki Yagyō picture scrolls created centuries earlier. Visually, he heavily referenced the work of artist Sūshi Sawaki's 1737 picture scroll *Hyakkai-Zukan*. In his scroll, Sūshi had given some of the yōkai of the Hyakki Yagyō names for the first time. There were no explanations to go along with these names, however. That would be Sekien's innovation. (Toriyama, 2017)

Figure 5: Nurarihyon from the *Gazu Hyakki Yagyō* by Toriyama Sekien. Wikimedia Commons.

In *Gazu Hyakki Yagyō,* Seiken took the yōkai designs and for the first time put them in lived settings, with backgrounds and actions. *Gazu Hyakki Yagyō* was transformative in that these creatures that had previously been pure character design now had agency and location. Until that point, the enigmatic yōkai nurarihyon had been depicted as a strange man in monk's robes with an oversized head. Seiken's version was now alighting from a kago, a type of palanquin used for transportation where human bearers carried a rider in a carriage, and entering a home. This simple act of stepping from a palanquin would later be expanded on by writers in other eras to give nurarihyon special powers and rank, as leader of all yōkai. The stories of many yōkai began here. *Gazu Hyakki Yagyō* featured fifty-one yōkai in total.

Unlike the hand painted picture scrolls of Sūshi and previous generations of artists, Seiken's work took advantage of new printing technology. Instead of needing to arduously hand copy each edition, a single engraving could produce hundreds of books. This allowed Seiken's versions of these yōkai to disseminate to the public in numbers previously unimaginable. His *Gazu Hyakki Yagyō* was so successful he followed it up

with three sequels: *Konjaku Gazu Zoku Hyakki* (The Illustrated One Hundred Demons from the Present and the Past; 1779); *Konjaku Hyakki Shūi* (Supplement to The Hundred Demons from the Present and the Past; 1781); and *Hyakki Tsurezure Bukuro* (The Illustrated Bag of One Hundred Random Demons; 1781). From the third book on, however, Seiken no longer referenced previous yōkai art and legends and began inventing his own. Although the exact number is unknown, it is speculated that Sekien added around eighty-five new yōkai to the pantheon. His work inspired other artists and writers, who began producing literature telling tales of an interconnected yōkai society where the monsters interacted with each other as well as with humans. In this new world, yōkai had relationships, engaged in feuds, and mirrored human society.

The Meiji Period and the Transformation of Yōkai by Science

In 1853, Commodore Matthew Perry arrived at the entrance to Edo Bay, insisting that Japan open for trade with the world. Renewed contact with the West brought advances in scientific and medical research, as well as new technologies and modes of thinking. The Japanese government determined that modern, scientific nations did not believe in the supernatural. Intellectuals such as Inoue Enryō began giving government-sponsored lectures and publishing works explaining how belief in yōkai was akin to mental illness. All could be explained by science, Inoue said. Alternately, writer Yanagita Kunio saw value in these legends, seeing them as Japan's unique cultural identity. Inspired by the German Brothers Grimm, Yanagita began doing fieldwork to gather and preserve yōkai stories before they vanished. His work *Tono Monogatari* (*Legends of Tono*; 1910) became the sole source for many legends that would otherwise have been forgotten.

As with the Warring States period, the Meiji period (1868–1912) was a time of social upheaval as Japan sought to reinvent itself as a modern nation. The Tokugawa Shogunate, the military government that had ruled Japan for the length of the Edo period, was overthrown. The emperor was reinstated. Japan learned from and emulated the Western powers. And as in other times of social upheaval, this era witnessed a decline in cultural discourse about yōkai. The government was eager for this transformation. Emphasis was placed on psychology and medicine over folk beliefs and magic. Kabuki theater altered stories, so protagonists were tormented by their guilty psyche rather than their deceased spouses' spirits.

The Showa Period and Shigeru Mizuki

The Showa period (1926–1989) saw Japan at war again, this time as part of the Tripartite Pact with fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, waging war against the rest of the world. Almost all of Japan was drafted into the war effort. Civilians worked at factories to provide ammunition and parts to the war machine. Almost all men of any age were drafted into the armed forces to fight against the allies. One of the men drafted was named Miura Shigeru, although he would become better known by his pen name—Mizuki Shigeru.

Mizuki Shigeru was an artistic prodigy who displayed an inquisitive intellect from an early age. While still in elementary school, his teachers arranged a solo exhibition of his paintings, and he was featured in several newspapers (Mizuki, Yokai: *The Art of Shigeru Mizuki*, 2023). However, according to Mizuki as wrote in his diary at the time, the Japan he lived in had no use for the arts. He called it "an age of buried hopes." When he was of age, he was drafted as a soldier and sent to fight on the island of Papua New Guinea in the south seas. There, he lost his arm in an allied bombing attack. But unlike many, he made it home alive.

Aside from being an artist, Mizuki also had a deep and profound belief in yōkai. From an early age, he had been raised by Kageyama Fusa, an elderly woman known as Nonnonba. Kageyama often took the precocious Mizuki on walks through nature, telling him the yōkai stories she remembered from her youth. These were not mere stories for Mizuki, but part of the living world. When he was away, fighting in the jungles of Rabaul, he claimed to have had his life saved by the yōkai *nurikabe*, a sort of invisible wall that is impossible to walk around. Mizuki believed the yōkai chose him to tell their stories. (Mizuki, Yōkai: *Shigeru Mizuki's Supernatural Parade*, 2025)

When Mizuki returned from the war and began his career as an artist, he tapped into this well of yōkai lore to create his own stories. After a challenging time, with many failures, he finally had a hit in 1960 with *Hakaba Kitarō* (*Graveyard Kitarō*), which was later renamed *Gegege no Kitarō* (*Kitaro*). His series followed the yōkai boy Kitarō and his father Medama-Oyaji, along with an ensemble cast of yōkai characters. Mizuki took his "good" yōkai from Yanagita Kunio's book *Tono Monogatari.* For his villains, he used Toriyama Sekien's yōkai from his *Hyakki Yagyō* tetralogy.

Because Yanagita Kunio had provided no visual description of the yōkai he catalogued—if indeed any such visual existed, as many of them were purely auditory phenomena—Mizuki continued the long tradition of artists of creation. He created character designs for many yōkai that had not been depicted before, including the invisible, extending wall nurikabe that had saved his life in the jungles of Rabaul.[ii] Mizuki believed that the artists role with regard to yōkai was almost like a supernatural medium; yōkai who wished to appear would reveal themselves to an artist so they can be realized (Foster, "The Otherworlds of Mizuki Shigeru," 2008). Whatever their origin, Mizuki's designs became the de-facto image of yōkai in Japan.

The Showa Yōkai Boom

Gegege no Kitarō ignited the Showa Yōkai Boom of the 1960s, a time when yōkai were at their zenith of popularity. At the time, Japan was recovering from its devastation and on the cusp of the economic miracle that would transform the country. Television was new and special effects shows were increasingly popular with children. Mizuki's art style was perfectly placed to capture the zeitgeist.

Other artists soon joined in and created their own series. Japan had a passion for yōkai not seen since the Edo period. Artists such as Saga Miyuki retold Kabuki plays such as *Yotsuya Kaidan* in the modern medium of manga. Even Japan's "God of Manga," Tezuka Osamu, was not immune to the fervor. In his introduction to the fourth collected edition of the pioneering manga, *Dororo*, Tezuka said he created his series *Dororo* as a direct response to *Gegege no Kitarō*. Jealous of Mizuki's fame, Tezuka created the series to prove he could "out-Mizuki Mizuki," [Osamu, 1981] although he did acknowledge that Mizuki was his master.

With his financial success and societal position secured thanks to the explosive success of *Gegege no Kitarō*, Mizuki expanded his role from entertainer to educator. He began including yōkai encyclopedia entries in his work, as well as yōkai quizzes, so children could evaluate their knowledge. Educational magazines for school-age children began requesting this aspect of his work. Mizuki produced multiple yōkai encyclopedias, as well as explorations of the myths and monsters of other cultures, comparing and contrasting them to Japan. A true polymath, Mizuki also wrote works on his experiences during WWII, exposing the cruelty and sadism of Japanese forces to a country whose government had a vested interest in covering them up.

Mizuki Shigeru's influence on Japanese art and culture—and by proxy, world culture—is as great as any artist to have been born in Japan. Artist Takahashi Rumiko followed in Mizuki's footsteps with her series *Urusei Yatsura* and *Inuyasha*, both successful in English speaking countries.[iii] Miyazaki Hayao and Studio Ghibli have followed in his footsteps with yōkai-inspired films such as *My Neighbor Totoro* (*Tonari no Totoro;* 1988) and *Spirited Away* (*Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi*: 2001). Fine artist Murakami Takeshi has said his entire life is a love letter to Mizuki Shigeru and cites him as a major inspiration.

The Lasting Appeal of Yōkai

The torch of yōkai has been passed down through the years, sometimes flickering in the wars of the world and sometimes in danger of being blown out entirely, but always with someone new to grab it and fan it into a roaring blaze. The anonymous artists of the Muromachi period (1336–1573) who first painted a Hyakki Yagyō scroll inspired unknown imitators, some of whose work survives to this day. That torch was passed to Toriyama Sekien, who solidified these vague ideas into true folkloric entities with names and

stories. When the light of science threatened to blow it out again, the sensitive artist Mizuki Shigeru took it up, using all of his genius, passion, and belief to ignite and unify the country in a love of yōkai.

If you think in terms of sheer money spent, Japan's legacy of monsters clearly has incredible power and lasting appeal. This can be seen in the considerable number of products for sale featuring yōkai designs, in the form of toys, clothing, pins, and accessories. Many local towns have attempted to invigorate tourism by focusing on local yōkai. Cities such as Beppu in Ōita prefecture market themselves as the land of *oni*, with huge statues of red-faced giants in tiger skin robes dotting the landscape. Fukusaki in Hyogo prefecture took advantage of their unique local legend of a red *kappa* (as opposed to the usual green) to create a mechanical monster that emerges from a small pond in a popular park. There are many kappa-themed shopping areas and attractions across Japan, such as Kappa-bashi in Tokyo. In a country that loves mascots and characters, it is no wonder they have developed such a delightful pantheon of bizarre, unworldly creatures.

And now, thanks to *Demon Slayer,* the world is in the grips of a new Yōkai Boom, but this time an international one. Museums across the world are having yōkai exhibits, highlighting Japan's art and culture. Children in elementary schools in America are making yōkai masks in their activity classes. Yōkai-themed movies are breaking box office records. We can never know the future, but of one thing we can anticipate—yōkai will be a part of it.

Notes

[1] It is interesting to note that the fifth film on the list, Disney's *Frozen* (2013), also is based on folklore, from Danish author Hans Christian Andersen's book *The Snow Queen*.

[2] In 2007, a scroll was discovered at Brigham Young University with a creature labeled *nurikabe*. Mizuki acknowledges this as the earlier version.

[3] The English language localization for both series, however, removed most references to yokai and Japanese folklore, instead using terms such as "demon" and "goblin."

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