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Japanese Demon Lore

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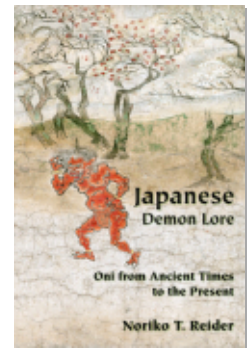
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Foreword

ON THE LAST DAY OF WINTER, *SETSUBUN*, the parting of the seasons, people perform a ceremony at temples and in many private houses where they throw beans at imagined or impersonated frightening figures called *oni*. When they throw the beans they shout: “*Oni wa soto, fuku wa uchi*” (Oni get out, luck come in). On this year’s *setsubun* a foreign colleague participated in this ceremony at a temple only to find himself to be the target of people throwing beans and shouting “*oni wa soto!*” He found himself looked at as if he were an oni. For what reason would he have been considered to be an oni?

It is difficult to translate the term *oni* because an oni is a being with many facets. It may be imagined as some ambiguous demon, or it may be impersonated as an ugly and frightening humanlike figure, an ogre. However, it is not an intrinsically evil creature of the kind, like the devil, who, in monotheistic religions, is the personification of everything that is evil. The difficulty in describing oni, is in itself, it seems to me, part of the oni’s character as a basically elusive and ambiguous creature. At *setsubun*, when people throw beans to dispel the oni, they do it with so much fun so that the onlooker may get the impression that an oni is nothing more than a character from children’s stories. Yet, as Noriko Reider eloquently shows in this volume, there is much more to an oni. In fact, it can be said that this figure and its actions let us have a glimpse at how the Japanese imagine their own world in its relation with the outside. This relation is continually reinterpreted according to the change of times. For that reason, oni are not simply a product of naïve beliefs of a remote past, they are alive to an astonishing degree still today. The experience of my colleague mentioned above may well be taken as a sign of the oni’s continued actuality. The changes as well as the continuity in the image of the oni, are the topic of this volume. Here I do not plan to summarize Reider’s argument, because to do so would only take away a good deal of its fascination. However, a recent experience of mine might help to prepare the reader for how complex the concept “oni” in fact is.

On a day in late February a dream I had fostered for many years finally became reality. It was a sunny and, for the season, an unusually warm day, when I visited the “Namahage Museum” on the Oga Peninsula, a wind-stricken peninsula reaching out into the Sea of Japan north of the city of Akita. Although Namahage appear in many villages all along the sea line of Akita and neighboring Niigata Prefectures, those of the Oga Peninsula are particularly well known. Impersonated by vigorous young men they are truly terrifying figures, by their looks as well as by their raucous and impetuous behavior. They appear in pairs or in groups of four or more. Their faces are hidden behind red, blue or black masks with large gaping mouths that expose huge canine teeth. From the top of their head protrude two large horns. Their garments, a shoulder cover, a skirt and shoes are all made of rice straw preserved from the last harvest. These looks and the strange sounds they utter when they visit the houses combine to make them truly frightening. The time of the day when they appear also adds to this fearsome impression: late in the evening of the last day of the year they emerge out of the dark mountain forest. They burst into the houses where they look for lazy or disobedient children or adults, threatening to take them away. They cause great havoc, especially among the children who hide behind their parents’ backs or cling desperately to a pillar trying to avoid being taken away. But the head of the family invites them to a formal meal and soothes them with sake until they leave rather quietly, leaving behind pieces of straw that had fallen from their covering. After they are gone, the people of the house gather these pieces and bind them around the head of the children because they are believed to insure good health for the coming year.

Who are these threatening figures? They are one kind of oni. The Namahage Museum offers two kinds of narratives about them: one to explain their presumed origin, the other to explain their and the villagers’ behavior.

The first narrative about their origin is related to the striking fact that Namahage appear in numerous villages more or less close to the sea shore, but not in the mountains of the hinterland. In this narrative the wild figures are presented as being foreigners from the continent, probably Russians, who had suffered shipwreck and then were trying to go inland in search of a way to survive. Dressed in their long coats, with large beards and long disheveled hair, it is said that these foreigners must have appeared to the surprised villagers they encountered as wild and threatening giants. In other words, these disquieting figures must have burst upon the villagers as

nothing else than real oni, the strange creatures about whom they had heard in their old stories.

The second kind of narrative is an example of such a story. At one time, a group of huge oni appeared in a village and demanded that the farmers hand over to them a village girl. The distressed farmers discussed the matter among themselves and finally decided to offer the oni a deal. For some time they had had in mind to build a stair of one hundred stone steps up the mountain. Now they saw a chance to have the oni do the work in their stead. So they proposed to let the oni have the girl under the condition that the oni build the stair of heavy stones in one single night before the first cry of the cock at dawn. The oni accepted the deal and eagerly set to work. By the time dawn was approaching the farmers noticed that they were about to loose the deal, but when the oni carried the last stone, one of the farmers shouted “cock-a-doodle-doo” imitating the cock’s cry. The oni, believing that it had been a cock’s cry and that, therefore, they had lost their bet, flew into a terrible rage. One of them pulled up a huge tree with its roots and tossed it back into the earth top down. After that the oni disappeared. Although the villagers had won their bet and were happy about the impressive stone stair, they had some afterthoughts about their own behavior. They were not quite happy that they had deceived the oni. In order to make up for their misbehavior, they built five small shrines on top of the flight of steps where from then on they honored the oni as divine beings.

Today, the young men of Oga Peninsula who impersonate the Namahage—the oni—dress up in the afternoon of the last day of the year at the village shrine. When they are ready, by falling darkness they gather in the shrine’s hall of worship. There, in front of the village deity, the shrine priest purifies them ritually before he lets them go out into the dark village in pursuit of their mission. If these oni were conceived of as intrinsically evil beings, as devils set on harming humans, one would be hard pressed to explain why they are sent into the village by the priest who attends to its tutelary deity. In fact, despite the turmoil and confusion they cause on entering a house in the village, they are wined and dined by the head of that house just as honored guests are. And what they leave behind, the straw fallen from their garments, is accepted as a token of the blessings they are believed to have bestowed on the family: that in the coming year its members would be free of sickness and have a good harvest.

The Namahage *are* frightening creatures and their exaggerated strange appearance underlines what they are: beings from outside, from another

world. For that reason they appear not just on any night, but on the very night that marks a border, the end of one year and the beginning of another. For the villagers and their ordered world they represent the (seemingly) threatening outside, the unknown other. However, at the same time they are also the harbingers of all the good the villagers hope for. In this function they are mediators between their world, the outside, and the world of the villagers, the inside. In Japanese folk tradition such outsiders are prone to cause fear, yet they are also accepted because they are considered to be beings with special powers that work for the benefit of those living inside the daily ordinary world. These visitors, despite inspiring intense feelings of fear, are also looked at as a kind of divine being. Their distinguishing mark is often that they are clad in shabby garments made of rice straw. The foreigners appearing in the first narrative may not have been dressed in straw garments, but both their unusual foreign dress and their sheer physical size, which the villagers had never seen before, may well have called up associations that linked the foreign figures with the conceptions the people held about visiting deities or beings of the other world.

Oni are denizens of an other world, a world invisible by definition. Yet they are imagined as having a shape that somehow resembles the shape of visible beings of this world. The weird exaggerations in the manner of how they are imagined only underline their very otherworldliness. Yet, the oni that are the target of bean throwing at *setsubun*, as well as the Namahage, are oni made visible. As such they can be grasped and handled so that they may even turn into beings favorably disposed towards humans.

In the examples mentioned above, oni appear to be fantastic expressions of folk imagination, a result of people's efforts to come to terms in some way with the reality of the other, be it either otherworldly or just outside the borders of one's ordinary world. When we go back in history, we find that in medieval Japan the term oni is used to express 'the other' in fields different from folk tradition, namely in medicine and court literature. Under the influence of Chinese medical treatises, early medieval Japanese practitioners of medicine argued that the causes for human diseases are certain entities active inside the human body. These causes were conceived as oni, but at that time oni were not yet the terrifying figures they became later. However, in later interpretations it was thought that types of *mushi* (an imaginary 'insect') were active in the different parts of the body. Challenged by some outside being, these *mushi* were believed to cause a disease together with the intruder. The outside challengers were concretely conceptualized as oni. In

this interpretation oni are not only entities of a world outside of the human body, they were also of a negative and noxious nature. In a quite different world, that of Heian court literature, we find still another idea of oni, for example in the expression *kokoro no oni* (oni in one's heart). In this case the oni serves to give concrete form to an otherwise hard to express and invisible disposition in one's mind, namely the dark and evil side of one's heart, such as evil or mischievous thoughts and feelings toward fellow humans. This kind of oni is said to hide in a dark corner of the heart and to be difficult to control. However, in consequence of an impetus from outside it may be thrown into consciousness and its noxious nature may show itself (see Knecht et al. 2004).

There can be no doubt that oni are much more than just the gruesome figures of fairy tales. In Japanese society, ancient and recent, they can appear in various forms and serve a variety of purposes. If we look closely at them we may notice two main aspects. In folk tradition oni are ambiguous beings, at times feared but helpful at other times. In the sophisticated traditions of medieval medicine and literature they are the concrete figure by which otherwise difficult to grasp concepts or states of the mind and heart are made intelligible and, as a result, also controllable. Yet, under both of these aspects, the oni are conceptions of entities generally foreign to normally functioning society. Therefore, as Reider says in this volume's introduction, examining them "reveals a problematic and unstable aspect of the human psyche and of society in general."

Oni are not readily visible yet they help to make hidden problems visible and understandable, in individuals as well as in society. They help people to come to terms with the other. Reider leads the reader skillfully through this mysterious yet ever actual world of Japanese culture. Yet, it is hoped that her work not only makes the oni of Japan visible to foreign readers, but challenges researchers outside of Japan to study in their cultures expressions of the encounter with otherness and the psychic and social problems it causes.

Peter Knecht