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Japanese Demon Lore

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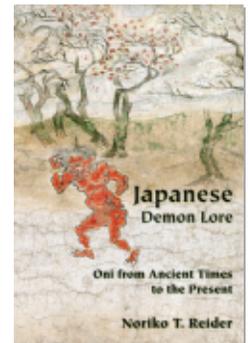
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Introduction

WHY THE SUPERNATURAL? “Serious scholars remain very wary about studying supernatural folklore. . . . The supernatural has been officially demoted to the nursery, commercial, or fantasy worlds,” Gillian Bennett writes, yet at an “informal level, there continues to be a very widespread belief in the supernatural” (1–2). Here, Gillian Bennett refers to contemporary English society, but this is true for Japanese society as well. In varying degrees Japanese people believe in life after death, deities, ghosts, and demons, just to name a few. Indeed, the supernatural is an integral part of their everyday life. To study supernatural lore of the past and present—how the Japanese have perceived, treated, believed or disbelieved the supernatural from ancient times to the present—is to explore fundamental issues of how the Japanese worldview has been shaped and changed or remained unchanged. It is to examine how Japanese people have thought and lived, to study the Japanese psyche and behaviors. Examining the supernatural as a collective whole is far beyond the scope of this book or my capacity, however. In this book I focus on just one of its important elements—the *oni*.

Referenced throughout generations of Japanese literature, religion, art, and in more modern times, through mass media representations in such pop culture icons as anime and film, oni’s longevity can arguably be ascribed to their symbiotic evolution alongside Japanese society. Oni are mostly known for their fierce and evil nature manifested in their propensity for murder and cannibalism. Notwithstanding their evil reputation, oni possess intriguingly complex aspects that cannot be brushed away simply as evil. While oni are sometimes likened to their demonic or Western ogre counterparts, the lack of a streamlined western mythos makes the comparisons roundabout and difficult.

In popular Japanese thought, the word “oni” conjures up images of hideous creatures emerging from hell’s abyss to terrify wicked mortals. Some scholars assert that the concept of the Japanese oni is a purely Buddhist creation, while others argue that it is not exclusive to the Buddhist cosmos.

Komatsu Kazuhiko, for example, notes that the term *oni* was used in *onmyōdō* (the way of *yin* and *yang*) to describe any evil spirit(s) harmful to humans (“Supernatural Apparitions and Domestic Life in Japan”). Some scholars find the root of *oni* in Chinese thought while others claim the creatures are indigenous to Japan. Each theory of origin and formation seems plausible, even though some theories contradict each other. *Oni*, as a subject of study, thus represent rather eclectic supernatural creatures. These representations came into being adopting, embodying, and assimilating multifaceted elements, concepts and characteristics of entities that draw from Chinese origins, Buddhist religious traditions, and *onmyōdō*. *Oni* can thus be said to be genuinely pan-Asian in their roots.

While the shape shifting powers of the *oni* make it possible for them to assume human, as well as other forms, their typically gruesome appearances are often reflective of their allegedly evil dispositions, as one might surmise from the *oni*’s well-known appetite for human flesh. Yet, close examination of *oni* in diverse contexts reveals more than just monster imagery. For instance, in some traditions, *oni* can be harbingers of prosperity to humans. This gentler aspect of the *oni* seems to be closely related to *oni* as a variation of *marebito* (foreign travelers, or *kami* [Japanese deities] from the other world [*tokoyo*] who visit villagers) as Orikuchi Shinobu describes them (“*Oni no hanashi*” 17–18). Or it could originate from the dichotomous nature of Indian deities from which many Buddhist gods and demons are adopted. This positive aspect gives a wonderful source for *kyōgen* plays and other auspicious folklore. On the metaphorical level, the *oni* can symbolize the anti-establishment, as “other” or outsider, vis-à-vis some form of hegemonic authority. Traditionally, anti-establishment elements are often assigned the appellation of *oni* as a pejorative against difference. Rosemary Jackson, author of *Fantasy*, suggests: “the fantastic traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made ‘absent’” (4). In this context *oni* can represent disenfranchised persons, groups and organizations silenced, and/or destined for elimination by those in authority and/or mainstream Japanese society.

Shuten Dōji, a notorious *oni* known for kidnapping and consuming the maidens of the Capital of Heian, is a good example of all the above. He is a formidable, cannibalistic villain; yet, he may also represent someone opposed to public policy, such as a local deity chased away by a religious authority, or a marginalized being considered by the ruling dynasty to be injurious to the general public or the safety of the court itself. Interestingly,

in this vein, Shuten Dōji's narrative reveals the voice of someone or something outside the powerhouse of hegemonic authority.

While the visual image of oni is predominantly masculine—with muscular body and loin cloth—there are numerous examples of female oni in Japanese lore such as Yomotsu-shikome (literally ugly woman of the other world) who appears in *Kojiki* (Ancient Matters, 712),¹ Uji no hashihime (woman at a bridge), and *yamauba* (mountain ogresses). Notably, one hypothesized origin of the Japanese oni is a female named Yomotsu-shikome, born from a female deity who felt shamed by her husband. A great number of female oni seem to be born from the angst and/or shame of being seen as unsightly by male lovers; Uji no hashihime, a protagonist of Noh's *Kanawa*, or contemporary versions of “Kanawa” by Yumemakura Baku² all become oni while they are alive because of jealousy, angst and/or shameful feelings related to being watched by someone. There are, of course, exceptions, such as a *yamauba* who is introduced in a Noh play as “an oni-woman.” A *yamauba* is a woman marginalized by villagers or family members at home and who lives in the mountains either voluntarily or because she is forced to by others. Depending upon the time and social expectations, the *yamauba*'s role changes from an enlightened seeker to a doting mother.

Examining oni—what and how they were and are represented, their vicissitudes and transformation—reveals a problematic and unstable aspect of the human psyche and of society in general, not exclusively endemic to Japanese society. To that end, in this monograph, I will treat the oni as marginalized other, and examine the evolution of their multifaceted roles and significance in Japanese culture and society. “Other,” in this sense, broadly signifies a person or members of a group marginalized and/or silenced by hegemonic authority and/or mainstream society, willingly or involuntarily, temporarily or permanently. Those marginalized persons or groups are partially or entirely excluded from participation in politico-historical affairs of their particular society, and they suffer from cultural, intellectual, legal, geographical and/or physical disadvantages attached to their status.³

In more limited terms, I follow Komatsu Kazuhiko's notion of other or “strangers.” Most pertinent to my work is his explanation about strangers

1 For the Japanese text of *Kojiki*, see Yamaguchi and Kōnoshi. For an English translation, see Philippi.

2 Yumemakura's “Kanawa” is included in his *Onmyōji: Namanari-hime*.

3 For the discussion of “other,” see Goodich; Dallery and Scott; Huffer.

as those who live spatially far away from a community, and are thus known to members of the community only through their imaginations such as foreigners who live overseas and supernatural creatures who live in the other world (“Ijin ron –‘ijin’ kara ‘tasha’ e” 178).

Several years ago when I visited the oni museum in Ōe-mach in Kyoto, I purchased a booklet. A small explanation of the front page picture—monstrous Shuten Dōji’s head biting Minamoto no Raikō’s helmet—reads, “There is nothing false in the words of demons.” A friend of mine who was traveling with me saw it, and repeated the phrase, deep in thought. She was apparently sympathizing with Shuten Dōji as someone who was naively deceived. A great number of people in contemporary society seem to find the idea of oni as marginalized and/or deceived creatures attractive and empathize with them as one of their kind. Thus, as elements of our human psyche, oni are alive with us and within us. One need only examine the work of certain contemporary Japanese authors who take the oni as tantamount to humans and attempt to understand their behavior, to see how this plays out in contemporary Japanese popular culture.

These fantastic creatures—threatening dark forces of society in ancient and early medieval periods—took up residence in remote mountains and rivers, and strode through the realms of art and literature in the Early Modern period. In present-day Japan they have emerged at the forefront of pop culture. Modern lighting technology appears to have deprived oni of their traditional living space—complete darkness of night. But they seem to have relocated via modern technology to a cyber-world comprised of film, anime, and games. Commercialization and commodification of oni come with this reclamation, reflecting contemporary consumerism if not drawing it into the mix. It has to be understood, however, that commercialization of oni did not start in the postmodern age. An *oni no nenbutsu* (oni intoning the name of the Buddha) of Ōtsu-e (Ōtsu pictures) back in the Early Modern age is a good example. Ōtsu-e are folk paintings produced in and around Ōtsu town, one of the fifty-three stations of Tōkaidō (Eastern Sea Route) connecting Edo and Kyoto. Undoubtedly, the Praying oni were popular souvenirs for the travelers who journeyed on to Tōkaidō. Oni’s commodification has only accelerated in the postmodern age.

Despite the oni’s importance in Japanese cultural history as well as their recent resurgent popularity, scholarly analytical works on the subject in English are limited. While many articles refer to or mention oni, the oni are rarely the major focus of the articles. Ikeda Yuriko’s article, “Oni or Ogres in

Japanese Literature” straightforwardly treats the oni; however, it deals with ancient Japanese oni only and does not analyze their representative construction or social function. There are a number of insightful and informative books available in Japanese, and I am indebted to many of these for an appreciation and understanding of the metaphorical and literary treatment of oni, especially Ishibashi Gaha’s *Oni* (1909), Kondō Yoshihiro’s *Nihon no oni: nihon bunka tankyū no shikaku* (Japanese Oni: Perspectives on the Search for Japanese Culture, 1975), Chigiri Kōsai’s *Oni no kenkyū* (Study of Oni, 1978), *Oni no kenkyū* (Study of Oni, 1988) by Baba Akiko, Komatsu and Naitō’s *Oni ga tsukutta kuni Nihon* (Japan, a Country Created by Oni, 1991), and *Oni* in Volume Four of *Kaii no minzokugaku* (Folklore Studies of the Strange and Mysterious, 2000) edited by Komatsu Kazuhiko. While these works are all informative and illuminating, they rarely discuss the oni’s modern rendition.

Japanese Demon Lore: Oni from Ancient Times to the Present is different from existing studies in both English and Japanese in that it studies the oni’s vicissitudes or progression/regression in Japanese history from ancient times to the present day, examining and evaluating the cultural implications these astonishing creatures have had for the Japanese psyche and society and culture as exemplified in literature, religion, art, folklore and film. It is my hope that this book will provide an analytical overview of oni, while suggesting connections with broader disciplines. This study thus addresses not only scholars and students of Japanese literature but also general readers interested in history, religion, anthropology, cultural studies, gender studies, and the visual and performing arts.

The monograph is organized into nine chapters. Chapters one through three deal with the ancient and medieval periods. Chapter four is transitional, and examines the medieval and Early Modern periods. Chapters five through nine discuss the oni from the Early Modern through the contemporary periods, and these chapters are further organized according to topics.

Chapter one (“An Overview”) examines what has become the dominant representation of oni. The oni’s genesis, etymology, and formation are described from the viewpoints of indigenous Japanese, Chinese, Buddhist, and *onmyōdō*. Further, the general features of the oni are discussed with literary examples. Considered a real entity by the ancient and medieval Japanese, the oni frequented both urban and rural areas, and were even seen in the capital, disrupting everyday life. The oni’s principal characteristics—cannibalism, the power to change shape, enmity to central authority, social

isolation, and the power to discharge lightning and to bring prosperity—are analyzed as established features of the medieval oni.

The second chapter (“Shuten Dōji [Drunken Demon]”) explores one of Japan’s most renowned oni legends, the story of Shuten Dōji. Shuten Dōji is a dynamic medieval oni with all the typical oni characteristics. He and his cohorts kidnap daughters of the nobility and then eat their flesh. Shuten Dōji is finally eliminated by the warrior-hero Minamoto no Raikō (or Yorimitsu, 948–1021) and his four loyal lieutenants. The legend is intriguing in that, while it clearly praises “the forces of good” (the protectors of Japan with the imperial authority as its center), a sympathetic view of “evil forces” (voices of those outside the central authority) resonates equally. The tale is also insightful in that it anticipates the emerging power of the warrior class in contrast to the declining dominance of oni. Using Mikhail M. Bakhtin’s theory of the “carnavalesque” (see *Rabelais and His World*) this chapter examines the Shuten Dōji texts as treatments of the marginalized other.

The third chapter (“Women Spurned, Revenge of Oni Women”) examines two medieval stories of spurned women whose angst turns them into ferocious female oni while they are still living. They are Uji no hashihime (Woman at Uji Bridge) as described in the *Heike monogatari* (Tale of the Heike) and a famous Noh play entitled *Kanawa* (Iron Tripod), which is based upon the Uji no hashihime episode. While describing the stories of the spurned women, the chapter primarily focuses on the space and gender that male and female oni, represented by Shuten Dōji, and Uji no hashihime and the woman of *Kanawa*, respectively, occupy. Uji no hashihime’s fury causes random disappearance of people similar to those in Shuten Dōji. The chapter concludes with the conjecture that an Uji no hashihime episode may have actually been a source for the male Shuten Dōji.

In the fourth chapter (“Yamauba, the Mountain Ogress”), I examine the female oni known as yamauba or mountain ogress and trace her transformative image from medieval time to the Early Modern period. According to the medieval Noh text entitled *Yamamba*, a “yamamba (or yamauba) is a female oni living in the mountains” (Yokomichi and Omote 279). To many contemporary Japanese, a yamauba is an ugly old woman who lives in the mountains and eats human beings. By the end of the seventeenth century, the legend of Shuten Dōji and the tales of the yamauba were linked in the story of one of Raikō’s four lieutenants, Sakata Kintoki. Kintoki, a legendary super-child raised in the mountains, was considered the son of a yamauba. The theme of motherhood in the yamauba tale was gradually brought to

the forefront, as exemplified in the Kabuki/Puppet play entitled *Komochi yamauba* (Mountain Ogress with a Child, 1712). Later, the yamauba came to be portrayed as an alluring, seductive woman by *ukiyo-e* (pictures of the floating world) artists. In urban areas, yamauba have been commodified as objects of sexual desire.

During the Early Modern period, Edoites believed in the supernatural to varying degrees. Belief in the oni as a real entity had significantly declined; yet, the oni continued to thrive in the minds of common folks and remain visible in their literary and visual arts. The fifth chapter (“Oni in Urban Culture”) examines a general trend of de-demonization of oni in the Early Modern period and looks into an increasing tendency among urban cultures to commercialize and commodify oni. This is seen in Tsuruya Nanboku’s *Tōkaidō Yotsuya kaidan* (Yotsuya Ghost Stories, 1824), and Edogawa Ranpo’s *Kotō no oni* (Oni of a Solitary Island, 1929–30), a work of the Modern period.

The sixth chapter (“Oni and Japanese Identity”) examines the problematic labeling of oni. The imperial Japanese military complex used the oni to define its enemies, particularly effectively as a tool to define foreigners. The idea of outsider or “other,” simultaneously promoted a sense of unity among the Japanese. This became especially true during the Second World War. Conversely, Japan’s foes could use the oni to define the Japanese. This identification of oni becomes essentially a matter of whose viewpoint one takes, and this is a focal point in some postwar fiction such as Aramata Hiroshi’s *Teito monogatari* (Tale of the Imperial Capital, 1983–89).

Authors of any age, with or without intention, tend to impart values and issues contemporary to the age in which they are writing, albeit some aspects—sex and violence, for example—tend to attract larger audiences. The late twentieth and early twenty-first century’s portrayal of the oni as a victim rather than the perpetrator of evil seems to be representative of all popular media of the time. In taking this approach, some modern authors essentially seem to tap the Japanese psyche. The seventh chapter (“Sex, Violence, and Victimization”) examines oni representations that evince these trends through Nakagami Kenji’s “Oni no hanashi” (“A Tale of a Demon”) and Yumemakura Baku’s extremely popular series titled *Onmyōji* (The Yin-Yang Master).

The eighth chapter (“Oni in Manga, Anime, and Film”) examines some noted anime (Japanese animation), manga (graphic novels), and films that utilize oni and oni variants, and studies the signification behind the oni.

A contemporary oni in these media is often portrayed as a creature from a different time and space whose existence has become entwined with cutting-edge technology such as electronics, mechanics, or robotics. Geopolitics may change; but the oni is still an alienated “other.” Some oni are used in apocalyptic epic stories like Nagai’s *Devilman*, or as representation of a negative emotional state of mind such as in *Shuten Dōji* by the same author; some are cute and sexual such as Lum in *Urusei Yatsura*, and others are employed as allegories or social commentaries as in Akira Kurosawa’s “The Weeping Demon,” one episode of *Dreams*. Oni-like characters appear in the award-winning animated film *Spirited Away* as well. Just as the subject matter of the contemporary representative pop cultural media varies greatly, the oni’s use has a wide range.

The ninth chapter (“Oni without Negatives”) studies the oni characters that do not have any negative associations. The modern era has witnessed the birth of an utterly kind, selfless oni as described in Hamada Hirotsuke’s *Naita Akaoni* (Red Oni Who Cried). Hamada’s oni may at first appear to be an anomaly, but in the process of studying various aspects of oni throughout Japan’s history, a selfless oni may become understandable. “Oni no hanashi” (A Story of Oni) written by a famous twentieth-century author, Inoue Yasushi, is a keenly personal account. His oni are good people who are deceased. These oni stories do carry cultural baggage and the oni’s stigma, and yet, give fresh breeze to the stereotypical oni world, revealing the oni’s lasting flexibility and elasticity.

Regarding the way Japanese names appear in this text, according to the Japanese custom, they are written with the family name appearing first. For example, the family name of Orikuchi Shinobu, the name of a scholar of Japanese literature, folklorist, and poet, is Orikuchi. The exception to this rule occurs when the names are well known outside Japan in English circles. For example, the film director, Akira Kurosawa, remains Akira Kurosawa even though Kurosawa is his family name.

In my research I have encountered various images and interpretations of oni. One memorable image is a cute, baby-like chubby, angry-looking oni painted on a train car in the Kamaishi line, Iwate Prefecture in the summer of 2007. It was part of East Japan Railway Company’s campaign titled “Another Japan North East North: Aomori, Iwate, and Akita” to attract more passengers and tourists to northern Japan. This particular train had only two cars, and on one car a lovable looking oni and *kappa*—once grotesque or bizarre supernatural beings—are portrayed. They are inviting

people to come and increase the train company's revenue as well as to revitalize the areas the train visits with tourism. Rich in folklore and sites of the supernatural, northern Japan and the Railway Company appear to be effectively capitalizing on this unique cultural resource. For the people of Kitakami city in Iwate prefecture, "Oni are ancestors who protect the townspeople and good deities who bring happiness" (Kitakami shiritsu oni no yakata 3). Perhaps boosting tourism is one way today's oni can bring material prosperity. This made me think how times have changed in regard to the oni—from the ancient time when people were helpless before their invisible, awesome force to the present when human beings create and use them to their advantage. As we shall see, oni provide a rich pallet of representations, from a formidable evil force, to forlorn and marginalized individuals, to connoisseurs of art, and harbingers of fortune. They are indeed multifaceted fantastic creatures.