



PROJECT MUSE®

## Japanese Demon Lore

Noriko Reider

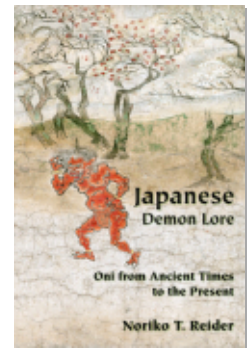
Published by Utah State University Press

Reider, Noriko.

Japanese Demon Lore: Oni from Ancient Times to the Present.

Utah State University Press, 2010.

Project MUSE.[muse.jhu.edu/book/1077](https://muse.jhu.edu/book/1077).



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/1077>

Access provided at 6 Apr 2020 05:44 GMT with no institutional affiliation



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

## An Overview

### What Are Oni?

IN AN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TREATMENT OF ONI it is tempting to seek comparisons in Western demonology. Indeed, the concept of oni and the history and development of their representation have some striking affinity to the demonic entities that populate Judeo-Christian myths and the various figures from older Greco-Roman, Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, Germanic, and Norse traditions that became “demonized” as Christianity spread through the European continent, the British Isles, and finally Iceland. Such a comparison, a worthy task in itself, is, however, beyond the scope of this book. It suffices to say that the Western adjective *demonic*, while the closest Western term to describe oni, falls short of capturing the full idea of these creatures.

The popularity and longevity of the oni myth is no doubt partially based on the beings’ conventional demonic accoutrements, which have remained relatively constant through the ages: they are dreadful supernatural beings emerging from the abyss of Buddhist hell to terrify wicked mortals; their grotesque and savage demeanor and form instill instant fear; and the oni’s omnipresence in the socio-historical and cultural archive of Japan is directly attributable to the moral, social, and religious edification that stories about oni engender. But there is a lesser known side to the oni that will also be examined here—the oni as harbingers of wealth and fortune. This widely disparate dichotomy begs a fundamental question, “What are oni?” This chapter examines the genesis and etymology of oni, as well as their features and attributes as depicted throughout various literary texts.

## Origins, Etymology, and Formation of Oni

Considering the diverse roles of oni in the Japanese cultural milieu, one expects varieties of theories about oni's origins, etymology, and formation, and one is not disappointed—they are indeed multiple and varied. According to Anesaki Masaharu, Japanese oni “belong to a purely Buddhist mythology” (238) but the oni cannot be said to be exclusive to the Buddhist cosmic universe. Komatsu Kazuhiko explains that oni was the term used in *onmyōdō* (the way of yin and yang) to describe any evil spirits that harm humans. In early *onmyōdō* doctrine, the word “oni” referred specifically to invisible evil spirits that caused human infirmity (“Supernatural Apparitions and Domestic Life in Japan” 3). Takahashi Masaaki identifies oni as an epidemic deity (4), while Kumasegawa Kyōko interprets an oni as an individual and/or societal shadow (204). It is little wonder then that overwhelmingly negative forces have often been attributable to oni. This section examines the origins, etymology and formation of oni and explores the four major lines from which oni stories have evolved: the Japanese, Chinese, Buddhist, and *onmyōdo*. There are many overlapping elements across the four lines; some descriptions are contradictory and yet believed simultaneously. Others are interwoven as if to reinforce themselves. There are many ambiguous and even ambivalent descriptions. While some conflicting and/or ambiguous explanations reveal the process of integration and adoption of various origins in the early stages of history, they also disclose Japanese attitudes toward something foreign: a selective adaptation while trying to keep their indigenous beliefs. The oni remind anyone researching their origins how strong and influential the dominant culture, be it Chinese or Buddhist, stood in relation to indigenous beliefs in *kami* or Japanese deities. Without a solid philosophical and intellectual background, evil or negative *kami*, like their European pagan counterparts, are *demonized* and incorporated into the large corpus of oni.

### The Japanese Line

Kondō Yoshihiro describes the genesis of oni as a historical product of people's fear of the destructive power of phenomenological occurrences such as thunder and lightning, storms, and earthquakes (14–15). Among the natural forces, thunder and lightning are most strongly associated with the oni. That thunder and lightning instilled fright in people is evinced by the sheer number of shrines dedicated to the thunder gods (Kondō 16). According

to Wakamori Tarō, the inhabitants of ancient Japan believed in the existence of evil spirits that resided deep in the mountains. He also asserts that the Japanese referenced the presence of oni well before the advent of Chinese thought and Buddhism in Japan (119–122). For the appellation of the “oni” itself, Orikuchi Shinobu asserts a Japanese origin, meaning giant people 大人 (pronounced oni) who lived in caves (“Oni to sanjin to” 121). Furthermore, Orikuchi suggests that there may have been no clear demarcation between an oni and a *kami* in Japan’s ancient past. Both were “awesome” beings, although the oni may not have been worshipped. Orikuchi asserts as well that the negative and fearful aspects of *kami* came to be considered oni (“Shinodazuma no hanashi” 283–284). He writes that the oni concept before the introduction of Buddhism was a variation of *tokoyo-kami* (*kami* who live in the other land or the land of the dead) or *marebito* (foreign travelers, *kami* who visit villages) who give blessings on the lunar New Year’s Eve and/or New Year’s Day for the coming year. *Marebito* wear *minokasa* (straw raincoats and hats) and come from a distant land beyond the sea. Villagers treat *marebito* well because they are foreigners with awesome power and the villagers want them to return soon. Orikuchi equates *marebito* to oni. He writes, “fearful oni rouse sometimes close (*shitashii*) and dear (*natsukashii*) feelings—not at all like Buddhist oni.” After Buddhism was introduced in Japan, he continues, oni became mixed up with such Buddhist creatures as *rasetsu* (rākṣasa), *gozu* (ox-headed demons), and *mezu* (horse-headed demons).<sup>1</sup> If one accepts Orikuchi’s connection between *marebito* and oni one can see how oni came to be considered harbingers of wealth.

In the same vein as Orikuchi’s suggestion that *kami* are worshiped while oni are not, Komatsu Kazuhiko explains that supernatural deities worshipped by Japanese are known as *kami* while those that are not worshipped are called *yōkai* (hobgoblins/monsters), and the *yōkai* with the most negative association are oni (“Yōkai” 334, 342). As we shall see in detail in chapter eight, people performed religious rituals in order to transform *yōkai* to *kami*. If there is not worship enough for a particular supernatural being to be considered *kami*, then that *kami* becomes *yōkai* (*Yōkaigaku shinkō* 193).

Citing eighteenth-century Japanese Nativist scholar Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801), Ishibashi Gaha considers an origin of the Japanese oni in Yomotsu-shikome (literally ugly woman or women in the nether land), who

1 Orikuchi, “Oni no hanashi” 16–18; “Kokubungaku no hassei” 13, 21; Also see the discussion of *tokoyo* and *marebito* in chapter one of Yamamoto’s *Namahage*.

appears in Japan's creation myth in *Kojiki* (Ancient Matters), the oldest extant chronicle or record in Japan, compiled in 712 (4). After the death of Izanami, the female creator of Japan, Izanagi, her husband and male counterpart, misses her so much that he goes to the nether land to retrieve her. But Izanami says that she has already eaten the food from that realm, implying that it would be difficult for her to return easily to this one. The food produced in the other world has the power to make one stay in that world, so she tells him to wait and not to look. The taboo against "looking" is a familiar folk literature motif—unable to resist temptation, a protagonist often breaks a promise not to look. Izanagi breaks his promise not to look at Izanami—just as Orpheus does on his journey to bring Eurydice back to the world of the living in the Greek myth. When Orpheus looks back, beautiful Eurydice slips back into the world of the dead. When Izanagi looks at Izanami, however, she is ugly, with maggots squirming and eight thunder deities growing around her entire body. Izanami is furious, probably because he broke the promise/taboo and looked at her changed appearance. Instead of bemoaning her fate and going back to the nether land quietly, she attacks him saying that he has caused her undying shame. Terrified, Izanagi quickly makes his way back to this world, whereupon Izanami dispatches Yomotsu-shikome from the underworld to avenge her shame.<sup>2</sup> It is interesting that a precursor of Japanese oni is a female born from a goddess who feels "shame" and is spurned by a male lover, for this pattern continues to appear throughout the ages in Japan, as we shall see in the following chapters. While the Japanese can identify with a primordial form of oni in Yomotsu-shikome, Ishibashi attributes the appellation, oni, to Chinese thought (104).

### The Chinese Line

Ancient Japanese literature assigns a number of different written characters such as 鬼, 魍魎, and 鬼魅 to express oni (Tsuchihashi 95). Among them, the character used now is 鬼,<sup>3</sup> which in Chinese means invisible soul/ spirit of the dead, both ancestral and evil. The letter 鬼 is a hieroglyph that presents the shape of a dead body at a burial during the Yin Dynasty (1500–770 BCE);

2 For the Japanese text, see Yamaguchi and Kōnoshi 45–47. For an English translation, see Philippi 61–64.

3 According to Kosugi Kazuo, the oldest example of the character, 鬼, in Japan appears in an inscription written on the halo of the statue of Shaka and two attendants housed in the Golden Hall of the Hōryū-ji (*Chūgoku bijutsushi* 203).

the fundamental meaning of 鬼 is, therefore, a dead body itself.<sup>4</sup> According to *Wamyō ruijushō* (ca. 930s), the first Japanese language dictionary, oni is explained as a corruption of the reading of the character *on* 隱 (hiding), “hiding behind things, not wishing to appear... a soul/spirit of the dead.” Apparently the concept of oni in *Wamyō ruijushō* is based upon the Chinese concept (Takahashi Masaaki 41). Tsuchihashi Yutaka writes that the term oni came from the pronunciation of *on* 隱 plus “i.” Similar to Orikuchi, he writes that many types of *kami* possessing powerful spiritual forces existed in ancient Japan. Among *kami*, those harmful to humans are quite similar to the *mono* or evil spirits. Both beings are invisible; the *kami* are, however, the object of awe and respect, while the *mono* are universally feared, but not respected. Oni are spiritual beings very much like the *mono*. Tsuchihashi surmises that the character, 鬼, was employed probably because the meaning of 鬼 is close to the concept of *mono* (95).<sup>5</sup> But as Takahashi suggests, it is unclear whether the negative meaning of *mono* had existed before applying the character 鬼, or the Chinese meaning unwittingly seeped into *mono* when the character 鬼 was applied. In the end, Takahashi asserts that oni, *mono*, and *goryō* (vengeful spirits of the dead that will be discussed later), are all heavily influenced by Chinese concepts (41).

The early examples of 鬼 appear in *Nihongi* or *Nihonshoki* (Chronicles of Japan, 720 CE) and in *Izumo fudoki* (Topography of Izumo Province, 733 CE),<sup>6</sup> describing evil and/or antagonistic beings. In *Nihongi*, for example, when Takamimusuhi, one of the central deities of the Plain of High Heaven and an imperial ancestor, desires his grandson to rule the Central Land of Reed-Plains (i.e., Japan), he pronounces, “I desire to have the evil Gods of the Central Land of Reed-Plains expelled and subdued.”<sup>7</sup> He calls

4 See for example, Li, “‘Kiki’ seiritsu ni okeru ‘oni’ to iu ‘hyōgen’” 425. Izushi Yoshihiko explains the original character of 鬼 (without 厶, which was added later) is made up of two parts: 由 and 儿. 由 presents a dead person, and 儿 is a hieroglyph for a person. So he surmises that the various changing appearance of dead people or a difference between a living person and a dead person was displayed by 由 (416–418).

5 Orikuchi explains that the oni were something to be feared and that *mono* was the abstract being, possessing no particular shape or form (“Oni no hanashi” 9).

6 *Izumo fudoki* is included in Akimoto 1958 and Uegaki 1997.

7 For the Japanese text, see Sakamoto et al. I: 134. For an English translation, see Aston 1: 64. In *Kojiki*, Amaterasu, rather than Takamimusuhi makes this announcement. The corresponding section is written as “kono kuni ni chihayaburu araburu kunitsu kami domo” (unruly earthly deities in this land). See Yamaguchi and Kōnoshi 99; Philippi 121. The 鬼 character is not used in *Kojiki*.

the inhabitants of the Central Land who are not subjugated “ashiki 鬼,” or evil gods. In *Izumo fudoki*, a one-eyed 鬼 appears in a reclaimed land in the community of Ayo of Izumo Province (present-day Shimane prefecture) and devours a man (Akimoto 238–39). Komatsu Kazuhiko writes, “People who had different customs or lived beyond the reach of the emperor’s control” were considered some form of oni (“Supernatural Apparitions and Domestic Life in Japan” 3). This concept is actually not unique to Japan. Targets of subjugation and different ethnic groups that do not assimilate the precepts of hegemonic authority are described as 鬼 by the Han race even before the period of Six Dynasties (220–589) in China (Li 427).<sup>8</sup> It is not certain, however, whether the character, 鬼, was pronounced as oni or *mono*. Indeed, the character is rendered as *mono* in *Man’yōshū* (Ten Thousand Leaves, ca. eighth century).<sup>9</sup> There exists no definitive example of the term “*oni*” in the ancient literature (Tsuchihashi 94–95).<sup>10</sup> As Shelley Fenno Quinn notes:

[T]he oldest myths and legends of Japan, material that is assumed to have been orally transmitted from ancient times, has been handed down to us in scripts that are written either in classical Chinese or in characters taken from Chinese and used for their phonetic values in writing Japanese. It was not until the ninth century that simplified phonetic scripts for writing vernacular Japanese came into general use, and thus much of what we know of these preliterate, oral discourses, reaches us through the filter of a continental writing technology or adaptations thereof. (“Oral and Vocal Traditions of Japan” 258)

Thus, when something called oni comes to be identified as 鬼, that entity seems to emerge from this kind of process.<sup>11</sup>

During the Heian period (794–1185), *mononoke* (evil spirits)—sharing the same *mono*—exerted great influence on the lives of Japanese people. Though *mononoke* is often written as 物の怪 (*mono*’s mystery), the original meaning is 鬼の気 (oni’s vital energy), or that which employs 鬼 (Tsuchihashi 96). *Mono*, 物 as in 鬼, was a spiritual perception that negatively affected the

8 Li, hence, finds Chinese influence in the use of 鬼 in *Nihongi* and *Fudoki*.

9 For the text of *Man’yōshū*, see Kojima, Kinoshita, and Tōno.

10 While Baba Akiko surmises that the rendition of 鬼 as *oni* probably started around 600 CE, other scholars such as Ōno Susumu consider the appellation of “*oni*” starts to appear in literature in the Heian Period, and until then, 鬼 is rendered as “*mono*.” See Baba 31 and Ōno, Satake and Maeda 228.

11 For the detailed influence of the Chinese character, see Li.

human, 怪 as in 氣 was shapeless energy, integral to the essence of the human body. A story in Keikai's *Nihon ryōiki* (Miraculous Stories from the Japanese Buddhist Tradition, ca. 823) recounts the tale of a mysterious messenger from the netherworld, documented as 鬼. When 鬼's 氣 was attached to the human character, that human either fell violently ill or died (Takahashi 3–4). In any case, the rendering of the character 鬼 as oni was mostly established in and after the tenth century.

As the use of the character 鬼 became popular, the invisible oni gradually became omnipresent in popular Japanese consciousness and began to be represented in more tangible form. Reflecting this trend, artisans and entertainers of the day often represented oni in literature, paintings, and in the performing arts. Oni are customarily portrayed with one or more horns protruding from their scalps. They sometimes have a third eye in the centre of the forehead, and varying skin color, most commonly black, red, blue, or yellow. They often have large mouths with conspicuous canine teeth.<sup>12</sup> More often than not, oni are scantily clad, wearing a loincloth of fresh tiger skin. The combination of the horn and the tiger skin may trace its origins back to an ancient folk belief. The image of oni with an ox horn(s) and tiger skin loincloth is said to have come about from a play on the word *ushitora*. *Ushi* (ox) represents the direction thirty degrees east from due north (north-north-east); *tora* (tiger) is the direction thirty degrees northward from due east. Ushitora was considered an ominous direction called *kimon* 鬼門—oni's gate 門. Hence, ox horns and tiger skins are used to depict oni (Baba 46–47; Toriyama 80). Oni are often depicted carrying an iron rod used to torture their human victims.

Although descriptions of oni vary, there are certain common physical traits that tend to be relatively constant from one representation to another, such as their three-fingered hands. As they are described in *Konjaku monogatari shū* (Tales of Times Now Past, ca. 1120),<sup>13</sup> in the medieval period, the oni usually have only two or three fingers and toes with long and sharp nails. Indeed, some oni depicted in *Jigoku sōshi* (picture scrolls of Buddhist Hell, ca. 12<sup>th</sup> century), *Gaki sōshi* (picture scrolls of hungry ghosts, ca. 12<sup>th</sup> century),<sup>14</sup> and *Kibi daijin nittō emaki* (Minister Kibi's Adventures in China, late 12<sup>th</sup> century) are depicted with three toes (see Figure 1).

12 Some *gokusotsu*, prison guards of Buddhist hell, are ox-headed (*gozu*) or horse-headed (*mezu*).

13 For the Japanese text of *Konjaku monogatari shū*, see Mabuchi, Kunisaki, and Inagaki. For English translations, see Ury; Tyler, *Japanese Tales*.

14 For the texts of *Jigoku sōshi* and *Gaki sōshi*, see Komatsu Shigemi and Akiyama.





Figure 1. An oni. Artist Unknown, Japanese. *Minister Kibi's Adventures in China*, Scroll 2 (detail), Japanese, Heian period, 12th century. Handscroll; ink, color, and gold on paper; 30.04 x 458.7 cm (12 5/8 x 180 9/16 in.). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, William Sturgis Bigelow Collection, by exchange, 32.131.2. Photograph © 2010 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Oni are frequently considered to have imposing physical stature. This may have some relationship to Orikuchi's explanation of oni's etymology, which is that the term was used to describe gigantic people. According to *Fusō ryakki*, a 12<sup>th</sup> century history book, on the twenty-fifth of the Fourth month of 929, a man saw an oni who was taller than the beam of a house (see Kōen 688). According to a story included in *Konjaku monogatari*, an oni that a man encountered at Agi Bridge in Ōmi province was nine feet tall.<sup>15</sup>

Sometimes oni are described as hairy. According to (*Yashiro-bon*) *Heike monogatari* (Yashiro version of the *Tale of the Heike*, ca. early 13<sup>th</sup> century), the oni who attempts to kidnap Watanabe no Tsuna (953–1025) to Mt. Atago has a black arm full of white hair,<sup>16</sup> and an oni described in *Ōkagami* (The Great Mirror, ca. 1085–1125) has “a shaggy hand with long, knifelike nails.”<sup>17</sup> As mentioned earlier, a primordial form of oni is female, and there are a number of notably fierce female oni in Japanese literature and performing arts. But the popular image of oni remains predominantly male.

Furthering the theory that the concept of oni bears the mark of Chinese influence, Kosugi Kazuo asserts that the root of the visual image of Japanese oni is found in Chinese *gui-shen* 鬼神 (ghosts and spirits), and the oni's shape has remained surprisingly unchanged from that of its Chinese predecessor. The *gui-shen* was originally an indigenous Chinese being and had no foundation in Buddhism. Buddhism, however, seems to have assimilated *gui-shen* into its pantheon. According to Kosugi, Chinese *gui-shen* came to Japan with Buddhism, and gave a shape to what was heretofore a shapeless oni. Kosugi finds evidence that indigenous Japanese concepts of the oni bore no clear visual image by merit of fact that when the Chinese *gui-shen* were introduced to Japan around the seventh century the Japanese applied the form to oni with little apparent change (*Chūgoku bijutsushi* 188–206).<sup>18</sup>

As the image and character of oni spread in popular use and recognition, the *aratama* (malign spiritual entities) of humans, animals, and various

15 The story of an *oni* at Agi Bridge is found in Mabuchi et al. 38: 46–52. For an English translation, see Tyler, *Japanese Tales* 19–22.

16 The story of an *oni* and Watanabe no Tsuna is found in Asahara, Haruta, and Matsuo 518–22.

17 Translated by Helen Craig McCullough. An episode is found in McCullough, *Ōkagami: the Great Mirror* 106. For the Japanese text, see Tachibana and Katō *Ōkagami*, 95.

18 The earliest *oni* figure in visual art is *rasetsu* on the Tamamushi no zushi (miniature shrine decorated with wings of jewel beetles, Asuka period [538–645]) at Hōryūji temple (Mizuo 190).

phenomena, which previously had not been represented visually, came to be recognized as oni and were likewise depicted with oni features. Similarly, the label 鬼 was applied to the specters of ordinary household objects such as tools and containers after they reached a hundred years of age.<sup>19</sup>

### The Buddhist Line

As mentioned earlier, Anesaki Masaharu writes that Japanese oni belong to a purely Buddhist myth. Although the oni cannot be said to be exclusive to the Buddhist cosmos, Buddhist influence is profoundly significant in all of the oni's elements. As we have seen, the image of oni came to Japan with Buddhism. The dreadful supernatural creatures that reside in the abyss of Buddhist hell to terrify mortal sinners are, one can rightly claim, Buddhist oni. Conversely, the creatures stepped on by *shitennō* or Four Heavenly Guardians,<sup>20</sup> often seen at a temple gate representing evil beings that go against Buddhist Law, are also oni. Just like humans, there are a variety of oni, from the minions in Buddhist hell punishing wicked humans to the beings punished by divine Buddhist protectors.

In broad terms, Buddhist oni include cannibalistic beings of Indian origin as *yasha* (*yakṣa* in Sanskrit) and *rasetsu* (*rākṣasa* in Sanskrit). *Yakṣa* in Sanskrit and Pali literature is generally synonymous with *deva* or deity, “sometimes in the highest sense, and sometimes in the lower sense of goblin or spook” (Coomaraswamy 9).<sup>21</sup> *Yasha* share a truly violent aspect with oni in that they are said to suck in a human's vital energy and devour her or his flesh (Mochizuki and Tsukamoto 5: 4895). This image seems to be underscored in Japan. *Rasetsu* is an evil creature that devours human flesh and drinks human blood. In Buddhist mythology, *rasetsu* punishes the sinners in hell (Mochizuki and Tsukamoto 5: 4953–54). Both *yasha* and *rasetsu* are the followers of Bishamonten (Vaisravana), also known as Tamonten.

A little deeper explanation of *yakṣa* helps to better understand the

- 
- 19 These animate objects are called *tsukumogami* (tool specters). For a discussion of *tsukumogami*, see Rambelli 211–258; Reider “Animating Objects”; Lillehoj 7–34; Tanaka *Hyakki yakō no mieru toshi*; Komatsu Kazuhiko *Hyōrei shinkō ron*, 326–342.
- 20 Four Heavenly Guardians are pre-Buddhist deities that were incorporated into the Buddhist pantheon to protect Buddhist teachings. They are Tamonten (North), Jikokuten (Dhrtarasta, East), Zōchōten (Virudhaka, South), Kōmokuten (Virupaksa, West). Each of them rules one of the cardinal points and a race of earthly devas.
- 21 Also *yakṣa* and *yakshis* are known as three spirits, the chief divinities of a popular non-Vedic cult (Robinson and Johnson 21).

Buddhist influences on the representational development of the oni. *Yakṣa* are not only a representational predecessor of oni, they are quite popular in present-day Japanese culture as *yasha*. With the rise of Buddhism, *yakṣa* that appear in the *Vedas* (sacred canonical texts for Brahmanism, 1500 to 500 BCE) are integrated into the Buddhist pantheon. Among the earliest figures in the images of Buddhist art, *yakṣa* and *yakshis*, their female counterparts, represent fertility and abundance and often adorn the decorations around stupas and entrances to cave temples (Fisher 22).<sup>22</sup> Powerful deities among *yakṣa* acquire important positions in the Buddhist cosmos. The best example is the aforementioned Vaisravana or Bishamonten, one of the *shitennō*. While high-class *yakṣa* such as Vaisravana are promoted to the Heavenly realm, low-class *yakṣa* remain as they are and become oni to serve the *shitennō*. Those oni called *jaki* (evil oni) who are stepped on by *shitennō* at temples are of the lower class of *yakṣa* (Mizuo 93–97). *Shitennō* and *Jūniten* or Twelve Devas<sup>23</sup> that become quite prominent by the Heian period are said to exercise power over minor gods and demons. The Indian Buddhist devas that belong to the heavenly realm are by and large fearful deities with dichotomous natures; they are said to cause misfortune but may bring good fortune as well (Ōshima, “Shichifukujin no denshō” 310). As will be discussed in more detail in the section on “Prosperity,” this is another branch in the oni’s genealogy and one source of the idea of oni as harbingers of good fortune. Historian Ōsumi Kazuo writes:

Buddhist priests gave a form to this invisible being and explained oni with *jaki* that rebel against Buddha. The priests also carried out rituals that drive away oni. As Buddhist hell was being explicated, the hell’s prison guards were explained as oni. In the minds of Japanese people, various types of oni such as *mononoke* and vengeful living spirits were

---

22 The earliest example of *yakṣa* as a Buddhist deity appears on the reliefs from Bharhut (2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE) (Mizuo 93).

23 The Twelve Devas or tutelary deities who control varied directions became quite prominent as protectors of Buddhism, and by extension, as harbingers of peace and prosperity to Japan. They were originally Hindu devas and were incorporated into Esoteric Buddhism. The highest in status among the Twelve Devas are *Bonten* (Brahman, rules upper direction) and *Taishakuten* (Indra or Sakra, rules east). *Bonten* and *Taishakuten* are followed in the descending order as follows: *Suiten* (Varuna west), *Bishamonten* or *Tamonten* (Vaisravana, north—he is one of the Four Heavenly Guardians), *Enmaten* (Yama, south), *Katen* (Agni, southeast), *Rasetsuten* (Raksasa, southwest), *Ishanaten* (Isana, northeast), *Fūten* (Vayu, northwest), *Nitten* (Surya), *Gatten* (Candra), and *Jiten* (Prthivi, downward direction).

believed to exist, and their activities were threatening the lives of people. Buddhism took the role of exorcising these feared beings with incantations and prayers. Buddhism was the civilization that had a power to make the invisible visible, and it possessed methods of negotiating with and fighting the unseen. (238)

This is true not only in the psychological and spiritual sense that Ōsumi describes in this passage, but, as we have seen, in the representational sense as well—from the standpoint of the oni's representation, Buddhism can literally be said to “make the invisible visible.” The fearful beings mentioned in this passage include *goryō*.

According to Hori Ichirō, the *goryō* belief “possibly originated in the ancient belief in *hito-gami* of the shamanic and charismatic folk religion, and under the influence of Buddhism and Yin-yang or religious Taoism was transformed into belief in individual evil spirits of the dead” (*Folk Religion in Japan: Continuity and Change* 112).<sup>24</sup> The pinnacle of *goryō* belief is presented in the case of Sugawara Michizane (849–903), a statesman and scholar. Indeed, if those who go against the will of the emperor are given the label oni, Sugawara Michizane might well have been regarded by the imperial family as a chief among oni (Komatsu Kazuhiko and Naitō 117). Not only is Michizane's case a prime example of *goryō*, it reveals an interesting relationship between Buddhist deities, Shinto *kami*, and oni. Michizane fell victim to Fujiwara no Tokihira's slanderous tongue and was relegated from the position of Minister of the Right to the chief administrator in Kyushu. After Michizane died at his place of exile in Kyushu, a rumor arose that his angry spirit might retaliate against his enemies. His dead spirit became Daijō-itokuten (Heavenly Great Merits) whose dependents, one hundred sixty thousand evil spirits (*akushin*), were said to cause various natural disasters. His attendants look like *kongō rikishi* (guardian gods), thunder gods, oni kings, *yaksa*, and *rasetsu*. Legend has it that Michizane as Daijō-itokuten had received permission from Bonten (Brahman) and Taishakuten (Indra or Sakra) to cause thunder and lightning to strike the emperor's residence in 903.<sup>25</sup> Further, the emperor whose ancestors include the Sun Goddess and who bestows *kami* status is

24 Further, Hori writes, “The magical Buddhist priests and upāsaka-magicians, as well as the shamans and Yin-yang priests, actively promoted this trend in collusion with each other and also possessed the confidence of the troubled persons by means of their magic” (*Folk Religion in Japan* 116).

25 For a text of the *Illustrated Legends of Kitano Shrine*, see Sakurai, Hagiwara, and Miyata 141–68.

sent to Buddhist hell because of sins against Sugawara Michizane. Buddhism's influence on the Japanese system of belief becomes clear in this story as we see both the emperor and indigenous Shinto gods subordinated to Buddhist deities.<sup>26</sup> As ensuing emperors bestow high court rank, and *kami* status on Michizane and build shrines in his honor, his anger is said to subside—it thus appears that there is the give and take of a symbiotic relationship between high Shinto priests and Buddhist deities. Michizane's story reveals this as well as the relationship between *kami* and oni proposed by Komatsu Kazuhiko, which we touched on earlier. That is, angry spirits turn into *kami* by way of people's worship. Indeed, these fearful aspects of *kami*—or rough and rowdy *kami* anyway—seem to earn them the moniker oni simply for want of a better word. We will return to this transformation from oni to *kami* later when we look at lightning, one of the oni's attributes.

### The *Onmyōdō* Line

*Onmyōdō* is an eclectic practice whose roots are found in the theory of the cosmic duality of yin and yang and the five elements (metal, wood, water, fire, and earth). To these ancient Chinese roots, *onmyōdō* added elements from Buddhist astrology (*Sukuyōkyō* or *Xiuyaojing*) and indigenous Japanese *kami* worship. As mentioned earlier, Komatsu Kazuhiko explains that in early *onmyōdō* doctrine, the word “oni” referred specifically to invisible evil spirits that caused human infirmity. It is noteworthy that in each of the four lines of origin explored here, be it Japanese, Chinese, Buddhist, or *onmyōdō*, invisibility is a predominant feature of oni in their very early stage. Something one cannot see yet causes her/him to fall is dreadful, because there is absolutely no way to prepare against it. One need only watch someone stumble over her or his own feet and look back to see what caused her or him to trip to get a sense of just how innate this fear is. The Heian period was the apex of the oni's hold on popular imagination as a real entity. Within the Heian period, the era of Engi-Tenryaku (901–947) is considered a time when *onmyōdō* prospered and produced excellent practitioners of its tradition. The official practitioners of *onmyōdō*, which included Abe no Seimei (921?–1005), were the employees of a government ministry that observed and examined astronomy, astrology and divination, and the

26 The primary source for the *Illustrated Legends of Kitano Shrine* was produced by priest(s) of *Shingon* esoteric Buddhism who were in search of measures against and prevention of disasters based upon the *Golden Splendor Sutra* (Imahori 26–40).

current almanac.<sup>27</sup> But the Engi-Tenryaku era is the transitional period when the official *onmyōdō* tended to become the aristocrats' private cat's-paws (Murayama, "Kyūtei onmyōdō no seiritsu" 378, 385). More precisely, as descendants of the northern branch of the Fujiwara clan were establishing their authority through the Regency, the court practitioners of *onmyōdō* were consolidating their own power by serving the Fujiwara (Murayama, *Nihon onmyōdō sōsetsu* 112, 172). It was believed, in this period, that the practitioners of *onmyōdō* could use magic, and that some could see, and even create oni. Komatsu Kazuhiko writes that the foundation of the practitioners' magical force is *shikigami* or invisible spirit (*Hyōrei shinkōron* 222). Using *shikigami*, the practitioners were actively involved in the lives of aristocrats. The *onmyōji* or yin-yang diviners used their magic at the request of their royal and aristocratic patrons and not infrequently against their patrons' political enemies. Importantly, Tanaka Takako surmises that the *shikigami* that were left underneath the bridge—not just any bridge but Modoribashi Bridge in the capital—by practitioners of *onmyōdō* such as Abe no Seimei, became various oni who stroll on certain nights in the capital (Tanaka, *Hyakki yagyō no mieru toshi* 141).

Expansive and dynamic, the oni of legend were said to thrive in all corners of ancient and medieval Japanese society. They could appear anywhere and often did. The oni frequented both urban and rural areas, and were even seen in the capital and within the imperial palace compound, disturbing everyday life, spreading fear and causing trouble. Indeed, the oni were the objects of awe and fear, and considered real entities among ancient and medieval Japanese. The modern oni, despite their continued evolution and changes, still exhibit many of the characteristics of medieval oni.

## Characteristics of Oni

### Cannibalism

One of the oni's major and most gruesome attributes is their huge appetite for human flesh. Oni are often portrayed feasting on human flesh. It is said that oni can eat a person in a single gulp. Indeed, the phrase "oni hitokuchi" (oni in one gulp) more than suggests the oni's cannibalistic inclinations. The sixth episode of *Ise monogatari* (Tales of Ise, 945 CE) tells of a man who falls

27 The agency is called *onmyōryō* (the Bureau of Divination). See Bowring, *The Religious Traditions of Japan, 500–1600* 171–92.

hopelessly in love with a woman well above his social status. The man decides to kidnap her. On their runaway trip, near the Akuta River, a severe thunderstorm forces the woman to shelter in a ruined storehouse. Even though the man stands gallantly on guard at the entrance of the shelter, the lady is eaten by an oni in one gulp. Although she screams, the pounding thunder muffles her cry and the man does not realize what is happening until she is gone.<sup>28</sup> In the story, nobody sees the oni eating the woman, or even the oni itself for that matter. But the gruesome act is attributed to oni. “Oni in one gulp” suggests an instantaneous action, exemplifying an oni’s atrocity and enormous appetite. But these creatures do not always consume the victims so quickly. As will be discussed in chapter two, in the story of Shuten Dōji, the oni deliberately savor the delicacies of human flesh during special banquets.

Another example of an oni’s ravenous appetite appears in *Nihon ryōiki* (Miraculous Stories from the Japanese Buddhist Tradition, ca. 823). The story is entitled “Nyonin akuki ni kegasarete kurawareshi en” (On a Woman Devoured by an Oni). During the reign of Shōmu (724–749) in the province of Yamato, there lived a wealthy family with a beautiful daughter. Many suitors came seeking the girl’s hand in marriage but the daughter never consented to wed. One day, a suitor sent her a number of luxurious gifts including three carriages full of splendid silks. Pleased with this suitor’s overtures, she accepted his proposal. On their wedding night, from the bedchamber of her house, painful cries were heard. Her parents dismissively concluded, “perhaps she feels pain because she is not used to it.” So they took no action. On the following morning, her mother went to her daughter’s bedchamber to wake up the newly wedded couple, but there was no reply to the mother’s call. Thinking this strange, she opened the door only to find her daughter’s severed head and one remaining finger—the rest of her body had been completely devoured. People claimed it was the work of an oni.<sup>29</sup> In the story, no one sees the enemy or its act of cannibalism, but as the title denotes, this abhorrent act is attributed to oni.

Stories of cannibalism are frequently recorded in Japan’s official history, too. According to *Nihon sandai jitsuroku* (True Records of Three Generations in Japan, 901), on the seventeenth of the eighth month of 887 three beautiful women walking near Butokuden, one of the buildings in the

28 She is supposedly devoured by an oni. For the Japanese text, see Sakakura et al. 114. For an English translation, see McCullough, *Tales of Ise* 72–73.

29 For the Japanese text, see Endō and Kasuga 274–277. For an English translation, see Nakamura Kyoko 205–206.



imperial palace compound, see a good-looking man under a pine tree. The man approaches one of the women and begins talking with her. When the remaining two women look back in the direction of the pine tree, they are horrified to see the dismembered woman, limbs strewn on the ground, her head missing. At the time, people believed that an oni transformed into the handsome man and then ate the woman.<sup>30</sup>

While showing the oni's cannibalistic side, this tale also illustrates the oni's exceptional metamorphic abilities. Changing from its grotesque form to a handsome man allows the cunning oni to gain the trust and interest of his victim so that he can devour her with little or no resistance. Oni are capable of transforming into both male and female forms at will.

### Transformation Power

One exemplary tale that attests to the oni's gender-crossing powers of transformation appears in *Konjaku monogatari-shū*. In the story, a man who brags about his prowess goes to Agi Bridge in Ōmi province in an attempt to exterminate an oni haunting the area. The oni, disguised as a beautiful young woman, is presented waiting at the bridge. As soon as the oni attracts the man's attention, it reveals its true form: greenish skin color and nine-foot-tall frame, three fingers on each hand and dishevelled hair. The man narrowly escapes. Later, the same oni, disguised as the man's younger brother, visits his house and finally murders him.<sup>31</sup> It is intriguing to note that this oni changes its shape freely to female or male in its confrontation with the man.

A similar but better known story, one that became a source for a famous Noh play entitled *Rashōmon* in fact, appears in "Tsurugi no maki" (Swords Chapter) of *Heike monogatari*.<sup>32</sup> According to the "Swords Chapter," during

30 For a text of the episode, see Fujiwara et al. 464.

31 The story of an *oni* at Agi Bridge is found in Mabuchi et al. 38: 46–52. For an English translation, see Tyler, *Japanese Tales* 19–22.

32 For the texts of "Swords Chapter," see Asahara, Haruta, and Matsuo 3: 514–47; Mizuhara 1: 59–88. For an English translation, see A. L. Sadler, 1921: 325–354. There are numerous texts of *Heike monogatari* such as *Yashiro bon*, *Kakuichi bon*, *Shibu gassenjō bon*, *Nanto bon*, *Enkyō bon*, etc. These various texts have been classified in many ways. The classification used here, one of the recognized standardized classifications, is to divide the texts into two lineages: (1) *katarihon kei* (recitation lineage) which includes *Yashiro bon*, *Kamakura bon*, *Kakuichi bon*, *Rufu bon*; and (2) *yomihon kei* (reading lineage) which includes *Shibu gassenjō bon*, *Genpei jōsuiki* (Vicissitude of the Genji and Heike Clans), *Enkyō bon*, *Nanto bon*.

A number of texts were in existence by the end of the thirteenth century, and the most prevalent text of *Heike monogatari* today is *Kakuichi bon*, which was compiled

the time of Minamoto no Raikō (or Yorimitsu, 948–1021), people begin disappearing in the capital. Around that time, Raikō sends Watanabe no Tsuna, one of Raikō’s *shitennō* (four heavenly guardians), on an errand. Thinking that the capital is dangerous, Raikō lends his famous sword to Tsuna to guard himself. At Modoribashi Bridge in the capital, Tsuna encounters a beautiful woman of about twenty years of age who asks him to take her back to her house. Tsuna agrees and lifts the lady on his horse, just as the lady reveals her true identity—she was a monstrous oni. Grabbing Tsuna’s topknot and flying in the air, the oni declares that s/he is going to take Tsuna to Mt. Atago. Tsuna manages to cut off one of the oni’s arms. The oni flies off, leaving the severed arm (with Tsuna) behind. Later, the same oni, disguised as Tsuna’s foster mother,<sup>33</sup> attempts to gain entry to his house. The foster mother/oni asks Tsuna to show her the famous oni’s arm. Believing that the woman is actually his foster mother, Tsuna takes the disguised creature to the chest where he has placed the oni’s arm. Seeing the severed arm, the creature reveals its true identity to Tsuna, grabs the limb and flies away with it.<sup>34</sup>

An oni often uses the power of transformation to prevent warriors from

---

in 1371. *Yashiro bon* is considered an older version among the texts of the *Katari-bon* lineage, which includes the *Kakuichi bon*. The *Kakuichi bon* contains the “Swords Chapter” in Volume Eleven, but this is different from more elaborate *Yashiro bon*’s “Swords Chapter” or that of *Genpei jōsuiki*. In the “Swords Chapter” of *Kakuichi bon*, the episodes Minamoto no Raikō (*tsuchigumo*), Watanabe no Tsuna, and Uji no hashihime (will be discussed in chapter three) do not appear.

There are four English translations of the *Tale of Heike* as follows:

1. Sadler, “The Heike monogatari.” This translation, the oldest one, is based on the *Rufu bon*. The *Rufu bon*’s “Swords Chapter” is similar to *Yashiro bon*’s “Swords Chapter,” and it appears from 325–354 of vol. 49, part 1.
2. McCullough, *The Tale of the Heike*. This translation is based on the *Kakuichi* text published in Takagi Ichinosuke et al. *Heike monogatari*. Takagi’s *Heike monogatari* is based upon the Ryūtani daigaku version of the *Kakuichi bon*.
3. Kitagawa Hiroshi and Tsuchida, *The Tale of the Heike*. This translation is based on the same *Kakuichi bon* published in Takagi Ichinosuke et al.
4. Burton Watson, *The Tales of the Heike*. This is a selected translation of the *Heike monogatari*, and is based upon Ichiko, *Heike monogatari*. This book is based upon the Kōya version of the *Kakuichi bon*.

For the explanation of the *Heike* texts, see Takagi Ichinosuke et al. 33: 12–46; Asahara, Haruta, and Matsuo 1: 387–97 and 3: 548–51; Yamashita 390–98; Matsuo 406–07; Oyler 9–16.

33 She is also Tsuna’s aunt.

34 For the episode of an *oni* and Watanabe no Tsuna, see Asahara, Haruta, and Matsuo 518–522.

accomplishing their heroic tasks. An example of this can be found in the Noh play entitled *Momijigari* (Maple Leaf Viewing), authored by Kanze Kojirō Nobumitsu (1435–1516).<sup>35</sup> The warrior Taira no Koreshige (the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century) receives an imperial order to subjugate the oni residing on Mt. Togakushi. On the mountain, Koreshige meets an enchanting lady (an oni in disguise) and the two have a banquet under the maple trees. Seduced by the lady, he sleeps alongside her, completely intoxicated. In his dream, a messenger of the deity of Hachiman bestows a sword upon him and tells Koreshige to use it to kill the oni. Waking, Koreshige is shocked to find the sword from his dream at his side. He is even more shocked when he realizes what he is now lying next to; in place of the beautiful lady of his amorous tryst is a gruesome female oni with horns on its head. The oni in *Maple Leaf Viewing* is female and the performer who plays the role of the oni wears a *hannya* (she-demon) mask. Koreshige kills the oni with the sword given to him by the deity. The oni of Mt. Togakushi had transformed itself into a voluptuous woman to make Koreshige lessen his guard. It is not at all uncommon for an oni to use female sexuality as a ploy to achieve its goal.

#### The Other: The Oppressed, Alienated, and Isolated

As mentioned in the section on Chinese origins, people who had different customs or lived beyond the reach of the emperor's control were considered to be some form of oni. Indeed, one could argue that any person or people who are forced to and/or voluntarily live on the periphery of mainstream society are marginalized and thus, considered oni (Komatsu Kazuhiko and Naitō 11).

In the aforementioned *Maple Leaf Viewing*, it is worthy to note that the oni were to be eliminated by imperial command because they were deemed to be troublemakers, even seen as a threat to imperial authority. The oni in these tales are often “beyond the reach of the emperor's control,” so suppressing them means dispatching special warriors to remote regions. When the being is “beyond the reach of the emperor's control” or is considered an enemy of the establishment, that being is often labeled oni, thus becoming a target of subjugation. Using the oni label to connote difference, apartness or oppression is a theme previously seen in *Nihongi*. For example, when Emperor Keikō tells Yamato Takeru to conquer the rebels in the east, he

---

35 For the Japanese text, see Sanari 5: 3079–3092. For an English translation see Weatherby 33.

says, “So by cunning words thou mayst moderate the violent Deities, and by a display of armed force sweep away malignant demons (kadamashiki 鬼).”<sup>36</sup> The corresponding phrase in *Kojiki* is “the un-submissive people” (matsurowanu hito-domo).<sup>37</sup> As many scholars point out, the character, 鬼, does not appear in *Kojiki*. Ōwa Iwao writes that the editors of *Nihongi* employed the character, 鬼, for those who were against the emperors (48).

An interesting example of an oni defying the emperor and actually triumphing over him in the end can be found in a story in *Konjaku monogatari-shū*. A holy man of Mt. Katsuragi, who gains miraculous power through asceticism in the mountains, is summoned by imperial order to heal the illness of the emperor’s beautiful consort. The holy man successfully cures the consort’s illness, but while staying in the palace, he becomes increasingly infatuated with her. Acting upon his carnal desire, he is caught in the act and consequently imprisoned by the emperor. Thus imprisoned, the once ascetic, devout man swears an oath that he is prepared to die and reincarnate into an oni to possess the royal consort, the object of his carnal obsession. Hearing this ominous promise and obviously afraid of the holy man’s curses, the emperor and Fujiwara no Yoshifusa (804–872), the prime minister and the consort’s father, release the holy man from prison. Back in the mountain, the holy man proceeds to starve himself to death, determined to make good on his threat and return to earth as an oni. No sooner has he effected his death, than he appears before the consort as an oni apparition—a huge, statuesque, black-skinned, big-eyed, wide-mouthed being with sharp teeth. He seduces the consort and realizes his carnal desire—in public and in front of the emperor no less—who is helpless to stop it.<sup>38</sup> This oni reveals his extraordinary determination to realize his sexual desire. It is his determined will that makes him oni. His determination is such that he spurns the wishes of the emperor and powerful Fujiwara and brings about their ultimate humiliation. This example shows how the oni was indeed to be feared but not necessarily respected.<sup>39</sup>

36 For the Japanese text, see Sakamoto et al. I: 302. For an English translation, see Aston 1: 204. Ōwa Iwao surmises that Yamato Takeru’s story was originally probably a story of Amaterasu conquering violent deities. But the emperor’s power is augmented in *Nihongi* to enhance the emperor’s authority (51).

37 See Yamaguchi and Kōnoshi 223. For an English translation, see Philippi 81.

38 The Japanese text is found in Mabuchi et al. 37: 46–51. For an English translation of the story, see Tyler *Japanese Tales*, 178–180.

39 Iizawa Tadasu writes that the holy man of Mt. Katsuragi was actually Bishop Shinzei

Baba Akiko states that the oni were a representation of those suppressed people and/or those who were not a part of the Fujiwara Regency (from the 10<sup>th</sup> century through the 11<sup>th</sup> century). The Fujiwara Regency reached its peak with Fujiwara Michinaga (966–1027), and Baba observes that oni are said to be more rampant during Emperor Ichijō's reign, the zenith of the Fujiwara Regency, than at any other time in Japan's history (141,150). One of the best examples of those who "lived beyond the reach of the emperor's control" is the story of Shuten Dōji. Shuten Dōji, the chief of an oni band, lives on Mt. Ōe. During the reign of Emperor Ichijō, Shuten Dōji and his oni band abduct people, particularly maidens, enslaving them and eventually feasting on their flesh and drinking their blood. The concerned emperor orders the warrior hero Minamoto no Raikō and his men to stop the abductions by vanquishing Shuten Dōji and his band of oni followers. Raikō and his men disguise themselves as *yamabushi* (mountaineering ascetics) and by means of guile, deception and some divine help, they eliminate Shuten Dōji and his oni band. There are many theories regarding the origins of the Shuten Dōji legend, including the notion that Shuten Dōji and his fellow oni were nothing more than a gang of bandits who lived on Mt. Ōe, or that Shuten Dōji was a Caucasian man who drifted to the shore of Tanba Province (present-day Kyoto) and drank red wine. But, as will be examined in greater detail in the next chapter, what is most striking among these theories is that all the characters are disenfranchised either by geography, customs and/or different lifestyles.

En no gyōja (ca. 7<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> century), revered as the founder of *Shugendō* (Mountain ascetics) has two oni attendants: Zenki (anterior demon) and Goki (posterior demon). According to *En no gyōja denki* (History of *En no gyōja*), Zenki and Goki are humans born in a village at the foot of the mountain. They are orphaned when young and go to the mountains to

---

(799–860). Shinzei was greatly admired by Emperor Montoku, who had conferred the position of archbishop on the former. When Montoku became gravely ill, people had great hope for Shinzei's magic power to cure the emperor. But Shinzei failed and the emperor died at the age of 32. People were terribly disappointed, and Shinzei was greatly criticized from all directions. Shinzei retired in disappointment. With this background, not to mention the monks who had been jealous of his superior talent and intelligence, Shinzei was turned into the character of oni. Regarding the imperial consort, Izawa assumes that having lost her husband at a young age, over time, she would become hysterical from sexual frustration. In her later years, she resorted to extreme behaviors as written in the texts (142–53). Here, too, the person who was made into oni is someone who ultimately could not help the emperor's life, and was heavily criticized by society. Also, see the similar story in *Fusō ryakki* (Kōen 602).

survive. Their appearance is ugly, and the villagers who encounter them in the mountains call them oni. They in turn avoid humans, and make the mountain their territory before they become En no gyōja's disciples and protect the practitioners of *shugendō* (Chigiri 312). Ishikawa Tomohiko writes that those who lived in the mountains beyond the reach of imperial authority probably came to be known as Zenki and Goki (Ishikawa and Ozawa 12). Also in "Yama no jinsei" (Life in the Mountain) Yanagita Kunio writes of babies born with teeth—different from ordinary babies. These babies were widely believed to be *onigo* (oni's child) and were badly abused, particularly prior to the Edo period. Yanagita cites various documents including *Tsurezure nagusamigusa*, which records "... a deplorable custom in Japan where a baby born with teeth is called oni's child and is killed." In *Higashiyama ōrai* (Letters from Higashiyama) Jōjin (1108 –?), a Buddhist monk, chronicled how "a maid gave birth to a baby with teeth. The woman's neighbours advised her to bury the baby in the mountain, rationalising that the baby had to be an oni. The maid came to me for consultation and I [Jōjin] suggested that the baby be sent to a temple to become a monk" ("Yama no jinsei" 234). This appears to be the bleak destiny of any child thought to be of oni lineage—death, abandonment or more mercifully, the priesthood. People seriously believed that babies born with teeth would become oni (Satake, *Shuten Dōji ibun* 44). As many social scientists cross-culturally have come to observe however, it is human nature to apply social stigma to those displaying any difference or anomaly.

Indeed, the act of labeling people with different customs as 鬼 appeared as early as in *Nihongi*. The *Nihongi* states that during twelfth month of the sixth year of Emperor Kinmei's reign (544 AD), "At Cape Minabe, on the northern side of the Island of Sado, there arrived men of Su-shēn in a boat, and stayed there. During the spring and summer they caught fish, which they used for food. The men of that island said that they were not human beings. They also called them devils 鬼魅, and did not dare to go near them" (Sakamoto et al. II: 92).<sup>40</sup> The "men of Su-shēn" (Mishi-hase) was an old name for Tungusic ancestors of the people living in the coastal area of northeastern China. They must have drifted ashore from that region. The native people were thus observing Su-shēn from a distance while labeling them as 鬼. A similar case is found in *Izumo fudoki* regarding a one-eyed 鬼 who devoured a man. Referring to the one-eyed 鬼, Akimoto Kichirō

40 For an English translation, see Aston 2: 58.



Figure 2. Sugawara no Michizane as shown in *Nichizō's Journey to Hell*, from *Illustrated Legends of the Kitanō Tenjin Shrine*. Japan, Kamakura period (1185–1333). Late thirteenth century. Set of five handscrolls; ink and color on paper. (b): 11 5/16 in. x 28 ft. 3 3/4 in. (28.8 x 763 cm). Fletcher Fund, 1925 (25.224. b). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY, U.S.A. Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art/ Art Resource, NY.

notes that those with physical characteristics of a different race were probably described as such (238). Again, “difference” seems key to receiving the label of 鬼. Akimoto further notes “it may have some relation to metal workers whose deity of profession is *Ame-no-hitotsu-kami* (one-eyed deity)” (238). In other words, this 鬼 may have something to do with metal workers or their lifestyle. The first metal culture was brought to Japan either by Chinese or Koreans from Southern China (Tanigawa, “Seidō no kami no sokuseki” 31). The non-Japanese races or their descendents may have been looked upon as “different” by native Japanese and, therefore, described as 鬼. This may also explain why the oni are often depicted carrying an *iron* mace. Could it be that these early smiths, geographically and socially distinct from the rest of the populace, were what helped spawn the medieval revival of an even older myth? In creating metal equipment or weapons, sparks are emitted by hammering, sparks which visually resemble lightning. Perhaps these same blacksmiths’ propensity for metals is what caused the masses to attribute the impressive power of lightning to the oni.

### Lightning

Oni are often associated with one of nature’s most powerful forces—lightning. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, Kondō Yoshihiro finds the genesis of oni to be in people’s fear toward the destructive power of phenomenological occurrences, especially thunder and lightning (16). This results, no doubt, from the combined visual and auditory intensity of the experience, coupled with the threat of potential, instantaneous destruction. Recall that in *Ise monogatari*, the woman is eaten by the oni during an intense thunderstorm.

Also recall that Sugawara no Michizane (849–903), the dauntless adversary against imperial power, uses lightning as a weapon against the imperial family. In 955 a young child of a Shinto priest announced the divine message and “proclaimed that the spirit of Sugawara had become the deity of disasters and a chief deity of the thunder demons. The imperial court would dedicate a shrine to Michizane” (Hori, *Folk Religion in Japan* 115). Indeed, Sugawara is posthumously endowed with the highest rank, and is enshrined by the imperial household with various rituals, and now more than a thousand years later, he and his shrines are thriving as the *kami* of school entrance examinations for numerous boys and girls. In *Kitano tenjin engi emaki* (Illustrated Legends of the Kitano Tenjin Shrine, ca. 13<sup>th</sup> century) Michizane’s vengeful spirit turns into a thunder god and reincarnates Michizane as Daijō-itokuten. Remarkably, Michizane’s/Daijō-itokuten’s



appearance as a thunder god is portrayed as similar to the oni who torments wicked mortals in hell in the picture scroll.<sup>41</sup>

As the noted painter Tawaraya Sōtatsu's (early 17<sup>th</sup> century) portrayal of a thunder god reveals,<sup>42</sup> a thunder god is often depicted with features similar to oni. A thunder god usually appears standing on the clouds and carrying an array of drums. This similarity is understandable when one considers the extent to which oni stories originated from people's fear of thunder and lightning. Another interpretation of their resemblance is through the *kami-oni* (or *yōkai*) paradigm proposed by Komatsu Kazuhiko (*Yōkaigaku shinkō* 193). As mentioned earlier, people performed religious rituals in order to transform *yōkai* (oni being the most negative of *yōkai*) to *kami*. When a particular supernatural being is not worshipped abundantly and devoutly enough to be considered *kami*, then that entity is said to become *yōkai*. Thus as a vengeful spirit, Michizane was a terrifying oni; but with ample rituals and sincere apologies from imperial court authorities, he gradually changes (or is promoted) from oni to *kami*. Yet, by fostering vengeance and with a smothering destructive force, he retains the form of oni at the moment he inflicts his disastrous wrath on his enemy. It makes sense then, that Michizane as Daijō-itokuten and a thunder god takes the similar form as the oni who afflicts humans. In the popular military literature entitled *Taiheiki* (Chronicle of Grand Pacification, ca. 14<sup>th</sup> century) Sugawara Michizane himself is said to have actually transformed into the lightning that struck the imperial palace (Gotō and Kamada 406–407). By superimposing the oni onto natural disasters or inexplicable destructive phenomena like thunder or lightning, people had a clear target for their fear and anger; in this vein, the oni represent a self-designed coping strategy, helping people come to terms with nature's unpredictable fury by personifying it and giving substance to the inexplicable.

### Prosperity

A literary survey throughout the ages would no doubt reveal that more often than not, the oni's evil side is what is emphasized. Yet, the oni are not

41 In the earliest extant hand-scroll of *Kitano tenjin engi* owned by Kitano ten'mangū in Kyoto, Michizane's/Daijō-itokuten's appearance as a thunder god is portrayed almost identically to the red-skinned oni who torments wicked mortals in hell. See Komatsu Shigemi, Nakano, and Matsubara 25, 29, 31–35.

42 As "Fūjin rajjin zu" (the god of wind and the god of thunder), the painting is housed in Kyoto National Museum in Kyoto.

exclusively represented as evil beings. Oni can also be supernatural entities that bring good fortune and wealth. An example of how the oni can be seen as harbingers of wealth and fortune appears in the *kyōgen* play entitled *Setsubun* (on the lunar New Year's Eve). Traditionally, on the night of *setsubun*, people scatter beans, one for each of their years alive, saying “oni wa soto, fuku wa uchi” (Demons out, Fortune in). In some rites, a male from the community goes to a house pretending to be an oni (wearing a paper oni mask) and is chased out while people scatter their beans. In this *kyōgen* play (see Koyama 125–131), however, an oni from *hōrai*, the land of eternal youth, goes to Japan, wishing to eat beans. The oni visits a house where the husband has gone on a religious retreat leaving his wife at home, alone. The oni immediately falls in love with the wife. She is scared of him at first, but quickly realizes how to make the most of her situation by going after the oni's fortune and treasures, saying: “If you really love me, give me your treasure.” The oni zealously agrees, replying, “My treasures are a straw raincoat of invisibility, a hat of invisibility, and a wish-granting mallet (*uchide no kozuchi*),”<sup>43</sup> and he hastily gives her the cloak and the hat he wore to Japan. As soon as she receives the treasures, the wife chases the oni away with beans. Portrayed in the spirit of *kyōgen*, which makes fun of serious and frightening figures, this oni is humorous and quite credulous.

This *kyōgen*'s oni that comes from the land of eternal youth, and visits on New Year's Eve bearing treasures, probably descends from the Japanese line of oni which is, as we have seen, a variation of *marebito* coming from a distant land at a certain time, notably on the lunar New Year's Eve and/or New Year's Day, to give blessings to villagers. The *marebito* wear a straw hat and cloak.<sup>44</sup> The treasured cloak and hat with the power to make their wearer invisible might have been a main source of the oni's powers of invisibility. Such equipment was considered highly prized treasure; by being

43 These three treasures are also listed as oni's treasures in the story, “Momotarō,” or Peach Boy, that is discussed in chapter six. See Antoni 167.

44 An oni's association with a hat is mentioned in *Nihongi*, although it does not describe the hat as invisible. It says, on the evening Empress Saimei died, “on the top of Mt. Asakura, there was a demon (鬼) wearing a great hat, who looked down on the funeral proceedings.” Translated by Aston (2: 270). For the Japanese text, see Sakamoto et al. II: 350. By the early tenth century, an oni is widely associated with an invisible hat and cloak. Ōshikōchi no Mitsune, a late tenth century poet, writes in his private anthology of poems titled *Mitsuneshū* that “Oni sura mo/ miya no uchi tote/ mino kasa o/ nugite ya koyoi/ hito ni miyuran” (Even an oni/ takes off his cloak and hat/ in the imperial court/ this evening/ and lets people see its appearance, I wonder). The preface to the poem gives the date as 918 (Fujioka and Tokuhara 137).

invisible, one could acquire tangible and intangible wealth, from precious metals to valuable information. The theme of invisibility may also hark back to the *kami* being invisible (or oni being originally invisible).

A number of stories present a wish-granting mallet as an oni's valued possession. One such story is a famous folk tale entitled *Issun-bōshi* (Little One-Inch).<sup>45</sup> In the story, a boy is born to an elderly couple far past the years of conception and childbirth. For years, the couple prays for a child and eventually, the woman conceives. The boy she gives birth to however, never grows any larger than an inch (hence his name, Little One-Inch). One day, Little One-Inch decides to go to the capital in search of fortune and success. He gets a job as a servant to an aristocratic family and falls madly in love with the couple's beautiful daughter. He tricks her parents into believing she has stolen his rice and they disown her; she comes under his care, and they both soon leave the family's compound. On their journey with no destination, Little One-Inch and the daughter meet up with a band of oni. One of the oni swallows Little One-Inch in one gulp but he fights against the oni, plunging his little sword into the being from inside its body. Severely injured, the oni coughs up Little One-Inch and the demon band scampers away, leaving behind a magical wish-granting mallet. Little One-Inch picks up the mallet and with the help of its supernatural power, he is transformed into a normally sized human. He uses the mallet to produce food and treasures. Little One-Inch becomes rich, marries the princess, and they live happily ever after, primarily because of the oni's wish-granting mallet. Although the mallet was not given to Little One-Inch as a present but was left behind by the band of oni, the fact that the implement of good fortune was brought by the oni to the mortal world remains unchanged. Through their wish-granting mallet, the oni in the story become the bringers of fortune.

A mallet that produces food and wealth is indeed an invaluable treasure, and it seems a wish-granting mallet was widely considered to be a standard possession of an oni by the thirteenth century. A chapter entitled "Gion nyogo" from the Kakuichi version of *Heike monogatari* describes a mysterious being as an oni, adding "That thing in its hand is probably the famous wish-granting mallet."<sup>46</sup> To many contemporary Japanese a wish-granting mallet is most associated with Daikokuten (the Great Black Deity), one of the Seven

45 For the Japanese text, see Ichiko, *Otogi zōshi* 319–26. For an English translation, see McCullough, *Classical Japanese Prose* 495–98.

46 Translation by McCullough (*The Tale of the Heike* 215). For the Japanese text, see Ichiko, *Heike monogatari* 461.

Fortune Deities (*shichifukujin*). Daikokuten carries a wish-granting mallet in his left hand. I conjecture that Daikokuten came to possess a wish-granting mallet partly through its association with an oni. Daikokuten is:

a direct translation of Mahākālā [Great Black Deity], a Hindu deity already adopted by Buddhism in India. In the *Commentary to the Mahāvairocana Sutra* he is described as a manifestation of Mahāvairocana who can subdue demons. The *Sutra of the Wisdom of the Benevolent Kings* speaks of Daikokuten as a god of war, and in Buddhist iconography he is often portrayed with a fierce and angry countenance. (Reader and Tanabe, Jr. 158)

Indeed, the facial expression of the earliest Daikokuten sculpture housed in Kanzeonji temple in Fukuoka prefecture is stern (see Miyamoto Kesao 61). So is one of the most famous Daikokuten sculptures enshrined in Mt. Hiei: he is a fierce-looking three-faced, six-armed Daikokuten. Notably, neither sculpture has a mallet. It is plausible that the image of Daikokuten as the Great Black Deity, a fierce-looking war god, became conflated with oni images because of its original angry countenance and its black skin color. There is a belief that one day Dakini's consumption of living human flesh disgusted Mahāvairocana. Mahāvairocana changed his appearance to Daikokuten, caught Dakini, and ate it to remonstrate the latter's behavior (later Dakini was allowed to eat only the bodies of deceased humans). From this story, another belief that Dakini was subjugated by Daikokuten and became Daikokuten's attendant was born (Naganuma, *Fukujin kenkyū Ebisu to Daikoku* 266). Eating live humans, or supernatural creatures like *yasha*, is part of the oni's repertoire. The conflation of representations in these gruesome stories may have led to oni's possessions becoming associated with Daikokuten.

Although Daikokuten was a god of war in India, his image was also placed in monastery kitchens in India and China as a deity of food and its abundance. In Japan, from the Kamakura period (1185–1333) to the Muromachi period (1336–1573), Daikokuten is claimed as a protector of Buddhist teaching. This time period corresponds with the Japanization of Daikokuten according to Naganuma Kenkai (*Fukujin kenkyū Ebisu to Daikoku* 309),<sup>47</sup> and during this time Daikokuten comes to be worshipped

47 Two statues of Daikokuten, one housed in Kōfukuji in Kyoto and the other in Daikokuji in Osaka have a mallet held by the right hand. Naganuma assumes the production period to be the very late Kamakura period through early Muromachi period (*Fukujin kenkyū Ebisu to Daikoku*, 297).

mostly as a deity of food and good fortune. This attribute is strengthened as Daikokuten is also identified as Ōkuninushi no mikoto, an agriculture deity, through a homonym when their names are written in kanji. During the Muromachi period, Daikokuten came to be worshipped as a fortune deity with a big amiable smile and was quite popular among people of all walks of life (Kanai 331). Perhaps Daikokuten is widely considered to carry a mallet by this time, because an entry from Prince Fushiminomiya Sadafusa's (1372–1456) diary dated 1 Third Month of 1416 of *Kanmon nikki*, records that there were “Daikokuten's large straw raincoat and mallet of fortune”<sup>48</sup> at the tea gathering at Fushimi Mansion in Kyoto. The mallet is often explained in relation to agrarian moral values because of the homonyms “for the mallet (*tsumi*) that hammers out wealth (*takara*). ‘*Tsumi*’ also means dirt or earth, and ‘*takara*’ can also be read with two words: ‘*ta kara*’ (from the rice field)” (Reader and Tanabe 158). It makes sense that Daikokuten, who is worshipped as a deity of food and the kitchen, has an agrarian tool. But perhaps Daikokuten carries a mallet because of its strong association with oni.

It is interesting that Daikokuten, originally an Indian deity of war already adopted by Buddhism, was incorporated into one of the Seven Fortune Deities as *kami*, which are Shinto gods. More important perhaps is what this re-creation and realignment of representations demonstrate about the evolution of people's expectations since, as Miyata Noboru suggests, it was humans who selected the seven supernatural beings (six of them from either India or China) and put them together to create a set of fortune *kami* (“Kankō ni attatte,” 2). By the time Seven Fortune Deities became popular in the early modern period, it really did not matter whether a deity was of Buddhist or Shinto origin. What mattered was that they brought fortune in this world.

As a bringer of fortune, the oni of *Haseo sōshi* (Story of Ki no Haseo, the 14<sup>th</sup> century)<sup>49</sup> who brought the most beautiful lady to Ki no Haseo (851–912), a noted scholar, should be mentioned here as well. This oni, unlike many other oni, does not harm humans; rather he is an oni of word. One day the oni, apparently an eager player of *sugoroku* (a Japanese kind of parcheesi), approaches Ki no Haseo because of the latter's excellent ability

48 In a small letter, Sadafusa explains that “a *sake* barrel is named “Daikokuten's large straw raincoat” and that inside a wish-granting mallet are tea cakes and extra sake (Gosukō-in 1: 18).

49 For the Japanese text, see Komatsu Shigemi and Murakami 1–39.

at *sugoroku*. Similar to the oni of Rashomon Gate who plays the lute, this oni appreciates art. Haseo and the oni play *sugoroku* with a bet that if Haseo loses, the oni receives all of Haseo's treasures, and conversely if the oni loses, Haseo receives a strikingly beautiful woman from the oni. Needless to say, the oni loses. As he has promised, the oni brings the ethereal beauty to Haseo. He warns Haseo, however, that he cannot touch the woman for a hundred days. Haseo cannot resist however, and after eighty days he attempts to make love to the woman. No sooner does he touch her than the woman melts into water. The lady, the oni explains, was made of the best parts collected from various dead bodies, and her soul was to enter the body after a hundred days. Had Haseo been patient, he could have kept the most beautiful woman created by the oni. Interestingly, in *Haseo sōshi*, it is the oni who strictly keeps his promise and a human who breaks it.

The idea that demons are honest and not manipulative is not novel. For example, in the tale entitled “Miyoshi no Kiyotsura no saishō no ie-watari no koto” (The Eviction) from *Konjaku monogatarihū*, Minister Miyoshi no Kiyotsura (847–918) says “real demons know right from wrong and are perfectly straight about it. That's what makes them frightening” (Tyler, *Japanese Tales* 123).<sup>50</sup> Also an *onmyōji* in “Harima no kuni no oni hito no ie ni kite iraruru koto” of *Konjaku monogatarihū* says that “(the oni) will come from the gate in the shape of a human. Such an oni is not wicked or unjust. He follows a righteous way” (Mabuchi et al. 38: 79). Though generally considered evil, when one thinks of its role as an attendant of Buddhist protectors and/or a variation of *marebito*, it is understandable that he is more honest than normal human beings. An utterance of this kind is also heard from Shuten Dōji as we shall see in the following chapter.

Through the medieval period, oni with these attributes had a forceful presence in the consciousness of nearly all elements of Japanese society. Much of whatever was inexplicable and/or mysterious to human intellect and perceived as negative eventually took shape as oni. An abundance of records on oni in the ancient and medieval periods reveal how oni were perceived as real by the Japanese masses. In the following chapters, representative oni or labeling of oni from the medieval through contemporary times will be examined in more detail to see how oni were treated and/or what roles they played with the changing contemporary psyche and society of Japanese culture.

---

50 The Japanese text is found in Mabuchi et al. 38: 97–101.