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Japanese Demon Lore

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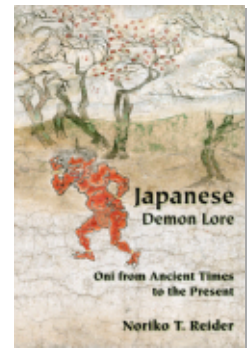
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Oni without Negatives

Selfless and Surrealistic Oni

ON I WITHOUT NEGATIVES DO NOT STRIKE ONE AS ONI. Yet, modern times have witnessed the birth of an utterly kind and selfless oni. He appears in the children's story, now widely considered a classic, titled *Naita Akaoni* (Red Oni Who Cried). Its author, Hamada Hirotsuke (1893–1973), says that he created a kind oni, hoping to spread compassion among modern people. Another oni without harm or evil comes from a famous, authoritative literary figure of the twentieth-century, Inoue Yasushi (1907–1992). Inoue Yasushi's oni is a deceased person, and in that sense, his oni is heavily based upon Chinese ideas of oni discussed in chapter one. The Chinese line of thought from Inoue Yasushi is not surprising when one considers his erudition on Chinese cultural history. His portrayal of oni is keenly personal, and their imagery, surreal. Although these oni themselves do not have negative ambiance, the stories revolve around the basic notion of the stigmatic oni that carries cultural baggage. The modern creation of oni without negativity gives a fresh breeze to the somewhat stereotyped oni world, i.e., a dark, violent and/or sexy image from pop culture. While this reveals the oni's lasting flexibility and elasticity, it also raises a question, "What are oni?"—the very question we asked in chapter one.

Kind and Thoughtful Oni: *Naita Akaoni* (Red Oni Who Cried)

The earliest depictions of utterly kind, selfless oni seem to have come from a noted author of children's literature, Hamada Hirotsuke (1893–1973). Kitajima Harunobu's comment on *Naita Akaoni* says that an "oni is a

frightening creature. There are many stories about scary and evil oni in Japan. Oni are widely perceived as frightful and evil, so it is quite understandable that the Japanese dislike them. *Naita akaoni* is unique, for it describes the oni as a good creature” (199–200).

In his *Naita Akaoni* (Red Oni Who Cried, 1933), the kind red oni is determined to be good. The red oni wants to befriend mankind, but humans are afraid of oni and want no association with them. Knowing the red oni’s desire, the blue oni (the red oni’s friend, and also a good oni) makes the major sacrifice: he plans an elaborate ruse that calls for the red oni to conveniently jump to the rescue of humans while the blue oni destroys their homes. The blue oni is willing to come across as the evil one so that his friend, the red oni, can be seen as the good one. His plan is successful and as a result, the red oni comes to have many human friends. One day, when the red oni visits the blue oni’s house, he finds that the blue oni has gone away so as not to disturb the red oni’s good relationship with the humans. The red oni cries, touched and moved by the blue oni’s thoughtfulness, friendship, and self-sacrifice.

Written at a time of change, an era of fast-paced modernization, Hamada’s stories would serve to help children and adults come to terms with this new age. The dehumanizing effect of modernization and particularly industrialization raised a number of questions about what it means to be human. As industrialism spread and more people began to feel the marginalizing effects of being cogs in the industrial machine, many began to ask themselves these very pertinent questions. When asked about his motivations, the author states, “I felt that I should like to bestow a good intention on an oni. If the reader pities the well-intended oni and feels compassion towards him, then such a sentiment would undoubtedly be extended to thoughtfulness and compassion for other people’s feelings” (Hamada 200). It certainly helped open a path for later oni fiction that treat oni as an alter ego of humans. The red oni was friendly enough to prepare tea and homemade cakes for the humans, while his counterpart, the blue oni, espoused qualities of self-sacrifice, putting the needs of others ahead of his own. The blue oni was considerate enough to leave the area so as not to interfere with his friend’s newfound acceptance. This piece served to illustrate the benefits of self-sacrifice, righteousness, and upright behaviour. Hamada succeeds in drawing empathy from his readership by emphasising the more compassionate side of humankind, producing in the process kind-hearted and benevolent oni. Hamada’s oni are different from the de-demonized oni

we have seen in earlier chapters in that they are not parodied beings; they have no evilness, no ulterior motives or underlining machinations. While Hamada's oni are positive, it should be noted that humans in Hamada's story have the cultural baggage to deny the oni's friendship simply because the red oni is an oni. In other words, the background of *Naita Akaoni* is actually the strongly held belief of oni as wicked.

The roots of this humane oni may be found in the protagonist of the Noh play, *Yamamba*, whose authorship is attributed to Zeami (1363–1443). As discussed in chapter four, folk belief portrays yamauba as a mysterious old woman living on the mountain and feasting on travellers who happen upon her path. Unlike the yamauba of folk tradition, Zeami's character is an invisible, lonely old woman who altruistically helps humans with their chores. She tells a group of entertainers to spread her side of the story to the public. Popular during the medieval period, Zeami's *Yamamba* is heavy with Buddhist philosophical precepts such as “the good and evil are not two; right and wrong are the same” (Brazell 207). Zeami's yamauba is laden with spiritual burdens, forever making the mountain rounds, forever disenfranchised by ordinary people. In contrast, Hamada's oni has no darkness within, therefore no philosophical weight. When one considers the genre of children's literature for which this story was written, having a kind oni becomes more understandable, for it is parents', educators', and for that matter, all adults' hope that children grow up to be kind and considerate. Indeed, oni can be used to teach such moral lessons as “appearance is deceiving”—even an oni that everyone considers evil turns out to be good—or to show the importance of self-sacrifice and true friendship, even among oni.

The oni's compassionate side is not typically an emphasized characteristic. As a purely fictional character, a product of the imagination unburdened by any attendant religious dogma, it is possible for Hamada's oni to be befriended by others, and become a source of hope to expand human compassion. As the story of *Naita Akaoni* has grown in popularity to become a classic of children's literature,¹ the kind oni has become less “anomalous.”

I have just used the word, “anomalous.” But is the oni without negativity really an anomaly? The reader of this book is familiar with a positive side of oni—the oni as harbingers of wealth and fortune. As mentioned in chapter one, Orikuchi writes that the oni concept before the introduction

1 The story is broadcast on the radio and television, and adapted to movies, ballet and opera (Hamada Rumi 117).

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. Further, demons were believed to be honest and not manipulative in ancient and medieval times. Again, as we saw in chapter one, in one tale of *Konjaku monogatari*shū, 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.”² Shuten Dōji, who is considered an archfiend, also cries out when he was deceived by humans and is to be killed, “How sad, you priests! You said you don't lie. There is nothing false in the words of demons.” He even offers lodging to a group of strangers out of compassion. After all, the multifaceted oni has a role as an attendant of Buddhist protectors, and a duty (as a variation of *marebito*) to be more honest and righteous than normal human beings. The kind oni are not anomalies, but the evil, murderous behavior, and notorious killing sprees that typify most oni stories are carved in human memory much more deeply than any positive elements; the oni as “other” has given unknown fear to ordinary Japanese lives. The oni's general appearance—large mouth with fangs and horns on its head—does not help promote the oni's light side, either. Hamada's oni is remarkable in that the author sheds full light on the oni's positive aspect, which tends to be forgotten. Various aspects of oni are drawn to people's attention according to human needs. Hamada's achievement was in rediscovering a positive aspect of what had been long considered dark and evil, and focusing entirely on that bright side against a harsh backdrop of societal changes and dehumanizing mechanization.

Oni Go to Heaven: Inoue Yasushi's Surrealistic “Oni no hanashi” (A Story of Oni)

Oni can be utilized not only by the authors of pop culture and children's literature, but also by Japan's masterful novelists. Indeed, a nostalgic and personal account of oni comes to us from the hand of Inoue Yasushi (1907–1992). The description of oni by Inoue Yasushi is quite ethereal. Inoue Yasushi, one of Japan's finest novelists (Richie 339), produced serious historical novels as well as semi-autobiographical novels and short fiction of

2 The English translation is by Tyler (*Japanese Tales* 123). The Japanese text is found in Mabuchi et al. 38: 97–101.

humor and wisdom. “Oni no hanashi” (Story of Oni, 1970) is one of his autobiographical short stories in which he describes his deceased friends and relatives as oni. Oni in the *Story of Oni* are not frightening or marginalized, they are simply deceased people. Inoue’s narrator writes that “it is said that when one passes away, *kiseki ni iru* (one’s name is recorded in the roster of the dead or ghosts). Indeed, my uncle died and became an oni” (162). The expression, *kiseki ni iru*, comes from a Chinese expression. As mentioned in chapter one, 鬼 in Chinese indicates an invisible soul or spirit of the dead, both ancestral and evil. When one dies it is believed that his or her name is recorded in King Yama’s roster; hence, *kiseki ni iru* means that someone is deceased. Unlike the Chinese concept of death, however, horns are an important element in the narrator’s discussion of oni. What convinces the narrator that his late uncle has become an oni are the horns, which have inexplicably grown on his uncle’s forehead in an image.

Inoue’s oni might be considered the product of mental illness because the narrator encounters them while he is suffering from neurosis and insomnia. The narrator persistently sees the images of his late uncle at night when he is still awake. One night, the narrator notes quite casually that he has noticed two horns on his uncle’s forehead. Yet, he quickly adds that his “uncle’s face with two horns was not gloomy or eerie in the least. Despite the two horns on his head, his face has become more like his real face” (162). He is sympathetic to his oni, not because they are dead and thus became oni, but because he has mostly fond memories of the deceased while they were alive.

During the course of sleepless nights, the narrator reflects upon the images of his late family members, relatives, friends, and acquaintances one after another. He puts horns on their heads to check whether the horns fit their faces or not. Some of the faces do not accept the horns. He concludes that even if the deceased are called oni, there are some with horns and some without. Further, he notices that a number of characters that contain the shape of the “oni” character, i.e., 鬼, are the names of the stars, and it strikes him that the oni without horns are probably stars in the sky. The narrator explains that when one passes away, one becomes either an oni in heaven as a star (without horns) or an oni on earth (with horns). Indeed, many of his oni are innocent and benevolent. The narrator describes his late baby girl who passes away only seven days after her birth as an “enchantingly lovely oni,” and an “innocent oni-child” (164). Of his maternal aunt, who dies at the age of twenty-three or twenty-four, the narrator says, “Her face with

horns made me feel that I could trust my baby daughter in her care, and I was much relieved” (164–65). Sabauchi, his friend of college days who took good care of a bed-ridden wife throughout his life, is also an oni with horns.

Naturally the question is raised: “On what kind of persons do horns grow, and on what kind of persons do horns not grow?” The narrator asks Sabauchi, and the answer is intriguing. Sabauchi replies, “Horns grow on the head of a saint who has never sinned. Horns don’t grow on the head of a similar saint. Some villains have horns and others don’t. The situation is terrible in your world. Sometimes several hundreds of horns of several hundreds of kinds grow on humans’ foreheads, and sometimes they don’t grow at all. It’s just you can’t see the horns” (186). Inoue’s oni is surreal. Clearly the horns, which initially made the narrator believe that people become oni when they die, are not an indication of one’s morality. Yet, if a horn, regardless of its meaning, still indicates an element of oni, the living humans who have horns in great numbers are also oni, but with more variety. Or conversely, if humans have hundreds of them on their heads, then horns do not indicate death, either. There appears to be no demarcation between oni and human and perhaps this is Inoue’s point. But one thing seems clear from Sabauchi’s further comments: the “realm of death is filled with sadness from separation. There is nothing else. No anger, no joy, no hatred nor jealousy. Only sadness of separation from the loved ones exists. ... The realm of the dead is not as dirty as a world of the living. The place is clear” (187). That the living world is dirty and murky is a familiar Buddhist concept. Humans’ existence and thought processes are probably much murkier than those of oni’s. Inoue’s oni, whose images appear to him like a kaleidoscope, are serene and philosophical.

The oni without negatives described by Hamada Hirosuke and Inoue Yasushi highlight the oni’s complexities: Hamada draws kindness and compassion, and Inoue illustrates oni as innocent and benevolent who reside in the “other” world. They are not entirely new, but they strike us as something different, something surprisingly fresh because oni have been long associated with the “dark side” or “otherness” of this human world or human psyche. When this unfamiliar “other” is totally kind and benevolent, the degree of fears toward the “other” decreases, though it does not disappear. Most obviously the difference in appearance or behavior remains unchanged. Thus, the oni, regardless of good or evil, seem to remain as “other.”

It should be noted that these kind oni have, like other modern oni, a yearning for human relationships. As we saw in chapter seven, by and large,

the modern oni are looking for some connections with others. Hamada's red oni wanted to be a friend of humans. Inoue's oni's world is filled with sadness from separation from their loved ones. While Inoue's explanation of the oni's appearance during his neurosis and insomnia keenly describes the situation in which a modern oni exists—it exists only in one's imagination—the loneliness the oni feels, yearning for relationship with others, someone they can love or someone who will love them, reveals the fragmented society of modern times.