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Japanese Demon Lore

Noriko Reider

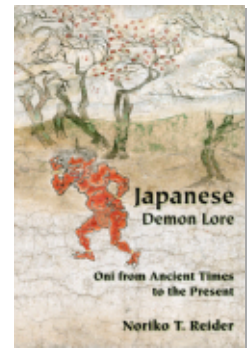
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Conclusion

AS THE READER HAS WITNESSED in the course of this monograph, oni emerge, take shape and derive substance from Buddhist cosmology, yin and yang beliefs, Chinese literature, and popular Japanese imagination. Through the ebb and flow of Japanese history oni are sustained by and feed upon not just human flesh but human creativity and the seemingly overriding human need to make sense of and bring order to their world. Thus, the Japanese have cast legends about and built praxis around oni according to the exegeses of their particular historical moment and their given beliefs and commitments.

For ancient and medieval Japanese cultures, oni had *real* efficacy. They were accorded the status of *real* entities having *real* physical substance. As objects of fear and awe oni were integral parts, and had important roles, not only within the ancient and medieval Buddhist cosmos, but also in the everyday lives of Japanese people. In these periods, oni were believed to be the very substance of thunder and lightning. Oni were the cause behind epidemics that killed people by the tens of thousands; conversely, these demons were also the harbingers of wealth and good fortune. Importantly, during the time period in question, oni pragmatically influenced the everyday spatial and temporal lives of people. Recall that during the Heian period, when oni were said to stroll at night in groups, people would carefully choose the day and direction of outings in order to avoid mishaps in encountering oni and being devoured.

Oni, throughout their long history, and on many levels of significance, have borne their great burden as repositories of much that is interesting about human emotions and the human psyche. Witness, as we have, what occurs when humans with huge political clout fall out of favor, and are demoted or disfranchised: they become angry, and such chagrin literally turns them into oni. Members of the imperial court, people on the victorious side of a particular political intrigue, and/or the guilty parties in instances of romantic trysts would, at their given historical moments, worship the vengeful spirit in their attempts to appease the wrath of the angry oni that may have come

in the form of natural disaster, or as the cause of unnatural death of people around them. Buddhist monks, *onmyōdō* practitioners, and Shinto priests were all summoned to quell the anger of formidable oni as we have seen in the case of Sugawara Michizane. Likewise, jealousy, infidelity, overpowering lust, and unrequited love all had the ability to turn people into oni. What is important for us to recall here is not the actuality of this phenomenon; that is, it is not important that the reader believe oni once walked the earth and derive meaning from the phenomenon. Rather, it is what this very pragmatic and widespread belief meant to, and says about, the historical culture from which it emerges. Most important, however, is what this system of belief *does*, and how it functions in the sociopolitical and physical lives of Japanese people in any particular historical period.

If one accepts the tenet that oni impact the physical everyday lives of people in the culture from which they emerge, then it is relatively easy to make sense of the oni's functions within and influences upon the political events that drive Japanese history. We have seen this happen in the course of this book—recall the warrior class and the shogun's rise to power. As those warriors who pride themselves on their physical prowess and skill at arms appear in the political arena, the oni's status gradually falls from that of an all-powerful and awe-inspiring entity that is to be avoided at all costs, to something to be challenged and subdued on behalf of the "forces of good." In this we witness the rather interesting carnivalesque flux in the relationship between self and other, and the ways that the various transactions of these ideas come to influence historical events. The imperial authority, its court, and recorders of such authority view themselves as the force of good, and label any enemy individual or force as oni, dispatching brave warriors to squash their existence.

As we have seen, this seemingly simple dichotomy of good and evil is much more complex since ostensibly one derives its "essence" from the other. Shuten Dōji is a good example. Recall that Shuten Dōji, the counterforce to the imperial court, lives in the jewelled palace in the mountains where nobody can easily approach. When he becomes hungry, he flies to the capital and even foreign countries to sate his enormous appetite for human flesh and blood. He causes natural calamities. In all aspects, he is the evil creature we associate with the term oni. Yet in closer examination of his origins, Shuten Dōji appears as a politically and socially marginalized being. Originally, he might have been an indigenous deity of the mountains before the official Buddhist sect opened the mountains for Buddhism, depriving

him of his residence. He could have been a metal worker, or a bandit. What is important here is that whatever he was, he was outside the sanction of the dominant and hegemonic culture of the court. He is other, something to be subdued and destroyed, an enemy, and this is the exact thing that makes this story, and the rise of the warrior class for that matter, so carnivalesque. The images that surround the scenes of Shuten Dōji and his court of oni (as shown in the picture scrolls) are presented as carnivalesque inversions of scenes of the warriors and the imperial court. That these images and the dichotomous relationships that they imply are indeed in flux, we see in the degree to which warriors' prowess derives directly from the tenaciousness and evil ferocity of the enemy they oppose. Since one comes to be defined in terms of the other, the distinctions between them begin to weaken and become blurred. If we look at the way this juxtaposition of self and other functions in more modern times, we see yet another example of flux. Recall that during the Second World War the state as well as the willing populace projected the image of oni onto the enemy camp, while the imperial Japanese army was acting like oni in various Asian countries, a prime example being the atrocities of Nanking committed in 1937. Who the oni is and who labels one an oni is a matter of perspective, and a blurred perspective at that. It remains a perpetual question.

The carnivalesque flux that characterizes the dichotomy of self and other extends as well to the dichotomy of natural and supernatural. As we have seen, this is indeed a complex relationship since it functions not only on a spiritual level but a spatial one as well. Thus we witness how Michizane is promoted from oni to kami because of abundant worship by the imperial household. We witness the spatial side of the equation in the public space that Michizane occupies nationwide vis-à-vis the Kitano Shrine dedicated in his honor, with numerous branch shrines all over Japan. We have also seen how this same interrelationship attends the Shuten Dōji stories. Recall that Shuten Dōji's severed head is said to be stored in Uji no hōzō. Shuten Dōji's head, physically present in the Fujiwara family's treasure house signifies the Fujiwara's high status as well as the regeneration of imperial authority in the Heian capital as carnivalesque ambivalence dictates. Shuten Dōji's violent death by the hands of the famous warriors, especially Minamoto no Raikō, gives material reward to the involved characters but also leads to the rise of the warriors' status—the severed head that so symbolizes Fujiwara power is won by Raikō, not the regent. Thus, even symbolically, the demise of Shuten Dōji influences events in the public arena.

If Shuten Dōji is a formidable force to threaten the lives of people in Heian capital, so then is Uji no hashihime who indiscriminately kidnaps and kills men and women of the capital. Yet in comparison to male oni, female oni such as Uji no hashihime as described in *Heike monogatari* occupy a private as opposed to a public space. This may be understandable when we consider the Japanese political landscape of that time. Women rarely publicly participated in government affairs—their political machinations were often concocted in private and executed by male relatives. In the Heian polygamous society and the societies of the ensuing periods it was permitted and common for a man to have concubines in addition to a legal wife. While women in this period were taught not to be jealous when their husbands had mistresses, a woman's anger, jealousy, and resentment were directed nevertheless to her husband and his mistresses. The fierce female oni are often born out of jealousy, misery, and anger. Juxtapose these “private” emotions with the more public emotions that characterize men turned into oni by thwarted political ambitions. One might also note that in the private sphere, while women are turned into oni because of thwarted *love*, it is thwarted *lust* that turns men to demons, so even in the private sphere these matters are to some significant degree gendered. It can also be argued that oni, both male and female, act to balance gender relations. The possibility that a woman will be made monstrous by her jealousy acts to curb her emotional response to her philandering husband. The existence of ferocious female oni in turn becomes a warning against a man's amorous behavior. Thus, Uji no hashihime is utterly marginalized by her lover and her jealousy and angst turn her into a living oni.

As we see throughout this survey of Japanese literature, one noticeable common denominator of oni is the stigma of “other” that they seem to have carried about them from the start. We have seen this otherness transacted in many ways throughout this book so it is perhaps proper as we draw our conclusions to revisit some of the socio-cultural ramifications this otherness implies. The other represents those marginalized individuals or groups who, either voluntarily or because of force, are partially or entirely excluded from participation in the political, historical, and cultural affairs of hegemonic society. People's reactions to this otherness range from avoidance, ostracism, or complete subjugation to total elimination. When occasionally oni are welcomed as bringers of prosperity, they are still expected to leave soon after giving the fortune and/or blessing. As seen in the oni character of the *kyōgen* play, *Setsubun*, the oni is expelled as soon as his treasures are obtained.

We have seen how those of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds and/or customs are frequently branded oni. Recall that yamauba is categorized as an oni-woman for very similar reasons. Yamauba, living in the mountains, are said to eat unsuspecting passers-by. But some of them, as we have seen, are simply old women disenfranchised by the mainstream villagers of the flatland. With nowhere else to go, they are forced to live in the mountains. As aged humans, they become viewed as unsightly (yet another form of marginalization), further compelling them to avoid the public space. That negative visual image of yamauba in the medieval period, however, is transformed to an exotic, beautiful nymph-like woman full of sexuality in the hands of skilled ukiyo-e artists and Kabuki performers. A young and beautiful yamauba becomes an object of the “gaze” in the Early Modern period. Again, they bring material profit to the sellers/authors/creators.

Interestingly, yamauba may still exist in contemporary society. In 1979, an urban legend known as “kuchisake onna” (a slit-mouthed woman) swept all over Japan. “Kuchisake onna” was a young woman who covered her mouth with a surgical mask. She asked an unsuspecting person a question, “Am I beautiful?” The usual response would be positive. Then she took off the mask, revealing her slit-mouth, and asked the same question again. If the response was positive, the person (as well as the kuchisake onna) was said to rest in peace. But if the person screamed with fear and ran away, she chased after him or her, leading to the victim’s tragic end. The inception of “kuchisake onna” was deep in the mountains of Gifu prefecture (Komatsu Kazuhiko, *Shinpen oni no tamatebako* 254–255), and some scholars, including Miyata Noboru and Komatsu Kazuhiko, consider “kuchisake onna” a type of yamauba (Miyata, *Yōkai no minzokugaku* 19–22).¹

Young yet unique-looking yamauba then popped up some years ago among high school-aged girls. They painted their faces brown, brushed their lips white, penciled their eyes white, and had disheveled hair dyed gold or silver. These girls were labeled “yamamba” by the Japanese masses and mainstream media; columnist Izumi Asato believes that it was probably some magazine’s editorial staff (rather than the girls themselves) that first labeled them “yamamba.” He writes that the teenage girls could not possibly have known that the word originated in a Noh play, let alone how to write its kanji, 山姥. Their fashion was considered “heretical” (Izumi 5). Indeed, these girls had quite a distinct appearance. They were not old women but

1 For an insightful discussion on “kuchisake onna,” see Foster, 182–203.

teenagers who looked and behaved differently from established societal, cultural, and religious norms. Their youth combined with their unusual appearance certainly portrayed quaintness, and at the same time, some sort of exotic sensuality. Just as in old times, these contemporary yamauba had white hair, but they could also be young and exotic. A tradition of yamauba thus continues in our modern age. The young and exotic yamamba seem to beg to see and to be seen.

As society becomes more secular and religion's influence recedes, the oni's power and influence wane. With the development of mass printing in the early modern period, people looked at oni in a book form. Oni thus became something catchable, i.e., a reader could see and examine them in an encyclopedia format. What was once awesome and terrifying became an entertainment and commodity in urban areas. In some cases, oni became a convenient souvenir of travel—like *oni no nenbutsu*. The commoditification of early modern times continues and has been accelerated in the present. In the contemporary landscape, it is not what oni will do to us humans, but what we humans can make out of them. This works on two valences: one is the idea of oni as a pure commodity seen solely for their entertainment value and the financial gains they produce for those who manipulate and control their imagery (a modern twist on oni as harbingers of wealth). The other, which is intricately intertwined with the first, is modern people's curiosity in trying to understand what oni are and why oni do what they do. A modern trend treats oni as an extension of the human psyche, and tries to understand their motivation—often from the oni's point of view. A good example, as we have seen, is the depiction of oni in popular fiction series like *Onmyōji*. In the present age, people now enjoy oni as entertainment, frightening but not threatening to their daily lives. People can open and close the doors to their living spaces to oni just as they open or close their books and/or turn on and off their television sets and video games.

In the realm of virtual reality, oni may take central stage as in the case of cute and sexy Lum in *Urusei yatsura* or righteous Shutendō Jirō in (Nagai Gō's) *Shuten Dōji*. But in many cases, oni have become just one of many *yōkai*, and appear on the screen with some modern-day additives to the original images, whether *tsuchigumo* or *yasha*. The images are evolutionary rather than set in stone. Oni have always been known for their shape-shifting power, and continue to morph into different shapes with new trappings. Indeed, they could appear as hybrids with western devils and succeed, as in *Devilman*.



Figure 8. Oni on the Kamaishi Line, part of East Japan Railway Company's July through September 2007 campaign, titled "Another Japan North East North: Aomori, Iwate, and Akita," to attract more passengers and tourists to northern Japan. Photo by the author.

Outside the world of virtual reality, oni are involved in people's lives and society. In fact, the oni's involvement in bringing some profit to society is exemplified in the movement of *machi-okoshi* (town revitalisation) in such towns as Ōe-machi in Kyoto. Ōe-machi is a town at the foot of Mt. Ōe, known for being the setting of the legend of Shuten Dōji. Once rich with rice, wood, and copper, Ōe-machi is now facing a depopulation crisis. Currently 6,000 people live there and many of those residents are elderly. In attempts to ward off its own extinction, the townspeople decided to make the town rich and comfortable again, employing the theme of the oni legend by "borrowing the strong power of oni to bring happiness" (Nihon no oni kōryū hakubutsukan). The area is rich in oni-related legends and sites and the townspeople decided to capitalize on this. The town has a museum called Nihon no oni kōryū hakubutsukan (The Japanese Oni Exchange Museum), and hopes to be a Mecca of oni in Japan to attract many tourists.

Similarly, there is another oni museum (*Oni no yakata*) in Kitakami City of Iwate Prefecture. Opened in 1994, the municipal museum collects and exhibits materials concerning the oni. The museum was founded as a symbol of the project “to create a town—[former] Waga town, now part of Kitakami City—for oni and peace” to revitalize the town. The museum is, however, located relatively far from the city; it was built where a traditional prayer dance, *oni kenbai*, was born and subsequently transmitted to the people of the surrounding area. The bus runs only four times a day, and it looks sadly isolated. For the people of Kitakami city though, “oni are ancestors who protect the townspeople and good deities who bring happiness” (Kitakami shiritsu oni no yakata 3). The hope is that the oni will become a financial resource, and the locals will preserve folk traditions and pursue the knowledge of oni’s roots.

Baba Akiko writes that “in and after the early modern period, oni, as represented on the night of *setsubun*, have been depicted as beings easily chased away by mere beans” (288). But oni are tenacious, flexible, and seemingly ever transmutable. Through the hands of artists, writers, and commercial interests, oni have survived and transformed into more human-like and commercially profitable entities. Currently, one can find a wide array of oni in the popular media—from the gentle and cute to the sexual and grotesque. The oni’s transformation is highly reflective of and inextricably intertwined with Japan’s own history and societal change. Still the oni’s cannibalism, powers of transformation, enmity towards a central authority, isolation, ostracization because of different customs, ability to emit lightning, as well as their positive attributes (as sources of treasure or bringers of wealth) remain ever-present as the beings’ major features. Some aspects of oni may be more emphasized than others to facilitate their use as art objects or political weapons, but whatever they mean, the oni have been an important part of the Japanese psyche for well over a thousand years.