



Japanese Yokai:

Creatures from Japanese mythology

Aims

- To introduce Shinto, consider this way of life for Japanese people and think about animism.
- Introduce some of the many (millions) of yokai.
- Consider their depiction past and present.

Shinto – in brief

Main religion of Japan.

Nature based religion.

Polytheistic - ?8 million kami.

It revolves around Kami – gods or spirits.

It believes that spirit exists in **ALL** things.

Worshipped at kamidana – household shrines, family shrines and public shrines.

At public shrines the torii gate both marks where the realm of Shinto kami begins and separates it from the secular world.



Shinto – in brief

In Shinto, humans are thought to be fundamentally good, and evil is believed to be caused by evil spirits. Consequently, the purpose of most Shinto rituals is to keep away evil spirits by purification, prayers and offerings to the kami.

Shinto seeks to cultivate and ensure a harmonious relationship between humans and the kami and thus with the natural world.

A key theme in Shinto is the importance of avoiding kegare ("pollution" or "impurity"), while ensuring purity.

Rites of purification are conducted so as to restore an individual to "spiritual" health and render them useful to society.

Divination is the focus of many Shinto rituals

Etiquette for visiting a Shrine



Itsukushima

- Pause at Torii gate, take a bow and start walking with your left foot.
- Cleanse yourself at the Temizuya
 - Hold the ladle in your right hand and scope water.
 - Wash left hand swap hands and wash right hand.
 - Take ladle again with right hand and pour a bit of water into your left hand – rinse your mouth with this.
 - Rinse left hand with a bit of water.
 - Hold ladle upright so the water drips down the handle
 - Replace ladle on the temizuya.



- Approach the haiden
 - If there is a bell, ring it
 - Bow twice, clap twice, bow once.
 - Throw money in the offering box
 - Bow twice, clap twice.
 - Make your prayer – quietly.
 - Bow once



Animism

- Simply, it is the belief that all objects, animate or inanimate, have a “spiritual essence”.
- Most common thread of indigenous religions.
- Can also describe the behavior towards different things (people, animals, plants, etc.).
- Sacred objects/beings that act as an emblem of a group of people are referred to as totems.

Kami



Kami are often associated with a specific place, often one that is noted as a prominent feature in the landscape such as a waterfall, volcano, large rock, or distinctive tree.

Others have many different shrines dotted throughout Japan.

Kami are believed to be capable of both benevolent and destructive deeds. Kami that are not given gratitude become vengeful demons called aragami.

All kami have a **different** guardianship or duty to the people around them.

Humans can become kami – alive or dead.

Yokai – a history

- The oldest recorded histories of Japan go back to the 8th century and contain the creation myths and legendary prehistory of Japan, including some yokai.
- During the Edo period (1603-1868), there was an unprecedented flourishing of culture and art in Japan. Ghost stories and stories about monsters and strange phenomena from all over Japan experienced a huge surge in popularity.
- Yokai fell out of popularity during the Meiji restoration (1868), when Japan rapidly modernized its society and culture. They were all but abandoned as a relic of the past.
- Today, the influence of yokai can again be seen in all aspects of Japanese culture, from manga, to video games, brand labels, and even on Japanese currency.

Yokai

Yokai are strange and supernatural creatures from Japanese folklore. They live in the Spirit world and the material world. They can have physical form and non physical form. Yokai includes ghosts, gods (*kami*), transformed humans and animals (*bakemono*), spirit possession (*tsukimono*), urban legends, and other strange phenomena.

Japanese folklore is an amalgamation of different traditions, with a foundation in the folk religions of isolated tribes living on the Japanese isles e.g. the ainu. These traditions were modified by Shinto and later Buddhism, incorporating elements from Chinese and Indian folklore as well. Different areas have different folk tales and yokai.

In mythology, yokai were created by the creator kami **Izanagi** at the beginning of time.

Yokai

- Live in all environments.
- Like the fair folk, the Yokai have individual personalities.
- Historically generally regarded as malicious (evil) creatures. Believed to be able to do great harm as well as great favours to humans, including possessing them.
- The more powerful Yokai can pass through physical and non physical states according to their will.
- Lots of different kinds. No exact number.
- Animals and humans can turn into Yokai with great age (wisdom, knowledge and power may also be factors).

Elementals

Elements	Elementals
Earth	Kitsune, Bakeneko, Inugami, Komainu
Water	Amabie, Kappa, Ningyo
Fire	Oni
Air	Tengu, Onibi, Chabukuro

Bakeneko & Nekomata

- Two types of cat-like yokai.
- Bakeneko only has one tail, nekomata has two.
- Can take on a demonic form
- There are localised folk tales of cats turning into Yokai at 12-13 yrs and that cats raised for seven years or longer will kill the one that raised it. There are also many regions where, due to this superstition, people decided in advance for how many years they would raise a cat.
- Depending on the area, there are stories in which cats that were brutally killed by humans would become *bakeneko* and curse that human.
- *Bakeneko* stories are not only about aged cats, but also sometimes about revenge against cruel humans. This also seems to be the case for other animals.



Bakeneko & Nekomata

- In the Edo period (1603–1867), there was a folk belief that cats with long tails like snakes could bewitch people. Cats with long tails were disliked, and there was a custom of cutting their tails.
- It is speculated that this is the reason that there are so many cats in Japan with short tails now, natural selection having favored those with short tails.

Inugami



- Dog spirit
- A type of familiar spirit, resembling, and usually originating from, a dog.
- They most commonly carry out vengeance or act as guardians on behalf of the inugami-mochi.
- Inugami are extremely powerful and capable of existing independently, as well as turning on their "owners" and even possessing humans.
- In the Oki Islands, the inugami takes on the function that the Kitsune holds in many other regions of Japan. It is believed that an inugami-mochi will be blessed with great fortune and success, and that favors granted by them will be returned with interest.

Komainu

Guardian of the place at temples and shrines. They act like watchdogs, guarding gates and doorways and preventing the wicked from entering. They live together in male-female pairs and are always found together.



In their pairs, the female usually guards those living inside, while the male guards the structure itself. The pairs are usually carved in two poses: one with mouth open in a roaring position, and one with mouth closed. Symbolically, these creatures represent yin and yang, or death and life.

Foxes

As well as silver, black, arctic and other red species, Japan is home to two unique subspecies of fox:

- Ezo Red Fox – mainly found in Hokkaido (north Island).



- Japanese Red Fox



Kitsune

- Fox (some depicted with nine-tails – others not).
- One belief is that the more tails they had the older, wiser and more powerful they were thought to be.
- So it may be assumed that tails are acquired over time.
- The fox with all nine tails being equivalent in knowledge and power to a Shinto God (Kami). Offerings are often made to nine-tailed foxes.
- On acquiring ninth tail the fur turns white or gold and senses increase in strength.



Kitsune

- Depicted as very intelligent being.
- Can shapeshift into human form.
- Closely associated with goddess Inari – kami of fertility, rice and agriculture.
- Often act as guardian of the place for Inari Shrines.
- Believed to be messengers to Inari – often depicted with scrolls in mouth.
- Mixed bag – some depicted as friends and faithful guardians of humans other tales talk of cunning tricksters.
- During Edo period (1603 – 1868), deep superstition surrounded many animals including foxes and they were labelled the witch animals.



Kitsune

There are thirteen types of Kitsune in Japanese mythology, each with associated element:

- *Tengoku* (Heaven, Celestial, Light, Prime)
- *Kukan* (Void or Dark)
- *Kaze* (Wind)
- *Seishin* (Spirit)
- *Kasai* (Fire)
- *Chikyu* (Earth)
- *Kawa* (River)
- *Umi* (Ocean, Sea)
- *Yama* (Mountain)
- *Mori* (Forest, Woods)
- *Sanda* (Thunder)
- *Jikan* (Time)
- *Ongaku* (Music, Sound)

Ningyo (mermaid)



<https://yokai.fandom.com/wiki/Ningyo>

- Ningyo more closely resemble fish than humans, with a varying level of human-like features, ranging from just an ugly, deformed fish-like face, to an entire human torso with long, bony fingers and sharp claws.
- They can range in size from the size of a human child to the size of a large seal.
- Ningyo sightings go back to the earliest written histories of Japan. The first recorded mermaid sightings date back to 619 CE.
- The flesh of a ningyo is believed to grant eternal life and youth to those who eat it, and thus it is the subject of many folk tales. However, the Ningyo can place a powerful curse on humans who try to wound or capture them, and some legends tell of entire towns that were swallowed by earthquakes or tidal waves after a foolish fisherman brought home a ningyo in one of his catches.

Amabie /amabiko

- Legendary Japanese mermaid or merman with three legs, who allegedly emerges from the sea and prophesies either an abundant harvest or an epidemic.
- Depicted as ape-like, bird-like, or torso-less, and usually 3-legged.
- Unsurprising revival recently due to COVID-19.



Kappa

- Water sprite found in rivers and ponds.
- Particularly noted in Tono region (north main island).
- Typically depicted as green, human-like beings with webbed hands and feet and a turtle-like shell on their backs.
- A depression on its head, called its "dish" (*sara*), retains water, and if this is damaged or its liquid is lost (either through spilling or drying up), the kappa is severely weakened.
- Mischievous troublemakers or trickster figures.
- Favourite food – cucumber. Some people put a slice of cucumber which has a piece of paper with a name of a family member they want protecting on it. They float this on the river or pond.



Kappa

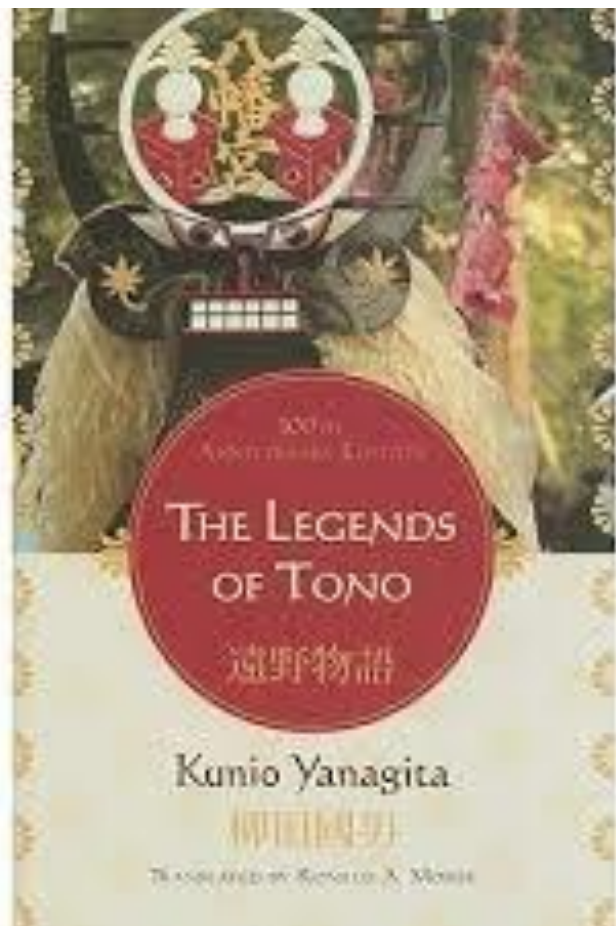
- Kappas have been blamed for drownings in rivers and it is often said that they lure or trick humans to rivers to drown them and pull down the legs of swimmers.
- They are also said to victimise animals, esp. horses and cows.
- Signs can be seen by bodies of water in Japan warning people of the dangers of the Kappa.



Kappa

- It was believed that there were a few means of escape if one was confronted by a *kappa*.
- *But Kappa* are obsessed with politeness, so if a person makes a deep bow, it will return the gesture. This results in the kappa spilling the water held in the "dish" (*sara*) on its head, rendering it unable to leave the bowing position until the plate is refilled with water from the river in which it lives.
- If a person refills it, the *kappa* will serve that person for all eternity.
- A similar weakness of the *kappa* involves its arms, which can easily be pulled from its body. If an arm is detached, the *kappa* will perform favors or share knowledge in exchange for its return.
- Once befriended, *kappa* may perform any number of tasks for human beings, such as helping farmers irrigate their land. Sometimes, they bring fresh fish, which is regarded as a mark of good fortune for the family that receives it. They are also highly knowledgeable about medicine, and legend states that they taught the art of bone setting to human beings.

The Legends of Tono



Oni

Huge ogre like demon. Female demons called kijo.

Believed to be born when a truly evil person dies. Although it is possible to become an oni whilst still living.

Folklore tells the story of Shuten Doji.

Live in caves, abandoned fortresses, mountains.

Diet of humans, livestock and alcohol.

Originally terrifying figures but more recently seen as a good luck charm.

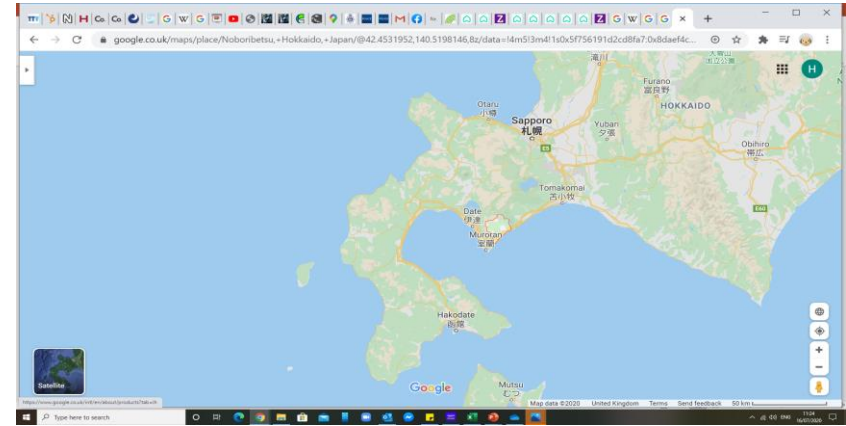
Oni masks are now used to scare away evil spirits.



Jigokudani(Hell Valley)



Valley which displays hot steam vents, sulfurous streams and other volcanic activity. Surface areas of lake 50c some are hotter.



Chabukuro



- Originating in the Kochi prefecture (Tokushima Island).
- Closely resembles the common domestic teabag. It is reported to float along dark roads, as if suspended in the air by an invisible string, and is known to spread disease by touch or by ingestion. It can often be much larger than its domestic namesake.
- In addition to appearing as a suspended apparition, Chabukuro is reported to drop from the sky, or to be found floating in streams and rivers.
- One tale tells of how another yōkai dropped Chabukuro near graves in order to spread disease to mourners.

Onibi (similar to will-o'-the-wisp)



- Live in grasslands, forests, watersides, graveyards.
- Diet of life energy
- Small balls of flame, usually blue or blue-white (red and yellow onibi are less common), and appear in groups of twenty to thirty orbs.
- Living creatures that draw too close are swarmed by dozens of orbs, which drain away the life force from their victims.

Tengu



- Early depictions of tengu show them as kite-like beings who can take a human-like form, often retaining avian wings, head or beak.
- The earliest *tengu* were pictured with beaks, but this feature has often been humanized as an unnaturally long nose, which today is widely considered the tengu's defining characteristic in the popular imagination.
- Buddhism long held that the *tengu* were disruptive demons and harbingers of war.
- Their image gradually softened into one of protective, if still dangerous, spirits of the mountains and forests.
- *Tengu* are associated with the ascetic practice known as Shugendō, and they are usually depicted in the distinctive garb of its followers, the *yamabushi*.

Yokai can take the form of objects in human life

- Tsukumogami (c. 10th Century) are inanimate objects that, once they have served their owner/s for 100 years, receive a soul and therefore become alive and self-aware.
- They are usually harmless, though they tend to play small pranks. Still, they have the capacity to get angry and can group up to take revenge against those who threw them away or didn't treat them well. For this reason, jinja ceremonies are performed in Japan to console broken and/or unusable objects.

Karakasa-obake



- Transformations of Chinese-style oiled-paper umbrellas.
- They have a single large eye, a long, protruding tongue, and either one or two legs upon which they hop around wildly.
- Karakasa are not particularly fearsome as far as yōkai go.
- Their favorite method of surprising humans is to sneak up on them and deliver a large, oily lick with their enormous tongues.
- Caution is advised, however. There are other umbrella tsukumogami which are dangerous to humans, and care should be taken not to confuse them with this more playful spirit.

Akubōzu

From Akita Prefecture and Iwate Prefecture.



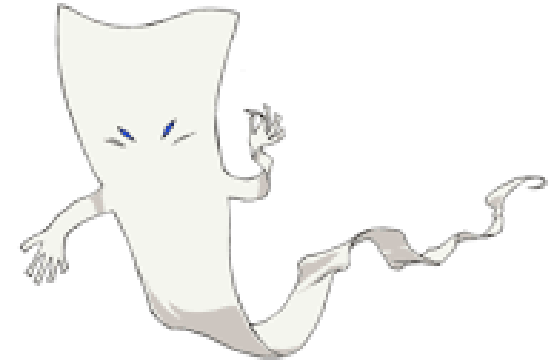
?Genie

Said to live in the ash of the hearth and appear when the ash is played with.

In Iwate, those who play with the ashes of the furnace are said to be drawn into the ashes by a monster called "Amanesaku" and eaten.

Ittan-Momen

- The Ittan-Momen is the tsukumogami form of a possessed roll of cotton, that flies through the night often attacking people and trying to smother them by wrapping itself around their faces or mouths.
- From the Kagoshima Osumi district (southern tip of south island).



Chōchin-Obake

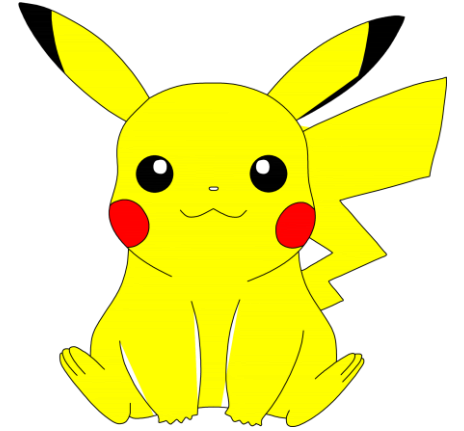
- The Chōchin-Obake is a possessed chochin lantern that comes alive after 100 years of service.
- It usually has one eye and a long tongue protruding from a hole in the lantern acting as the spirit's mouth.
- It rarely causes physical harm, preferring simply to surprise and scare humans, laughing and rolling its large tongue and big eyes at guests in the home.



<https://yokai.fandom.com/>

Anime and Manga

Most recently yokai has enjoyed a resurgence in popularity through anime and manga.



Anime – Hand drawn and computer animation from Japan. Often characterized by colorful graphics, vibrant characters and fantastical themes.

Manga – Comics or graphic novels originating in Japan

