

PART I Yōkai Culture



# 1 Introducing Yōkai

About fifteen years ago, I lived for a time in a small coastal village in rural Japan, where I was researching a local festival. I rented a rickety old wooden house literally a stone's throw from the ocean. Until a few months earlier, a family had lived there, and a lot of their belongings were still in the house: old furniture, pots and pans, kitchen utensils, drawers overflowing with clothes. A single Japanese-style room with worn tatami flooring served as my living room and became my bedroom when I unfolded my futon at night. There was a television in one corner and a Buddhist altar in another, and high on the wall was a row of framed black-and-white portraits of men and women looking down at me with severe expressions. These were the ancestors of the family who owned the house.

I'm not sure why the family had left. I rented the house from a distant relative of the owners, a kind old woman who lived nearby and saw that I was comfortable during my stay. And for the most part I was. I would fall asleep to the endless singsong of the waves. A few times, in the middle of the night, I awoke to rustling sounds in my tiny kitchen: a stray cat had snuck in through a hole in the floor and was rummaging around for scraps of food. And once or twice, when a storm blew in from the ocean, I could hear waves crashing on the beach with an eerie and purposeful violence.

The wind would shriek through the outer walls of the house and rattle the flimsy shoji doors inside.

But once, something really strange happened. I had been out late, drinking with friends and discussing the festival. When I got home around midnight, I diligently wrote up the day's events in my field notes and then laid out my futon. I promptly fell into a deep sleep.

When I opened my eyes, the room was glowing faintly. The framed photos of the ancestors glinted. It was dawn, that deep, quiet time of transition from darkness to light, from night to day. I wondered why I had woken up so suddenly and so early. Perhaps the cat had snuck into my kitchen again.

But then I heard voices—a woman, speaking quietly but with authority, and a man responding. I sat up wide awake now and looked around.

The voices were coming from the television. I watched the end of a weather report and the beginning of the morning news. There was nothing particularly scary about this until I started to wonder why the television was on in the first place. The remote control was on a table, a few feet from my futon, so it is unlikely I had turned it on accidentally while sleeping. Had I left it on the previous night? Perhaps I had been drunker than I thought, but I had no recollection of watching TV. Could there have been a weird electrical surge? Was something like that possible? Or perhaps it was a sign, some kind of message. Maybe somebody was trying to tell me something. I watched the news carefully, but could not figure out what message was being conveyed to me, other than the fact that the world was in its usual turmoil.

Eventually, I turned the television off and went back to sleep for another hour or two. Later that day, I mentioned the experience to several of my friends in the village. They had no explanation.

#### YŌKAI, FOLKLORE, AND THIS BOOK

I begin with this inconclusive story, a mundane modern mystery, because it raises the simple question of how we interpret our world. In particular, how do we explain occurrences that don't easily fit our everyday understandings of the way things work? When we ask who or what turned on the television, we are intimating that there is a living being or animated

force interacting with us even though we cannot see it. We may visualize this force as a monster or a spirit or a ghost or a shape-shifting animal. In Japan such a force, and the form it takes, is often called a *yōkai*.

And *yōkai*, notoriously, take many different forms. They are commonly associated with folklore, and with small villages or old cities or deserted mountain passes, but they have also long populated literature and visual imagery. Today they are found throughout Japanese anime, manga, video games, movies, and role-playing games. Particularly in these latter formats, they have crossed oceans and continents to become part of popular culture in countries far from Japan. So what is a *yōkai*? For now, let us just say that a *yōkai* is a weird or mysterious creature, a monster or fantastic being, a spirit or a sprite. As this book will show, however, *yōkai* are ultimately more complicated and more interesting than these simple characterizations suggest. *Yōkai* may emerge from questions such as who turned on the television when nobody was around, but from there they take us on a kaleidoscopic journey through history and culture.

### *About This Book*

One common characteristic of *yōkai* is their liminality, or “in-betweenness.” They are creatures of the borderlands, living on the edge of town, or in the mountains between villages, or in the eddies of a river running between two rice fields. They often appear at twilight, that gray time when the familiar seems strange and faces become indistinguishable. They haunt bridges and tunnels, entranceways and thresholds. They lurk at crossroads.

It is appropriate that this book about *yōkai* also fits somewhere *in between*. While it is based on years of academic research and fieldwork, it is not intended only for scholars of Japan or experts on supernatural folklore. I hope it will contribute to their discussions, of course; but more important, I hope anybody with even a passing curiosity about these subjects will find it of interest. I have tried to present my ideas as clearly as possible, with little technical language; at the same time, I have strived to do justice to the depth and complexity of the topic.

The book, then, occupies a space between the academic and the popular, a position, in fact, similar to that of many books written about *yōkai*, and

other subjects, in Japan. While Japan has a long tradition of publishing highly academic monographs with small print runs, many scholarly books—particularly about popular subjects such as *yōkai*—are also published by commercial presses and available at bookstores throughout the country. A diverse, well-educated public regularly consumes serious works on history, archaeology, folklore, media, literature, religion, and even philosophy.

This book is also situated at a crossroads between cultures. One objective is to introduce Japanese *yōkai* and Japanese scholarship on the subject to an English-language readership. In the West over the last several decades, the monstrous has increasingly become a subject of scholarly and popular fascination.<sup>1</sup> While much of the writing on these topics is insightful, rarely is there any mention of Japanese monsters. But as will become apparent in the pages that follow, in Japan the study of the monstrous—of *yōkai*—has long been a vibrant field. Like much other work within the humanities, *yōkai* research in Japanese simply has not been translated into English. This book is by no means a translation, but it is informed by rich Japanese research on the topic, which I hope to make accessible to people studying the monsters of other cultures. At the same time, I give all this my own particular interpretation and analysis, adding my voice to the conversation on these subjects.

Serious research on *yōkai* in English and other languages may be limited, but *yōkai* themselves are becoming more and more familiar to people in countries outside of Japan. Part and parcel of Japan's so-called soft power, these strange creatures have started to invade the rest of the world. For many of my students in the United States, for example, the terms *yōkai* and *Japanese folklore* are practically synonymous; they have encountered *kappa* or *kitsune* or *tengu* in manga and anime, films and video games, usually in English translation. This exposure inspires them to delve further into folklore, to find the “origins” of the *yōkai* of popular culture that they have come to love. And that is another purpose of this book, to provide some folkloric grounding for *yōkai* they might encounter. Although it is often impossible to trace the roots of particular creatures, I can offer a sense of the diverse influences and complex cultural histories that breathe life into them.

It will become clear, I think, that there has always been a great deal of interaction between *yōkai* in folklore, literature, art, manga, and so on,

and it is meaningless to draw sharp distinctions between these forms of communication. But for the most part, I leave analysis of the most contemporary popular-culture appearances of yōkai to readers—who are probably more familiar with these versions than I am. I also do not explicitly treat Western-born manifestations of yōkai, such as English-language manga and fan fiction. My own research has focused on yōkai as they are expressed *in* Japan; I hope those with interests located elsewhere will build on what I present here or use it for comparative purposes.

With all this in mind, I have divided the text into two parts. Part 1, “Yōkai Culture,” provides a cultural history of yōkai folklore and yōkai studies and explores some of the concepts that inform how yōkai and humans interact. Part 2, “Yōkai Codex,” is a bestiary, a compendium of various yōkai, that helps illustrate many of the concepts discussed in part 1. These two parts are really interdependent—yōkai discussed in part 2 appear in part 1, and texts mentioned in part 1 show up in part 2. Getting the full picture may require flipping back and forth.

“Yōkai Culture” is divided into three chapters, each with several sections. Because there is a lot of information in each of these chapters, the sections are short and each one includes a number of subheadings. The current chapter presents key concepts related to yōkai and their study. I explain a little about folklore in general and then trace the words that historically have been used for yōkai. Finally, I explore some of the ways we can define yōkai and think about how they come into existence.

Chapter 2, “Shape-Shifting History,” introduces the big names—both people and texts—through which we know about yōkai today. The simple premise of this chapter is that yōkai would not exist without the human beings who told of them, studied them, wrote about them, and in some cases tried to subdue them. Yōkai have played an important role, often in the shadows, as Japan developed from one period to the next. This chapter is divided into four sections, each dealing with a particular historical era.

Chapter 3, “Yōkai Practice/Yōkai Theory,” has two sections. The first provides a brief journey through what I call the “yōkai culture network”—a web of people who are closely involved with the production of yōkai knowledge today. And the final section suggests further approaches to understanding yōkai in the abstract and to exploring their meanings within a larger global context.

Part 2, “Yōkai Codex,” is designed like a small encyclopedia. One way people have commonly dealt with yōkai is by labeling, organizing, and classifying them. Perhaps this is because yōkai are so varied and plentiful: maybe the only way to really define them is by listing examples. So this part is a bestiary with information about selected yōkai: the list is long but really only scratches the surface, because, as I argue throughout the book, yōkai are diverse and abundant and always changing or being reborn. In the codex, I have tried to include all the best-known creatures, as well as a smattering of more obscure ones, but inevitably many have been left out. This bestiary is designed for easy sampling and for easily looking up particular yōkai, but it can also be read straight through, which may reveal surprising connections between different creatures.

### *Researching Yōkai*

Yōkai dwell in the contact zone between fact and fiction, between belief and doubt. They inhabit a realm of narrative in which laws of nature are challenged. And yōkai themselves are always changing, from place to place and generation to generation. Because of this mutability, broad generalizations or simplistic statements about them are tempting. With something so elusive and shape-shifting, how can anybody say you are wrong? How do we prove anything about these creatures?

Indeed, one is faced with a problem when writing about yōkai: unlike historical figures, political events, or economic changes, yōkai rarely make it into the authoritative public record. They slip through the cracks of official history. They don’t belong to anybody. Rather, they are a kind of communal intellectual property: anybody can play with them, change them, believe in them, and make new versions of them to be sent out into the world. Of course, these are all reasons why yōkai are deeply revealing. They are a part of culture that tends to be dismissed as “just folklore.” So how do you study something that emerges anonymously, exists in multiple versions, and circulates widely over time and space? What do you do when there is no *original*? How do you research yōkai?

*A young woman would walk up to people on the street. She was attractive, but she wore a large white surgical mask over her mouth. She would tap a stranger on the shoulder and ask, “Am I pretty?” Then she would*

*remove the mask. Her mouth was slit at the corners all the way up to her ears. “Even like this?”*

This is a legend I heard one day from a Japanese friend. She had heard it as a child and recalled being afraid to walk home from school alone. This frightening female yōkai came to be known as the *kuchi-sake-onna*, or the “slit-mouthed woman,” and for a few months back in 1979 the very thought of her terrified children throughout much of Japan. In the codex, I have a longer entry on the *kuchi-sake-onna*, but I mention her now because, as a modern urban yōkai, she serves as a good example of how one goes about researching yōkai in general.

In my experience there are three general approaches, each one informing the others. First there is ethnography: talking with people, asking them about yōkai they grew up with or encountered in their communities, their hometowns, their apartment buildings, or even in manga and anime. That is how I first learned of the *kuchi-sake-onna*—and then I followed up by asking almost everybody I met for their versions of the legend and memories of what it had meant to them. Sometimes this sort of research can be easy: you just hang out in a bar and chat with customers. But it can also require contacting a village historian, formally interviewing a publisher or novelist, or making an appointment at a shrine to talk with the priest. It can entail participating in a public festival or getting permission to attend a ritual or private ceremony. In some cases, this kind of research requires living in a community for a long time and gradually learning about people’s everyday lives.

A complementary form of research is archival—digging through primary sources. This might mean reading old texts written in Sino-Japanese *kanbun* or examining Edo-period images or illustrated books. It can also entail reading popular magazines or analyzing novels or contemporary manga and anime. These materials can be found in research libraries or museums, and sometimes in local communities or private households. The *kuchi-sake-onna*, for example, did not appear in any of the official historical documents I looked at, but I found dozens of references to her when I combed through popular magazines and tabloids from 1979 and the early 1980s; I also came upon all sorts of other data that helped me understand what she might have meant to people at that time. I found most of these sources in archives in Tokyo, but I also got some firsthand

information from a record producer whose company had once recorded a song about the kuchi-sake-onna.

And finally, in Japan there has already been a great deal of research on yōkai. Fortunately, highly trained scholars have sorted through difficult old texts, sometimes translating them into modern Japanese. They have looked through images, and woodblock prints, and community records and tracked down the yōkai lurking there. Japanese scholarship on monsterdom is perhaps the most active in the world. This means there are a great many secondary sources—dictionaries, anthologies, collected art, and documents, as well as insightful analyses. University professors in Japan, in fact, have written numerous works on yōkai, and today several freelance writers make a living by writing and lecturing about yōkai. The legend of the kuchi-sake-onna is recounted in a number of contemporary legend collections; there is at least one doctoral dissertation discussing her; and several scholars have written about how she links to different female yōkai from earlier periods or reflects socio-cultural concerns. I did not always agree with the analyses I read, of course, but they helped me think more deeply and develop my own interpretations.

As the kuchi-sake-onna example demonstrates, investigating yōkai entails a mix of all three of these approaches—ethnographic, archival, and secondary research. For the majority of yōkai in this book, I relied in part on archival materials and a great deal on the wealth of secondary scholarship available in Japan. I have also benefited immensely from getting to know some of the researchers personally; they have made suggestions, introduced me to primary materials, and engaged thoughtfully with my ideas and interpretations.

Throughout this book, I try to be as accurate as possible in my reporting and analysis. *Accuracy* may seem a strange word to use when talking about yōkai, but it is precisely because of their elusiveness that it is all the more important to note where the data and ideas come from. That is why I provide so many references and footnotes. Most sources, inevitably, are in Japanese, but whenever possible I also cite material in English, either translations or original research, so that English-language readers can know where to find more information. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Japanese-language sources are my own.

### *About Folklore*

The word *folklore* in English is bandied about relatively freely. It is a concept people tend to feel they understand—until they try to explain it. Folklore has actually always been difficult to define and indeed has changed a great deal since 1846, when the neologism *Folk-Lore* was introduced by William J. Thoms to describe “the manners, customs, observances, superstitions, ballads, proverbs, &c., of the olden time.”<sup>2</sup> All these things are still considered folklore, but the “&c.” (etc.), of course, is all but endless. It includes verbal folklore, everything from myth, legends, and folktales to jokes, anecdotes, memorates, and even slang. And material folklore—the making of things—can encompass the throwing of a ceramic pot to folding origami to baking a cake or carving a pumpkin. Another broad genre is customary folklore: rituals, festivals, and beliefs that are themselves often made up of, or expressed through, a combination of verbal and material culture. Think of a wedding, for instance, with its symbolic exchange of rings or other objects, formulaic utterance of vows, and eating of special foods.

One aspect of folklore that is often emphasized is *traditionality*—the idea that something has added value because of its association with the past (“the olden time,” as Thoms would say). But tradition, too, is tricky to define; I characterize it as referring to behaviors and beliefs that are infused with special meaning or value in the *present* because of a sense of continuity with the *past* and also with the *future*. Traditions are constantly changing, even though they retain (or seem to retain) some connection with the way they were performed in past years or by previous generations. And they are practiced in the present only because they have (or seem to have) some bearing on the future. Traditions, we might say, are creative continuity.

The process by which folklore operates is a kind of tug-of-war between two forces—the conservative pull of the past versus the immediate pull of present (and future) needs. Within this process there is also a contrast between the communal voice that has developed over the years and the innovative personal voice of the individual performer or participant. It is out of this tension between conservatism and dynamism that the folklore of the present is shaped and experienced.<sup>3</sup>

This pull between past and present is one of the forces in the creation and re-creation of yōkai through time. To a certain extent, this tug-of-war applies more or less to any process of creation—nothing is ever wholly new, and nothing is ever exactly the same as what came before. But one reason folklore is distinct from, say, fine art or a best-selling novel is that it tends to be unofficial and noninstitutional: folklore is not controlled by formal authorities, such as governments, schools, or established religious institutions. This is not to say that there is no overlap between folklore and these more official forms of organization, but the things we call folklore usually fly under the radar of these formal establishments. This is one reason folklore is able to change so easily—because nobody controls it.

Similarly, in principle, folklore is noncommercial. No author or designer or professional artist dictates what is correct or incorrect. Folklore does not *belong* to an individual creator or a single group—it belongs to all the people who engage with it.<sup>4</sup> Of course, none of this is cut-and-dried: these are not definitions as much as they are tendencies or orientations. In reality, as yōkai demonstrate, there has always been a dynamic and symbiotic relationship between folklore and commercial and popular culture. But in general, folklore is free to travel and reproduce—or rather, people can freely reproduce and reinvent folklore, transmitting it from person to person across time and space. And this is why any “single” item of folklore tends to have multiple versions and variants. As we will see, almost every type of yōkai exists in more than one place at a given time (and more than one time in a given place). Yōkai are characterized by these local and historical versions: they are the same but different wherever and whenever you find them.

And where do we find the yōkai of folklore? Often they reside within some kind of story—usually a legend or a folktale. While these two forms of narrative are related and often overlap, folklorists generally make a simple distinction. Legends tend to be thought of as true, or possibly true, by the teller or listener or both. At the very least, there is a question of truth or believability at their core. They often include specific details of time and place, as well as the names of characters (sometimes historical people). Sometimes they are recounted as hearsay, something about a “friend of a friend” (an FOAF, in folklorist parlance). On the other hand, folktales are related as fictional stories for purposes of entertainment;

they take place “once upon a time” or “deep in the woods,” and the characters are often “an old man and an old woman” rather than specific people. Yōkai are found in both these kinds of stories, and they are also found in shorter anecdotes and beliefs shared by people in a particular community.

We should also remember that not all folklore is transmitted by word of mouth; today we accept that folklore has always also been passed along through writing, drawing, and the making of objects. Yōkai in particular seem to inhabit visual media, such as picture scrolls and woodblock prints, and also work their way into books of all sorts. In contemporary culture, social networking, texting, and other digital means of transmission increase the creative ways in which beliefs, narratives, rumors, memorates, ideas, fears, jokes, and so on are communicated from person to person.

Finally, the notion of “folk” has also changed radically since the early days of folklore studies. The folk are no longer considered—as they once were—uneducated, rural people. They are, to quote American folklorist Alan Dundes, “any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is—it could be a common occupation, language or religion—but what is important is that a group formed for whatever reason will have some traditions which it calls its own.”<sup>5</sup>

Which brings us back to yōkai. While many of the yōkai in this book have been around for a long time, this does not mean they are only a thing of the past. Of course, the *folk* for whom yōkai are relevant are long-ago warriors from the Heian (794–1185) or Kamakura period (1185–1333), or urban merchants from the Edo period (c. 1600–1868), or perhaps even contemporary farmers working in small rural villages. But the folk are also sleekly dressed commuters in Japan’s thriving postmodern metropolises, and people like you and me who share a common interest in these mysterious, ever-changing phenomena. While some yōkai may already be gone and faded from memory, new yōkai and new versions of old yōkai are always being born, or reborn, and infused with fresh energy. Recall the kuchi-sake-onna story: a modern legend, in an urban setting, told by everyday people, and written about in popular magazines. All this is to say that as long as human culture persists, so too, in one form or another,

yōkai will flourish. If we are a folk group linked by an interest in yōkai, then we are connected with people in other places whom we have never met, and we are also connected with people who are long dead, and people who have not yet been born.

### THE LANGUAGE OF YŌKAI

Yōkai begin where language ends.

Mysterious sounds. Lights flitting through the graveyard. A flood that destroys one village and leaves another unscathed. A feeling that something is watching you in the darkness. How do we speak of things that are ungraspable, anomalous? What words can we use to signify things that evade established categories and seemingly refuse to conform to the laws of nature?

In Japan, as elsewhere, inexplicable occurrences and supernatural creatures have been part of the cultural imagination for as long as history has been recorded. Broadly speaking, these diverse mysterious phenomena and weird “things” have come to be called yōkai. In a sense, *yōkai* is nothing more than a convenient label to indicate a whole range of otherwise ineffable experiences that might, in English, be translated with the words *spirits, goblins, phantoms, specters, sprites, shape-shifters, demons, fantastic beings, numinous occurrences, the supernatural*, and perhaps most commonly today, *monsters*. This wide variety of possible translations speaks to the open-endedness of the word and hints at the many different ideas and nuances associated with it. Because of the danger of narrowing the definition too much, in this book I generally avoid translations and just use the word itself—and maybe, like *sushi* or *tofu*, it will take root in other languages as well.

#### *Mysterious Words*

#### MONO-NO-KE 物の怪

In popular culture and scholarly literature in Japan today, *yōkai* has become the umbrella term for an entire panoply of mysterious phenomena and weird creatures. But the common use of the word actually began

relatively recently; during different historical periods other terms have been used. In the Heian period, for example, spooky and unexplainable “things” were often called *mono-no-ke*. We find *mono-no-ke*, for instance, in Murasaki Shikibu’s *Genji monogatari* (*The Tale of Genji*, early eleventh century), the most famous literary text of the Heian period, where they tend to “take an invisible form imagined to signify human spirits.”<sup>6</sup> A direct translation of *mono-no-ke* is difficult, but *mono* usually refers to “thing” or “matter” and *ke* to something mysterious, suspicious, or troubling. Some scholars suggest that in early texts *mono* did not refer to concrete things as it does in modern Japanese but to amorphous or ghostly things such as souls or spirits.<sup>7</sup> Although this interpretation is disputed, we can compromise by thinking of *mono* as the essence of something and, therefore, characterize *mono-no-ke* as a sense of spookiness and mystery. However we translate it, though, *mono-no-ke* during the Heian period indicated danger, uncertainty, and terror—something lurking out there, just beyond reach, intending to do you harm.

#### ONI 鬼 AND HYAKKIYAGYŌ 百鬼夜行

Another term used to signify danger and fear was *oni*, generally translated today as “demon” or “ogre.” During the Heian period, *oni* was a default label for any sort of nasty and threatening creature, usually but not always humanlike in shape. For example, *oni* (in this case pronounced *ki*) is embedded in the word, *hyakkiyagyō* (alternatively pronounced *hyakkiyakō*), which can be translated as “night procession of one hundred *oni*.” In Heian-period texts, *hyakkiyagyō* usually refers to a procession of dangerous beings passing through the Heian capital (present-day Kyoto). Warnings that the *hyakkiyagyō* would be out on a given evening were provided by the *Onmyōryō*, the Bureau of Divination, staffed by practitioners of *Onmyōdō*, a complex system of divination and geomancy based on principles of yin and yang. When the *hyakkiyagyō* was on the move, it was to be avoided: suddenly the familiar space of the city was possessed by wild, unpredictable, dangerous demons. For a short time, *this* world and the *other* world would intersect and the usual rules of human culture were invalid.

It was also possible for people traveling outside the city to inadvertently stumble into alien territory possessed by demons. One tale from *Uji shūi*