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Onmyōji
Sex, Pathos, and Grotesquery
in Yumemakura Baku's *Oni*

Abstract

The common representation of *oni* (goblins, demons) in Japanese folklore is of evil, monstrous supernatural creatures malevolent to living beings. However, in recent popular depictions of *onmyōji* 陰陽師, and by extension Abe no Seimei 安倍晴明 (921?–1005?), in fiction, *manga*, and film *oni* are presented as lonely and misunderstood, if still monstrous, creatures. Author Yumemakura Baku 夢枕獏 (1951–) situates his representations of *oni* 鬼 in the Heian 平安 period (794–1192). His characterizations of people and *oni* are, however, informed by a much more modern pathos, evidently very appealing to contemporary Japanese readers and viewers. At a deeper level, the current popularity of *onmyōji* creatures and characters may well reveal latent Japanese interests in religion and the supernatural that reflect in turn people's existential anxieties about contemporary life and also their curiosity and interest in some form of afterlife.

Keywords: *onmyōji*—Onmyōdō—Abe no Seimei—*oni*—Yumemakura Baku—religion

IN YUMEMAKURA Baku's (1951–) series *Onmyōji*, Abe no Seimei (921?–1005?), a legendary *onmyōji*, or a practitioner of Onmyōdō (the way of yin-yang) known for his skills of divination, magic, and sorcery, teams up with the aristocrat Minamoto no Hiromasa 源博雅 (918–?). Together they solve mysteries and crimes of supernatural origin. The popular series, which first appeared in 1988, has been adapted as equally successful manga and a television series of the same title. *Onmyōji* has also inspired two feature-length films for which Yumemakura Baku helped write the screenplay. In writing *Onmyōji*, Yumemakura notes that he wanted to write stories on the Heian period (794–1192) and *oni* (goblins, demons). While *Onmyōji*'s backdrop is indeed the Heian period, Yumemakura's representations of *oni* and the development of his human characters are quite contemporary. Frequently, Yumemakura portrays *oni* as lonely, misunderstood beings, and thus touches a chord of empathy with Japanese readers and viewers. This article examines the very ways in which Yumemakura builds upon and/or modifies earlier images of *oni* and historical characters to make his series appeal to a contemporary audience. The changes he makes, in turn, reflect and express contemporary Japanese attitudes toward the supernatural, and by extension, give the reader/viewer a glimpse into historical and contemporary Japanese feelings about religion and demonology. Japanese attitudes toward death and religion do not seem to have waned after all in contemporary society.

ONMYŌDŌ OF THE EARLY TENTH CENTURY AND ABE NO SEIMEI

Yumemakura has remarked that he has always wanted to write stories about the Heian period, when creatures from the dark side, and particularly *oni*, resided among people (YUMEMAKURA 1991, 331).¹ The Heian period, often considered the apex of classical Japanese culture and literature, was when the *oni*'s influence on the Japanese popular imagination was at its peak. During this time, these ravenous demons struck fear into all walks of Japanese society.

Within the Heian period, the historical Seimei's youthful years correspond to the era of Engi-tenryaku 延喜天曆 (901–947), a time when Onmyōdō prospered and produced excellent practitioners of its tradition. The official practitioners of

Onmyōdō, among them *onmyōji*, were at the time servants of the imperial court, whose prime duties were to observe and examine astronomy, the almanac, astrology, and divination.² The Engi-tenryaku era also coincides with a transitional period in which the official practitioners of Onmyōdō tended to become the aristocrats' private "cat's-paws" (MURAYAMA 1961, 378 and 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 1981, 112, and 172).

One anecdote often used to prove Seimei's ability for prescience concerns Emperor Kasan's 花山 (968–1008) abdication. According to *Ōkagami* 大鏡 [The Great Mirror, ca. eleventh century], in 986 Emperor Kasan is set to renounce his throne, the result of the political machinations of Fujiwara Kaneie 兼家 (929–990). Kasan's abdication will allow Kaneie to rule as regent when his six-year-old grandson, Crown Prince Yasuhito 懷仁, ascends the throne and will thus solidify Fujiwara political power through a maternal relative, Kaneie's daughter and Yasuhito's mother, Fujiwara no Senshi 藤原詮子. When Emperor Kasan's entourage reroute to a temple and pass Abe no Seimei's house, "they [hear] the diviner [Seimei] clap his hands and exclaim: 'The heavens foretold His Majesty's abdication, and now it seems to have happened'" (MCCULLOUGH 1980, 81).³ Suwa Haruo, however, writes that it would not have been difficult for Seimei, who served Kasan closely, to foresee Kasan's abdication (SUWA 2000, 20). Some, including Shibusawa Tatsuhiko, even hypothesize that Seimei most likely knew the political situation in court and took part in Fujiwara Kaneie's family plot to depose Emperor Kasan (SHIBUSAWA 2001, 175). Be it through psychic powers or political connections, Abe no Seimei became a larger-than-life figure soon after his death.⁴

Prior to Yumemakura's *Onmyōji*, Abe no Seimei was traditionally depicted either as an old man, as he sporadically appears in classical Japanese literature, or as a young boy, as portrayed in plays of the early modern period (1600–1868). In the current Heisei era, Yumemakura's Seimei is a beautiful, good-looking adult with thin red lips. He is a cool hero endowed with supernatural powers, adept at solving the mysterious crimes of the nostalgic Heian period and facing his demonic adversaries.

ABOUT ONI

Before examining the *oni* characters in *Onmyōji*, the historical concept of *oni* could use some brief explanation.⁵ Ancient Japanese literature has assigned a number of different written characters, such as 鬼, 魍魎, and 鬼魅 to express *oni* (TSUCHIHASHI 1990, 95). The character used now is 鬼, which in Chinese means invisible soul/spirit of the dead, whether ancestral or evil. According to

Wamyō ruijushō 倭名類聚抄 (ca. 930s), the first Japanese language dictionary, *oni* is explained as a corruption of the reading of the character *on* 隠 (hiding), “hiding behind things, not wishing to appear.... It is a soul/spirit of the dead.” Apparently the concept of *oni* in *Wamyō ruijushō* is based upon the Chinese concept (TAKAHASHI 1992, 41). TSUCHIHASHI Yutaka writes that the term *oni* came from the pronunciation of *on* 隠 (hiding) plus “i” (1990, 95).

In popular Japanese thought, “*oni*” conjures up an image of a hideous creature emerging from hell’s abyss to terrify wicked mortals. An *oni* is customarily portrayed with one or more horns protruding from its scalp. It sometimes has a third eye in the center of its forehead, and its skin most commonly is black, red, blue, or yellow. It often has a large mouth with conspicuous canine teeth. The folkloric origin of this creature is obscure. According to some scholars, the Japanese *oni* is a purely Buddhist creation,⁶ but the *oni* did not remain unique to the Buddhist cosmos. Others note that the term *oni* was used in Onmyōdō to describe any evil spirit that harms humans. In early Onmyōdō doctrine, the word “*oni*” referred specifically to invisible evil spirits that caused human infirmity (KOMATSU 1999). While the visual image of *oni* is predominantly male, there also are examples of female *oni* in Japanese lore, the prototype Japanese *oni* being a female named Yomotsu-shikome (lit., ugly woman of the other world) (ISHIBASHI 1998, 4),⁷ born from a female deity who felt shamed by her husband.⁸

The shape-shifting powers of all *oni* make it possible for them to assume human form, but their typically gruesome appearance often reflects their evil dispositions. Indeed, *oni* are known for their appetite for human flesh. Still, close examination of treatment of *oni* in diverse contexts reveals less dreadful monster images. For instance, *oni* can be harbingers of prosperity to humans.⁹ Metaphorically *oni* can symbolize the anti-establishment vis-à-vis the central government. Anti-establishment elements are often depicted as *oni* by mainstream society as a way of disparaging those who are different. Indeed, there are many instances in which creatures of different customs, or the marginalized other, are called 鬼. As early as *Nihongi* (ca. 719) non-Japanese have been labeled by native Japanese as 鬼.¹⁰

Contemporary authors often capture this side of *oni*—a creature oppressed by mainstream society rather than an outright evil creature bent on performing malevolent acts—and take a sympathetic attitude toward *oni*. Yumemakura is no exception. His *oni* may be viciously violent but they are simultaneously replete with sorrows and human weakness.

The world of *Onmyōji* is frequently that of *Konjaku monogatari shū* 今昔物語集 (Tales of Times Now Past, ca. 1212), Noh plays such as “Kanawa” 鐵輪 (The Iron Tripod), *Ugetsu monogatari* 雨月物語 (Tales of Moonlight and Rain, 1776), and other classical literature. Yumemakura’s approach to the classical text

is simple and direct. Yumemakura fills in the contexts and explanations left out in the original stories so that the readers do not have to read between the lines. Filling in the gaps, Yumemakura presents the *oni*'s perspective. This important feature differs from classical literature, in which the *oni*'s stance is ignored by the authors/compilers or readers. Yumemakura often portrays *oni* in a sympathetic light, enabling readers to identify with these marginalized creatures. At the same time, Yumemakura peppers the plots of these old stories with a mixture of sex, pathos, and grotesque imagery involving *oni* and their emotional resonance. As we will presently see, many of his *oni* are the marginalized spirits of humans trapped in the world of the living by the overpowering urgings of unrequited love.

A BIWA CALLED GENJŌ IS STOLEN BY AN ONI

One example of how Yumemakura portrays *oni* in his own way can be seen in his retelling of “Genjō to iu biwa oni ni toraruru koto” 玄象という琵琶鬼にとらるること (A *biwa* [pipa] called Genjō is stolen by an *oni*).¹¹ The original story, found under the same title in *Konjaku monogatari shū*,¹² is a straightforward narrative: A prized *biwa* called Genjō disappears from the Imperial Palace. While the emperor deeply laments its loss, an enchanting melody being played on the *biwa* is heard from the direction of Rashō Gate. Minamoto no Hiromasa, an excellent musician, follows the tune and discovers an *oni* at the gate playing the missing *biwa*. (The reader is never quite sure who this *oni* is, let alone why the *oni* steals Genjō and is playing it at Rashō Gate.) Hiromasa asks the *oni* to return the *biwa*, an imperial treasure, and the *oni* obeys. Ever after the *biwa* acts like a living being—it plays whenever it feels like it.

Yumemakura's *Onmyōji*, in contrast to the original, gives background information and flavor to the tale, fleshing it out in the process. The narrative is much more detailed. To begin with, the *oni* is the spirit of a foreign *biwa* maker who created Genjō and died years before—one hundred and twenty-eight years to be precise. That the *oni* is a spirit of the dead follows a Chinese interpretation of 鬼. Further, this *oni* is identified as foreign-born, thus reinforcing the view that the *oni* is the marginalized other. So, Yumemakura uses a conventional image of *oni* in his text, but goes on to tell us that the *oni* does not rest peacefully because of his attachment to his homeland (India) and his wife, so he steals the *biwa* he made to console himself with music. Yumemakura thus creates a story behind the story and the *oni* is no longer so mysterious.

While the *oni* in *Konjaku monogatari shū* obeys a request to return the instrument to the emperor, *Onmyōji*'s *oni* asks for a woman. The *oni* explains to Abe no Seimei, who does not appear in the original episode of the *Konjaku monogatari shū*, that, while strolling in the imperial palace, he fell in love with someone who bears a remarkable resemblance to his wife. The *oni* agrees to

return the *biwa* in exchange for a night with the woman. In this way, the *oni* is endowed with human feelings and desires, making the episode abound in intimations of sex and violence.¹³ Abe no Seimei accedes to the *oni*'s request. But the arrangements go awry and the hideous *oni* eats the woman. The grotesque appearance of the *oni* is in accordance with convention, and so is its cannibalism. Yet it is important to note that, instead of being outwardly violent or antagonistic towards the other characters, the *oni* first reveals his weaknesses. He shows sadness and remorse for losing his previous wife and having to live as an *oni*. Yumemakura casts the *oni* in a pitiable light, as the reader is informed of his tragic death and his love for his wife. While the fact he stole the *biwa* remains unchanged, the portrayal of him as the creator of that very *biwa* makes it easier to feel sorry for him. It is the human (i.e., the woman's brother) who has broken a promise that caused the *oni* to revert to his evil nature and thus prey on innocent humans (such as, the woman who resembles his late wife). It was understood between the *oni* and Seimei that there should be no machination about the one-night affair. But the brother told his sister to cut off the *oni*'s head with a hidden knife, but when she failed to do so, she was torn asunder and eaten by the *oni*. In the process of devouring the woman, the *oni* says "How sad..." (YUMEMAKURA 1991, 73). It sounds rather comical for a devouring *oni* to say this, but since the woman's state of mind is never described, there is no hint of empathy or sympathy for her or her brother who interfered with Seimei's plan and foiled it. If one pauses a moment and gives it some thought, it seems quite natural for the woman's brother to botch the plan. As the brother says, it would ruin the reputation of the family if a rumor spread that his sister made love with an *oni*. (Note that any consideration for his sister's feelings is completely absent.) The reader is led to sympathize with the *oni* rather than the woman or her brother because the *oni*'s loneliness is the focal point of the story.

In the end the *oni* possesses a dying dog that transforms into the conventional masculine *oni* image. After this *oni*-dog is killed by the brother, the soul of the *biwa* maker comes to possess the royal *biwa* itself. That is why, Yumemakura writes, Genjō acts like a living creature—an explanation absent from the *Konjaku monogatari shū*.

KANAWA

Another example of Yumemakura's gap-bridging is "Kanawa," which is based upon the Noh play *Kanawa*. In fact, *Onmyōji*'s "Kanawa" follows the Noh text so closely that it even utilizes the language conventions of the Noh play (for example, he inserts narrative between the lines of the lyrics to explain the Noh's ornate diction). The Noh play *Kanawa* consists of two acts. In the first act a woman makes nightly visits to the Kibune Shrine, where she asks for the Kibune

deity to change her into an *oni* while she is still alive so that she can kill her former husband, who abandoned her for a new wife. While the woman professes to still love her husband, she is consumed by grief and jealousy. The deity answers her prayer, and through a shrine attendant instructs her to change her appearance and fill her heart with anger. She is instructed to apply vermilion to her face, wear red clothing, put an iron tripod on her head, and carry three torches. Pleased by the oracle, she goes home. In the second act, her ex-husband visits Abe no Seimei's residence to interpret a bad dream he has had and to learn what it portends for the future. According to Seimei's oniromancy, his ex-wife is cursing him and he is going to die that night. Responding to the man's pleas, Seimei performs a ritual to save his life. He makes two life-size dolls representing the man and his new wife, in an attempt to transfer his former wife's curse to the effigies. When the *oni*-woman appears in the room to kill the man, various deities summoned by Seimei prevent her from murdering him. After she fails and proclaims that she will wait for her revenge, the chorus recites, "Only her voice is clearly heard; the demon now is invisible. She has passed beyond the sight of men, an evil spirit beyond the sight of men" (KATŌ 1970, 204).¹⁴

Yumemakura comments that the Noh play *Kanawa* does not sufficiently describe the woman who turned into an *oni*, especially at the play's closing, so he wrote his "Kanawa" to offer a clear ending and a better insight into that *oni*-woman (YUMEMAKURA 2003, 385–86). He explains what is meant by the "invisible *oni*" and what happens to the woman. Yumemakura's characters are more nuanced than those of the Noh play, as are their dealings with each other and the events they encounter. Like the mortal characters, Yumemakura's *oni* are nuanced as well. By presenting the woman-turned-*oni* as the victim of a philandering husband, Yumemakura presents an *oni* whose actions are at least understandable, if not necessarily deserving of the reader's sympathy.

In his work, Yumemakura gives the man and his former wife names and adds personal touches. The man's name is Fujiwara no Tameyoshi, and the woman's, Tokuko. Yumemakura makes a significant change in the treatment of *oni* in Tokuko's attack scene. In the Noh play, the woman has already become an *oni* when she appears in the room to attack her former husband—this is the beginning of the second act and the woman appears on the stage wearing either a *hannya* 般若 (she-demon) mask or a *namanari* 生成 mask.¹⁵ Furthermore, she does not realize that she is tormenting a doll. In contrast, Tokuko is still in human form when she comes to Tameyoshi's residence—she is wearing a tripod, but she is human. Importantly she realizes that she is assaulting a doll when Hiromasa utters a sound of surprised disgust. Conscious of Hiromasa, Seimei, and Tameyoshi seeing her grotesque appearance and violent behavior, she turns into an *oni*. Tokuko says, "Did you see me? You looked at this wretched appearance, didn't you?... How embarrassing, my miserable appearance"

(YUMEMAKURA 2000, 79–80). Then, for the first time, the horns start to grow on her forehead and she begins to transform into an *oni*. Like Yomotsu-shikome, the prototype of Japanese *oni*, who was born out of a woman's feeling of shame about her repulsive appearance (and being watched by a man), Tokuko's story follows the pattern in which shame and anger turn a woman into an *oni*. For a woman who is fussy about decorum to be seen in a shameful act is a powerful enough stimulus to transform her into a different being. As her respectability is lost in the eyes of others, her jealousy and anger surface. This sequence of emotions follows the convention, but while the classical works omit the transformation completely, Yumemakura vividly describes its unfolding, capturing the reader's attention with a gripping portrayal of *onification*. Failing to kill Tameyoshi, and overcome by shame, Tokuko commits suicide. In her dying moments, she asks Hiromasa to play the flute whenever she is overwhelmed by her desire to eat Tameyoshi. She says that his flute will appease her anger. After that, whenever the *oni* appears beside Hiromasa, he plays the flute. The *oni* listens to the flute without saying a word and disappears. This is Yumemakura's explanation of what happens to the *oni* and why it is the "invisible *oni*." It is important to note that while Tokuko-*oni* is still consumed by anger and has a predilection for cannibalism, she offers a solution to her own problem and therefore causes no harm to anyone. In that respect, she is sensible, conscientious, and restrained. Tokuko-*oni* is also more self-reflective. She blames herself for having fallen in love with Tameyoshi. She says, "It is I who fell in love with you. Nobody told me to do so.... Not understanding that you play double, I pledged and shared a bed with you.... I know it's all my fault, but..." (YUMEMAKURA 2000, 76). Tokuko-*oni*'s attempt at revenge is quite vicious, but as her environment and feelings are amply explained by both the omniscient narrator and Tokuko-*oni* herself, the reader can sympathize with her. Incidentally, in *Namanarihime* (YUMEMAKURA 2003), which further expands the story of "Kanawa," Tokuko's situation becomes more pitiful and deserving of sympathy, for she is framed by her husband, belittled by his new wife, and thus marginalized by society in general. At the same time, her violence becomes more escalated and graphic. Notwithstanding their violence, Yumemakura's female *oni* are portrayed as sensible and understanding.

"ONI NO MICHYUKI"

The heroine-*oni* in "Oni no michiyuki" 鬼のみちゆき (*Oni's Journey* [to the Palace]) is also sensible, understanding, and, as well, patient. The *oni*'s identity is the unsaved spirit of a neglected woman. Unlike the stories seen above, this story appears to be unique to Yumemakura.¹⁶ Fifteen years before her death, the emperor visits her, promising that he will come back to take her to the palace. She clings to his promise, but the emperor never returns. Upon her death,

she starts her journey to the palace at night to realize the forgotten tryst. She appears as a beautiful woman of about twenty-eight years of age with a pleasant fragrance. Harassed by people on the street, however, she changes into a blue-skinned *oni* with a masculine hairy arm, killing and eating those who challenge her. The sudden transformation from a beautiful woman to a masculine *oni* is reminiscent of the *oni* in the *Konjaku monogatari shū*, particularly the one in the familiar story of Watanabe Tsuna 渡辺綱 and an *oni* at Modori Bridge.¹⁷ The *oni* in “Oni no michiyuki” is a victim of the emperor’s utter neglect. Unlike the fierce *oni* of classical literature, however, she happily goes to the other world once the emperor acknowledges his neglect and expresses sincere remorse. Before her disappearance, the *oni*’s anguish and marginalization serve to evoke the reader’s sympathy. In the end, the *oni* is not an evil creature bent on harming people but someone who just wants to receive simple acknowledgement after fifteen long years of abandonment.

YUMEMAKURA’S VIEW OF ONI

A major factor in the popularity of *Onmyōji* is Yumemakura’s modernization of classic stories as well as his characterizations of Abe no Seimei and Minamoto no Hiromasa. His invention of the Seimei-Hiromasa pairing bears a remarkable resemblance to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, where Holmes, the sharp observer and logical thinker, is balanced by Watson, the man of action. Yumemakura states that he was conscious of the conversational styles and patterns of Holmes and Watson (ARAMATA et al., 2002, 55). The banter between Seimei and Hiromasa is rhythmical and humorous. In reality, it is highly unlikely that Seimei, an *onmyōji* whose official ranking was Upper Grade of the Junior Seventh Court Rank and thus lower than a nobleman’s, and Hiromasa, a grandson of Emperor Daigo 醍醐 (885–930) who was already conferred the Lower Grade of the Junior Fourth Court Rank at the age of sixteen and so had access to the imperial court, would work as a team to solve mysteries. Even if they did work together, Seimei’s language would have been much more deferential when he spoke to Hiromasa.¹⁸

In any case, Yumemakura’s view of *oni* is replicated in the dialogs of Seimei and Hiromasa, which in turn seem to mirror the concept of *oni/yōkai* 妖怪 delineated by folklorists and anthropologists. Komatsu Kazuhiko, an anthropologist, explains *yōkai*: “People in an ethnic society, who desire to understand and systematize all the phenomena and beings in the world, have their explanation system. When phenomena or beings that cannot be fully explained by that system of thought appear, such incomprehensible and/or disorderly things are termed *yōkai*” (KOMATSU 1983, 346).¹⁹ So *oni* are *yōkai* with the most negative associations (KOMATSU 1979, 342). He explains the differences

between kami, supernatural deities worshipped by the people, and *yōkai*, who are not worshipped. People perform religious rituals in order to transform *yōkai* to kami. Conversely, if a kami is not being worshipped, that kami might become a *yōkai* (KOMATSU 1983, 349). Yumemakura's Seimei claims that kami and *oni* are essentially the same, and their naming depends upon human perception. When a phenomenon is perceived as beneficial, it is considered the act of a kami, whereas negative occurrences are labeled as perpetrated by an *oni*. Seimei concludes that "*oni* and kami don't exist without involving humans," and further argues that "be it kami or *oni*, the human mind produces them" (YUMEMAKURA 2002, 57). Commenting on the water deities enshrined in the Kibune Shrine, Seimei says, "Originally, water is just water. People call it good or evil because both good and evil lie on the side of humans." Hiromasa responds, "You mean, *oni* are a product of humans" (YUMEMAKURA 2000, 86–87). Later, Seimei and Hiromasa discuss how *oni* hide and live in the human *kokoro* (heart/soul) (YUMEMAKURA 2005, 133). The expression *kokoro no oni* first appeared in the late-tenth-century *Kagerō nikki* 蜻蛉日記 [The Gossamer Years] and became a topic of discussion in Heian women's literature (KNECHT et al., 2004, 286). Through its symbolism, it provides a psychological explanation for the discord and conflict of emotions in people's hearts that sometimes accompany marital relationships and relations between men and women in general (KNECHT et al., 2004, 279–82).²⁰ The discord caused by unhappy marital relationships ferments in the hearts of women, described symbolically as *oni* in the Heian literature. When women are overwhelmed by this discord they manifest outwardly the physical appearance of *oni*. This occurs in the Noh play as well as in Yumemakura's "Kanawa." In the latter, as noted before, the vivid description of Tokuko's transformation, tantamount to horror fiction, becomes a major focal point.

The view of *oni* as a product of the human psyche and the difference between *oni* and kami as one of human perspective becomes more prominent in the film, "Onmyōji II" (2003). In the film the *oni* is a human boy named Susa. Against his will, he is transformed into an *oni* in order to carry out the wishes of his father, the chieftain of the Izumo clan. Susa-*oni* devours various people to obtain great power. When Susa says, "I don't want to be an *oni*," his father corrects him by claiming, "No, you are going to be a kami" (TAKITA 2002). Throughout the film, the other characters who know Susa are conscious of his humanity and, rather than trying to fight him, set about to help him, even when he is beyond control and attacking innocent victims. His sister knows that he is transformed and out to kill her, but even so she ventures into harm's way to help him. The film turns the *oni* into a victim. This victimization of *oni* is a modern tendency. Modern interpretations go deeper into an *oni*'s motivations and feelings, creating a more complex view of these creatures by humanizing them. At his core, Susa is a young man capable of evoking a powerful sympathetic

emotional response from the viewers of the film. The audience sympathizes with the *oni* for being an outsider and/or loner who is unable to belong to society at large.

This sympathy and even empathy for *oni* seems to reflect modern people's affinity for *oni*-like existence. In other words, modern authors/narrators take the *oni* as a being tantamount to a human and try to make their behavior and feelings understandable—doing this, they attempt to delve into human motivations and needs. Contemporary Japanese consciously or unconsciously view themselves as lonely individuals and/or marginalized creatures like *oni*. They are perhaps trying to find a niche in society, just as *oni* are trying to do.

COMMODITY CULTURE AND JAPANESE ATTITUDES TO THE SUPERNATURAL

Onmyōji has been the driving force behind a recent “Abe no Seimei boom” that has spawned a number of books on Seimei as well as on Onmyōdō. Shrines endowed with the name of Abe no Seimei are popularly visited by countless young female *Onmyōji* fans.²¹ Just a decade ago, Seimei Shrine in Kyoto was quite obscure and was hard to locate. But the popularity of Abe no Seimei has brought numerous visitors to the shrine, and the shrine has added new offices, renovated buildings, and now is a tourist favorite in Kyoto (ARAMATA et al., 2002, 47). Whether or not this represents a renewed interest in the religious aspects of these shrines, Abe no Seimei brings material wealth with him. Be it Abe no Seimei or *oni*, the reality is that both are commodities sold for entertainment value. Perhaps people visit the shrines associated with Seimei looking to buy access to the scenes of the stories and to immerse themselves in that time-space—to experience in the three-dimensional physical space what they had imagined from the stories written on two-dimensional paper—and get in touch with some romantic time-space that they imagine existed in Japan's past, much as people visit a theme park like Disneyworld to immerse themselves in Disney stories. And make no mistake, *Onmyōji* offers all the classic products of a good action film: magic, music, fighting, demons, royalty, heroic men and beautiful women, and a few nice twists in the middle and at the end of the tale.

While readers may sympathize with *oni* or idolize Seimei, perhaps the popularity of Seimei and *oni* simultaneously reveals people's continued interest in something unknown and inexplicable about life, if not in established religion proper. As fantastic and outrageous as Yumemakura's stories may be, the reader must consider the existence and evil doings of *oni* somehow as an extension of reality—the reality of the imagined past in the present. The notion that this could happen to someone who exhibits similar behavior makes the reader feel close to the stories and makes the stories more exciting. What is it that makes the mysterious (and shocking) events of *Onmyōji* somehow believable? People's

affinity for doomed souls who cannot go to the other world—an *oni*'s fate—could be an answer.

Iwasaka and Toelken write,

[D]eath is not only a common subject in Japanese folklore but seems indeed to be the *principal* topic in Japanese tradition; nearly every festival, every ritual, every custom is bound up in some way with relationships between the living and the dead...the hypothesis that death is the prototypical Japanese topic, not only because it relates living people to their ongoing heritage, but also...because death brings into focus a number of other very important elements in the Japanese worldview: obligation, duty, debt, honor, and personal responsibility. (IWASAKA and TOELKEN 1994, 6)

Indeed, complex Japanese funeral rituals and year-round ceremonies for the dead speak of how important the dead and their memories are for family and community. The bereaved family wishes the dead to go to the other world peacefully. Souls lingering on earth after *shijū kunichi* (forty-nine days)—the point of time according to Buddhism when the dead are supposed to go to the other world—are believed to be dangerous to the living. Yumemakura's *Onmyōji* often portrays violent death, and the culprit of the mysterious crimes is often an *oni* unable to go to the other world peacefully. The *oni* in "Genjō," for example, is a soul who lingers on earth because of his attachment to the musical instrument. In "Kanawa," the invisible *oni* remains on earth still wanting to kill Tameyoshi. The *oni* in "Oni no michiyuki" stays on earth to realize her wish (while crushing those who meet her on her way to the palace). The concept of the dead lingering on earth for unfinished business is familiar among Japanese, deeply rooted as it is in a mixture of Buddhist and Shinto beliefs. If something unfortunate happens to someone, could there be some evil spirit, an *oni*, working to cause it? If this were the case, wouldn't it be nice if a person like Abe no Seimei could solve the mystery?

Shimo Yoshiko (1952–), a medium and healer who practices a line of Onmyōdō, speaks on TV and publishes books on how the individual lives of Japanese people can be improved. Her series of books, beginning with *Ryūseimei* 流生命 (SHIMO 2002), contains interviews and answers to questions about life after death and why certain (unfortunate) things happen. She explains that there is a higher force working in the universe and that it controls one's destiny—how does one work within the web of destiny? These concerns and questions fall within a religious field of thought. Diviners, many of them fortunetellers and/or prognosticators, continue to do good business, such as the contemporary figures Shinjuku no haha 新宿の母 (Mother in Shinjuku) and Ōizumi no haha 大泉の母 (Mother in Ōizumi).²² The fact that there are still quite a number of people who

live on the profession of exorcism/healing suggests that large numbers of people still believe in exorcists, healers, and religious people. Among several interesting news items related to Japanese religious belief, there was a report in 2003 that unlawful dumping of garbage was stopped as soon as a small (imitation) *torii* 鳥居 (Shinto shrine gate) was placed in the area.²³ It seems that while contemporary Japanese may not always claim to be familiar with religious doctrine, or to believe in established religions, they do believe in things inexplicable and supernatural.²⁴ Japanese are curious about spiritual or supernatural occurrences and manifestations so they seek some information and guidance from healers, mediums, diviners, and some religious people.

In a wider interpretation, this *Onmyōji* boom seems to manifest people's desire to understand why and how certain things happen that cannot be explained technologically or scientifically. While readers may seek in *Onmyōji* mystery, sex, violence, romance, and so on, perhaps they feel good about some causal relationships that are being explained. Some Japanese may view the character Abe no Seimei as they view healers, mediums, or diviners. Abe no Seimei solves supernatural mysteries by explaining the inexplicable, just as a medium, healer, or religious person explains the working of misfortune as a causal relationship. In this paradigm, evil happenings are tantamount to an *oni*. There is a reason for an *oni* to act in a certain way and one must look at the situation from the *oni*'s point of view as well. One must feel sympathy for the marginalized *oni* while one lives, because there is a chance that any of us might become an *oni* after death. In the final analysis, the humanization of *oni* portrayed in *Onmyōji* is a reflection and expression of contemporary Japanese feelings about, and attitudes toward, themselves—and by extension the uncertainty of their lives.

NOTES

1. Yumemakura's fictional Seimei claims that his profession will be lost without *oni*.
2. The agency they worked for was called *Onmyōryō* 陰陽寮 (Bureau of Divination). See BOWRING 2005, 171–92.
3. For the original text, see TACHIBANA and KATŌ 1996, 46.
4. For more information about *Onmyōdō* and Abe no Seimei's descendants in English, see BUTLER 1996, 189–217.
5. For more information about *oni* in English, see REIDER 2003.
6. See, for example, ANESAKI and FERGUSON 1928, 283.
7. Ishibashi further cites Japanese scholar Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801) for support regarding Yomotsu-shikome being the origin of *oni*.
8. 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 netherworld 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 told him to wait and not to look. The “taboo

of looking” is a familiar folk literature motif: unable to resist the temptation, the protagonist often breaks a promise not to look. Izanagi breaks his promise, just as Orpheus did on his journey to bring Eurydice back to the world of living in Greek myth. When Orpheus looked back, beautiful Eurydice slipped back into the world of the dead. When Izanagi looked at Izanami, she was not at all like what he expected. She was an ugly corpse with maggots swarming over her, and eight thunder deities were growing from her entire body. Izanami was furious, probably because he broke his promise and looked at her changed appearance. Instead of lamenting and going back to the netherworld quietly, she attacked him, saying that he caused her undying shame. Terrified, Izanagi was quickly on his way back to this world, whereupon Izanami dispatched Yomotsu-shikome from the underworld to avenge Izanami’s shame.

9. The famous folktale of Issun-bōshi (Little One-Inch) tells how *oni* can bring fortune to humans. In the story, a boy is born to an elderly couple far past the years of conception and childbirth. For years, the couple had been praying to a deity so that the woman might conceive, and eventually she does. But the child she gives birth to, a boy, never grows beyond one inch in height. One day, Little One-Inch decides to go to the capital in search of fortune and success. He gets a job as a servant of an aristocratic family and falls madly in love with the couple’s beautiful daughter. Tricked by Little One-Inch, the daughter is disowned and falls under his care. The two soon leave the family’s compound. On their journey to nowhere in particular, Little One-Inch and the daughter meet up with a band of *oni*. One of the *oni* eats Little One-Inch in one gulp but the latter fights the *oni*, plunging his little sword into the *oni* from inside its body. Defeated, the *oni* coughs up Little One-Inch and the band of demons scampers away, leaving behind a magical, wish-granting mallet. Little One-Inch picks up the mallet and, with the help of his supernatural power, he is transformed into normal human size. He uses the mallet to produce food and treasures. Little One-Inch becomes rich, marries the princess, and lives happily ever after, primarily because of the *oni*’s wish-granting mallet (ICHIKO 1958, 319–26).

10. The *Nihongi* states that during the twelfth month of the sixth year of Emperor Kinmei’s reign (544 AD) the following occurred: “At Cape Minabe, on the northern side of the Island of Sado, there arrived men of Su-shēn in a boat and staid (*sic*) 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” (ASTON 1956, 58; for the original text, see SAKAMOTO et al., 1965, 92). The “men of Su-shēn” (Mishi-hase) is an old name for Tungusic ancestors of the Manchus.

11. For Yumemakura’s text, see YUMEMAKURA 1991, 7–78. For an English translation, see MCGILLICUDDY 2004, 1–57.

12. For the text of “Genjō to iu biwa oni ni toraruru koto” in *Konjaku monogatari shū*, see MABUCHI, KUNISAKI, and INAGAKI 2001, 308–11. For an English translation, see URY 1979, 146–49.

13. In *Onmyōji*, the idea that the *oni* recognized the heavenly power of the emperor and returned the Genjō is absent. Obviously, simply returning the *biwa* would deprive the ensuing story of violence and excitement. However, it is also possible that the change is a conscious or unconscious reaction to something deeper—perhaps an admission that the Shōwa emperor is not a god, and thus would be unable to command *oni*. Yumemakura has Seimei regularly refer to the emperor as “that man.” To call the emperor “that man” was unthinkable in those days, and even today it does not sound very respectful. This choice of words may reflect the author’s (and perhaps many readers’) attitude toward the emperor and the imperial family in contemporary society.

14. For the Japanese text of *Kanawa*, see SANARI 1963, 703–14.

15. A *namanari* mask represents a being in the process of becoming a full-fledged *oni*. This is symbolized by small horns on its forehead (NOGAMI 1943, 299).

16. For the text, see YUMEMAKURA 1991, 233–96.

17. At Modori Bridge in the capital, Tsuna encountered a beautiful woman of about twenty years of age who asked him to take her back to her house. Tsuna agreed and lifted the lady onto his horse, just as the lady revealed her true identity—she was a monstrous *oni*. Grabbing Tsuna's topknot and flying up in the air, the *oni* declared that she was going to take Tsuna to Mt. Atago. Tsuna managed to cut off one of the *oni*'s arms, causing the *oni* to fly off, leaving the severed arm behind. Later, the same *oni* disguised itself as Tsuna's aunt and attempted to gain entry into his house. The aunt-*oni* asked Tsuna to show her the famous *oni*'s arm. Believing that the woman was his own aunt, Tsuna took the disguised creature to the chest where he had placed the *oni*'s arm. Seeing the severed arm, the creature revealed its true identity to Tsuna, grabbed the limb and flew off with it (ASAHARA, HARUTA, and MATSUO 1990, 518–22).

18. Again, as mentioned in note 13 above, Seimei regularly refers to the emperor as “that man.” To call the emperor “that man” privately or publicly is unthinkable, yet it adds to Abe no Seimei's charming quality as a defiant man. Seimei appears to be polite in public. In a rigid hierarchical Japanese society in which it is hard for a junior member of a group to speak up, readers may root for Abe no Seimei, a low-ranking official endowed with magical power.

19. Komatsu thus applies a broad definition to *yōkai*, one that encompasses anything labeled “strange” or “bizarre” (KOMATSU 2003, 10).

20. For various meanings of *kokoro no oni* and its origin, see KNECHT et al., 2004.

21. A *manga* version of *Onmyōji* authored by Okano Reiko (based upon Yumemakura's *Onmyōji*) spawned Abe no Seimei's popularity among female readers. See OKANO 1999–2005.

22. Some diviners use the date and time of birth for divination, while others may use tools such as tarot cards, crystal balls, or an abacus. Many clients of such diviners appear to be females who wish to know about their marriage prospects or their future working careers.

23. A Japanese firm manufactures products to dissuade people from dumping garbage at unapproved sites. One product in many ways resembles a *torii*. When the product that resembles a *torii* is placed on a site where unlawful dumping of garbage has occurred, illegal waste deposits immediately ceased. Construction workers who had placed the simulated *torii* just as a test were amazed by its remarkable efficacy. Indications suggest, according to Japan's official Shrine Agency, that many Japanese respect religious sites and perhaps fear divine retribution for dumping garbage on hallowed ground (Torii tachi, gomi tōki yamu 鳥居立ち、ごみ投棄やむ [Erecting a *torii* stops garbage dumping], *Mainichi shimbun*, 24 January 2003, evening edition, 10).

24. As Reader and Tanabe assert, Japanese people are “practically religious” and they are heavily inclined toward *genze riyaku* (this-worldly benefits), an important aspect of religion. See READER and TANABE 1998.

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