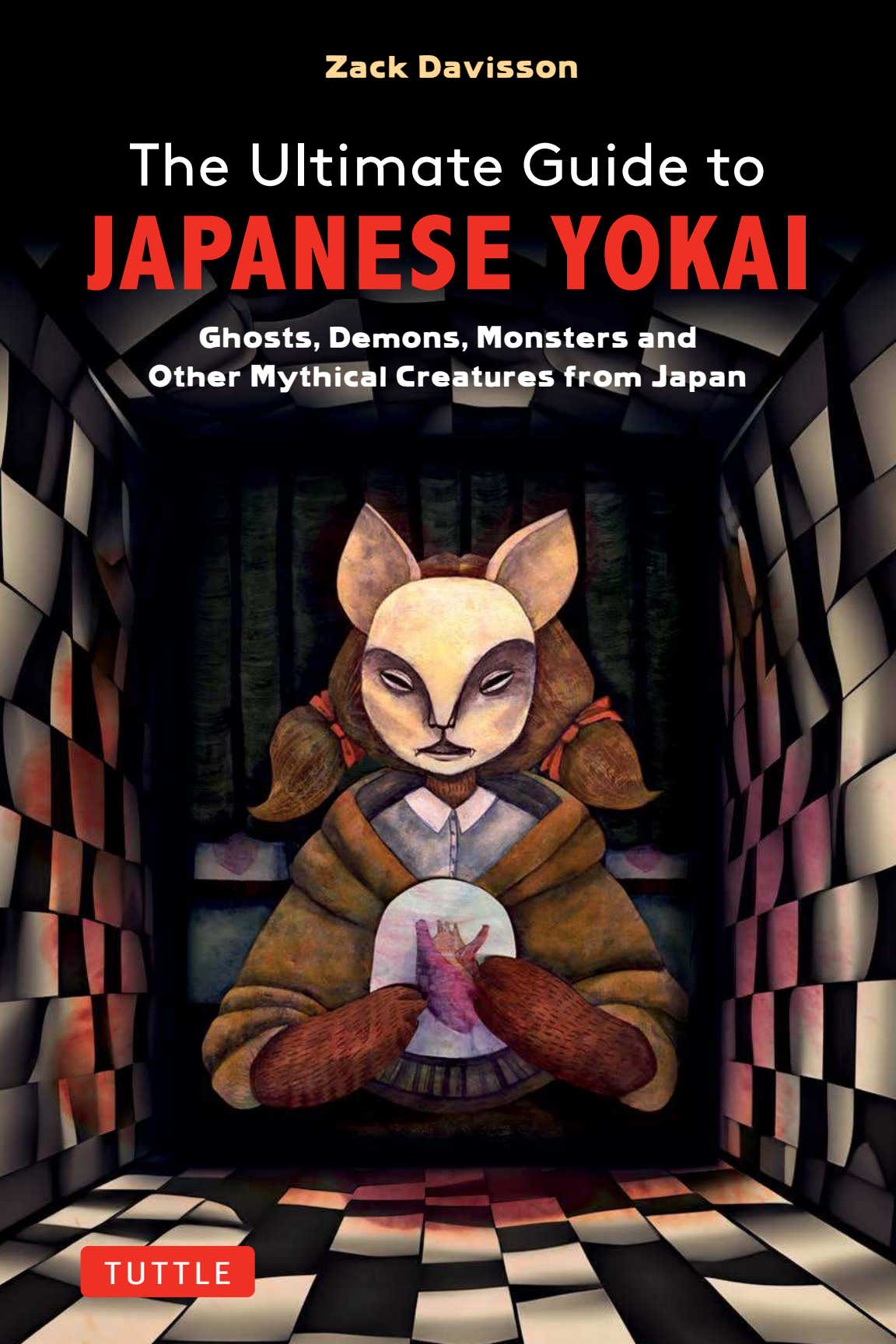
Zack Davisson

The Ultimate Guide to JAPANESE YOKAI

Ghosts, Demons, Monsters and Other Mythical Creatures from Japan



TUTTLE


勇烈血氣傳
桑名屋徳蔵
大晦日ニ船を乗出海坊主の怪物と
問答におよび凡世界に徳蔵ハ恐敷
活法ニ彼変化を威伏せし無双の船のり
なる事ハ人の知る所なり
錦朝楼
芳虎画
彫多七

To my mother Lani DeLong who taught me to dream about mysterious places and fantastic worlds.

And to my wife Miyuki who travels them with me.

妖怪

THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO

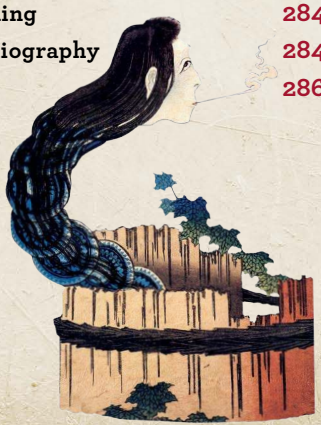
Japanese Yokai

Ghosts, Demons, Monsters and Other Mythical Creatures from Japan

By ZACK DAVISSON

TUTTLE Publishing
Tokyo | Rutland, Vermont | Singapore

Contents



Introduction

"The most beautiful thing that we can experience is the mysterious."

– Albert Einstein

"Countless variety of Yokai have been born, countless Yokai stories told and art created. Not because they are something we fear, but because playing with the mysterious brings us great pleasure."

– Komatsu Kazuhiko

An Akaname (facing page) licks a bath as a woman flees in terror. (2011) Image courtesy Roberta Mašidlauskytė.

The ghost of Oiwa (right) portrayed by Ichikawa Yonezo from a *kabuki* play about the ghost story. (1865) Enjaku.

What are Yokai?

In *An Introduction to Yokai Culture* (2017), scholar Komatsu Kazuhiko tells a story. He was giving a talk on ghost stories and in the middle of his lecture the lights went off. It was eventually traced to a burned-out light bulb, but in those few delicious moments when there was no explanation, when the hint of the possibility of something beyond the realm of human knowledge lingered, when the spark of the unknown flowed through the crowd like lightning and their hairs stood on end, that sensation, that feeling—that was Yokai.

Any book that promises a complete, absolute definition of Yokai is probably not a book worth reading. Yokai are, by their nature, indefinable. They are the mysterious manifest. They are the unknowable. And yet, without understanding Yokai, you can never truly know Japan.

Yokai are not fears personified (although they can be). They are not cautionary tales (although they can be). They are not explanations of natural phenomena (although they can be). They are not once-worshipped gods faded with time (although they can be). Yokai are not even exclusively Japanese. Many have origins in China, India, Korea, and Arabia. Traders along the Silk Road brought stories along with goods for sale.

Yokai are creatures of the boundaries. They are the in-between, existing in twilight and at the turn of the seasons. Yokai are the shadowy corners of your room. They lie beneath the surface of dark water. They walk behind you at night. Yokai are also puns and clever word play. They are witty political commentaries. They are crude jokes. Yokai are imaginative designs by artists trying to sell you a glimpse

of the fantastic. They are characters invented by writers and playwrights. Yokai are stories told around campfires. They are product mascots. They are art. They are commerce. Yokai are an expression of human imagination and creativity, and equally limitless.

Scratch the surface of Japan and you'll find Yokai. They play a fundamental role in Japanese culture, and—given the penetration of Japanese entertainment—world culture.

Yokai are in the cinema. *My Neighbor Totoro* is an excellent Yokai film. As is *Godzilla* (Yes, I went there.). They are in comics and other entertainment media...manga, anime, and games burst with Yokai: *Demon Slayer*, *Naruto*, *Mushishi*, *Natsume's Book of Friends*, *Kitaro*.... If you are reading this book, I'm guessing you count some of these among your favorites. They are in the language (calling someone a Tengu means they are full of themselves). They are in food and drink, such as Kappa sushi and Kitsune udon. Yokai are everywhere in Japan. Tanuki smile from restaurant entrances. Red-faced Tengu peek out from the shadows. Oni guard the corners.

And they change. Bakemono, another name for Yokai, means "changing things." They are born and die. They reflect the times. Yokai today are not the same as Yokai from yesterday or of tomorrow. Freezing them in a single point of time, defining them absolutely, would end them.

That is not to say that some do not try. In the early Meiji period, philosopher Inoue Enryo pioneered the field of *Yokaigaku*—Yokaiology, the study of Yokai—with the specific goal of ending Yokai. Using the modern tools of science, he hoped to banish Yokai to a superstitious past. Folklorist Yanagita Kunio disagreed, seeing Yokai as valuable to Japanese culture. Their battle set the stage ever since. I promise that someone disagrees with everything you will read in this book. There will never be a universal consensus on Yokai. It's part of the tradition.

Some such as Mizuki Shigeru and Komatsu Kazuhiko take a broader view. They see Yokai as threads on the grand supernatural tapestry of human existence. Others choose stricter definitions. You will find researchers who drill down on what can be codified and quantified, eliminating the rest as distraction, hunting for signal in the noise. Some view Yokai through the lens of history. Some through the screens of pop culture. I lean towards the broadest side.

Rokurokubi (below) with a neck of smoke. HappySloth/Shutterstock.com.

Dancing Nekomata (facing page) painted on three pieces of paper pasted together. Probably done as an art exercise. *Frolicking Animals, Cat and Raccoon* (19th century) Kawanabe Kyosai.

And now, in spite of what I said about Yokai being unexplainable, I give you an entire book explaining Yokai. For as elusive as Yokai are, we can catch glimpses of these things that hide in the shadows and flicker at the edge of human consciousness. We can coax them from their liminal spaces and have them stand in the light, if only for a little while.

The Evolution of Yokai: From Nothing to Something

Changing things change. Yokai as we know them today would be unrecognizable to the ancient people of Japan. They saw the dark places of the world occupied not with bouncing umbrella monsters or shape-shifting foxes, but with dangerous supernatural energy.

PREHISTORY AND MITAMA

The oldest known written version in a Japanese text of the word Yokai (妖怪) comes from *Shoku Nihongi* (772). It records a ritual to clean out "accumulated Yokai in the Imperial court." From context we assume Yokai referred to negative spiritual energy, something akin to "bad juju." However, the word was not in common usage.

Yokai is written **妖怪**
妖 (yo) – uncanny, suspicious, spooky, ominous
怪 (kai) – strange, wonderous, supernatural, weird

Of these, kai (怪) is the weightier one. It appears in words pertaining to the supernatural, such as Kaiju (怪獣) combining 怪 (kai; mysterious) + 獣 (ju; beast, animal) meaning "strange animal" or Kaidan (怪談) combining 怪 (kai; mysterious) + 談 (dan; stories) to mean "weird tales."

While not necessarily evil, Yokai (妖怪) gives a feel of the supernatural tinged with danger, beyond human control.

Before the eighth century Japan had no written records. Much of what we know comes from Chinese accounts. The Han dynasty *Records of the Three Kingdoms* (220–280 CE) tells of an island across the sea, the Land of Wa, governed by shaman-queen Himiko. She ruled with magic and sorcery and was able to predict the weather, a mighty power in the age of rice cultivation.

Like many cultures, Japan's beliefs were founded on animism. Derived from the Latin anima, meaning "breath," it defines a world filled with spirits. These can be spirits of nature, of rocks and trees and wind. Or spirits of animals and insects, both real and imaginary. Or spirits of the dead. In animism, these spirits are of "this world." They do not reside on separate planes, in Olympus

Ashiarai Yashiki descends from the ceiling as servants prepare to wash it. Once cleaned, the massive foot would rise and disappear. (2011) Image courtesy Roberta Mašidlauskytė.

or Hades. There is no distinction between spiritual and material worlds. All exist together.

These spirits are neither good nor evil. Like fire, earth, wind, and water, these primal forces are equally beneficial and harmful. The fire that warmed you could burn you. The oceans from which you pulled your livelihood could rise in a tsunami and destroy your village.

Sometimes known as Tama (霊) or Mitama (御霊), this spiritual energy had a dual nature. When pleased and harmonious, they were Nigi-mitama (和御霊) meaning gentle spirits. Conversely, the same energy could manifest as Ara-mitama (荒御霊), meaning rough or wild spirits. Nigi-mitama ensured good harvests and health. Ara-mitama brought famine, lightning, and disease.

Like cats on a couch, this spiritual energy was quick to lash out when annoyed. But it could be tamed into a gentle purr by a soft blanket and ear scritches. Ritual was the key to coaxing Mitama into showing their gentle face, their Nigi-mitama. Spirits needed to be fed and entertained. Dances were performed for them. Food set before them.

Ostensibly possessing powers beyond humanity, Mitama could be influenced and controlled. Shown proper respect, they were coaxed into shrines where they served as spiritual batteries for communities. Through ritual and worship, villages ensured Nigi-mitama manifested instead of Ara-mitama. This was the beginnings of the native Japanese religions we now call Shinto.

Powers beyond the realm of human influence, which could not be tamed, were known by terms such as Mono (物) or Oni (鬼). This was the beginning of Yokai.

Marebito

While Mitama was formless and invisible, there were legends of strange beings who walked Japan, bringing gifts and knowledge. Called marebito, they visited from beyond the horizons. An isolated island with no reason to believe anything existed over the oceans, it is easy to speculate on shipwrecked sailors from Asia or even Europe, washing up on Japanese shores with strange, advanced technology. They may have brought myths as well. Similarities between Japanese creation myths and those of southeast Asia have led to speculation of cultural exchange as early as the Jomon period (6,000–300 BCE).

Marebito is written **稀人**
稀 (mare) – rare
人 (hito) – people

The Arrival of Buddhism

In 552, envoys from King Seong of Baekje, modern day southwestern Korea, arrived in Japan. They brought gifts, including a statue of Buddha. Instead of the esoteric energy of Shinto, the elevated beings of Buddhism had physical representation in the form of statues worshipped in Temples. They had rules and regulations. This appealed to some of Japan's elite.

In a common story when two religions meet, Buddhism and Shinto went to war. In 587, the Buddhist Soga clan defeated the Shintoist Mononobe clan, and established a Buddhist government.

The usual outcome of religious wars is replacement and suppression; Japan instead chose merger. Shinto and Buddhism joined as Shinbutsu. In this new religion, Buddhist deities were the primary over-gods who ruled the heavens, while Shinto Kami were subordinate earthly overseers. You could dance before the Shinto shrines for a good harvest and then pray to Vairocana for blessings of the universe.

KOJIKI – RECORD OF ANCIENT MATTERS

In 711, Empress Genmei ordered the writing of an imperial history. By 712, chronicler O no Yasumaro had compiled and edited *Kojiki*, or *Record of Ancient Matters*. *Kojiki* laid out an official mythology of the birth of Japan. It says Japan was created by Izanagi and Izanami, sibling gods who give birth to the Kami. Among their children are the sun goddess Amaterasu and her brother, the impetuous storm god Susanoo. One of Amaterasu's great grandchildren was Jimmu, the legendary first emperor of Japan. *Kojiki* established the imperial Yamato clan's divine right of rule.

There is controversy over *Kojiki*. The humanistic, emotional Kami of *Kojiki* have little in common with the formless energy of earlier folk beliefs. They are mostly likely a mélange of ancestral clan deities and creation myths wielded into a single mythology

with Yamato deities given the top spots. Some researchers connect the sun goddess Amaterasu with Queen Himiko. Given enough centuries the weather-predicting shaman-queen may have evolved into the goddess of the sun. Whatever the truth, historians believe *Kojiki* to be primarily a work of propaganda.

Successful propaganda. *Kojiki* cemented the celestial lineage of the Yamato clan. This lasted until 1946 at the end of World War II, when Emperor Hirohito official renounced his divinity.

FUDOKI – LOCAL LEGENDS

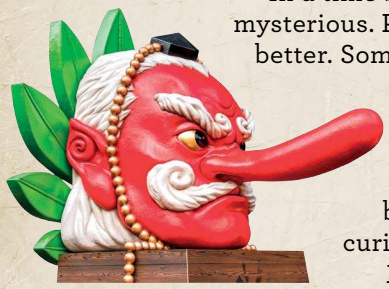
Empress Genmei also ordered provincial governments to create regional gazetteers, called *fudoki*. They collected names of districts, natural resources, and local myths and legends. Of these only the *Izumo Fudoki* remains intact, showing an interesting collection of deities and creation myths different from the official mythology of *Kojiki*. One tells of the god Yatsukamizu Omitsuno. Discontented with the small size of his domain he saw other lands over the waters. Omitsuno cut off chunks of them and pulled them across the sea to create the Japanese archipelagos.

The Heian Period and Mononoke

The influence of cultural contact kick started the Heian period (794–1185), and with it a new sobriquet for Japanese supernatural. In the court history *Nihon Koki* (840), an entry says Mononoke were causing illness in the Imperial court. An *Onmyoji* court sorcerer was summoned to pacify them with prayers.

Mononoke is written **物の怪**
物 (mono) – thing, object, evil spirit
の (no) – possessive, "of"
怪 (ke, kai) – strange, wonderous, supernatural, weird

Also, incorporating 怪 (kai), Mononoke was adopted from the Chinese 物怪 (mokke) meaning things without form or voice. Mononoke were invisible, evil energy. Mononoke has a malevolent feel to it. The film title *Princess Mononoke* is more sinister in Japanese.



Tengu statue in front of Kurama Station, Kyoto, in front of Mount Kurama where Sojobo taught martial arts to Minamoto. b-hide the scene/ Shutterstock.com.

In a time before germ theory, illness was terrifying and mysterious. People fell ill for unperceivable reasons. Some got better. Some died. In the Heian period this was thought to be the work of Mononoke, and evil spirits called Yakubyogami. Vengeful spirits whose curses caused disease, Mononoke were often spirits of the dead. They attached themselves to living beings. *Onmyoji* could transfer or banish Mononoke, curing the possessed.

Mononoke was widely used and appears in other

literature of the time. The famed 11th century novels *Genji Monogatari* and *The Pillow Book* both mention Mononoke, as does historical fiction like *Okagami* (1119).

KONJAKU MONOGATARI – TALES OF TIMES NOW PAST

One of Japan's oldest collection of folktales, *Konjaku Monogatari*'s origin is a mystery. Neither author nor date are known. Estimated to have been completed sometime in the early 12th century, *Konjaku Monogatari* is the foundational text for all Yokai stories to follow. It collects supernatural tales of three countries, paralleling Buddhism's transmission from India, to China, and finally Japan.

Konjaku Monogatari are mostly morality tales involving humans and the supernatural. There are encounters with ghosts, talking animals, as well as Tengu and Oni. Tengu are evil Buddhists monks who have fallen off the path. Oni are malevolent spirits. The stories emphasize karmic retribution, showing punishment and rewards for sin and righteousness.

HYAKKI YAGYO – NIGHT PARADE OF A HUNDRED DEMONS

A story in *Konjaku Monogatari* tells of Fujiwara no Tsuneyuki out on a midnight stroll to meet his mistress, when he encountered a group of a hundred Oni. Fortunately, his wet nurse had sewn a Buddhist sutra into his clothing. This repelled the demons.

Similar tales of random encounters with monster hordes appear in other period texts. These stories end with the creatures fleeing before a talisman, demonstrating Buddha's power. Their number is often given as 100, which is not exact but means "really big number." The monsters are vaguely described. *Uji Shui Monogatari* (1220?) describes them as "having features such as a single eye."

From these stories spread belief in a nightmare parade that roamed the streets of Kyoto called *Hyakki Yagyo*. People took this parade seriously believing it was deadly to be caught in it. *Onmyoji* predicted the nights it would occur so people could stay home. However, there wasn't much to fear since holding a Buddhist talisman or chanting a simple charm protected you from the pandemonium.

Hyakki Yagyo is written **百鬼夜行**
百 (hyaku) – one hundred
鬼 (ki, oni) – evil spirit
夜 (ya) – night
行 (gyo) – to move

Hyakki Yagyo uses 鬼 (ki) instead of 怪 (kai). It is usually translated as the "Night Parade of 100 Demons," although this could easily be "Night Parade of 100 Oni."

MUROMACHI PICTURE SCROLLS

Yokai got something new and exciting during the Muromachi period (1336–573)—bodies. Inspired by *Hyakki Yagyo*, artists painted scrolls depicting a parade of creatures marching through the night. Called *Hyakki Yagyo-e*, the oldest extant comes from the 16th century, believed to have been painted by the artist Tosa Mitsunobu, although this is disputed. Known as the *Shinju-an* scroll, it is held in Daitokuji temple in Kyoto. There are records of older scrolls. An Edo period book *Honcho Gazu Hinmoku* tells of a 1316 scroll painted by Tosa Tsunetaka.

There are currently 18 surviving *Hyakki Yagyo-e*. They are not exact copies but have two distinct systems which modify which Yokai are represented and in what order. The *Shinju-an* scroll is the oldest and most basic in design, with fewer Yokai and less artistic flourishes. Most *Muromachi* scrolls follow these patterns with variations in order.

Recent discoveries uncovered another system of *Hyakki Yagyo*, with different Yokai and scenery. Most of these come from the early to late Edo period, however it is speculated that they are also copies of older scrolls now lost. The *Hyakki Yagyo Emaki* held at the Kyoto Municipal University of Arts is one of the earliest surviving of these.

We have no idea where the creature designs of either system originated, what their names were, or if they had stories. The Muromachi artists must have imitated some established template, but it is lost forever. Whatever their origin, these designs became the visual template for Yokai.

A red-haired Amabie (facing page) with the distinctive three fins. Christopher Volk/ Shutterstock.com.

A Kitsune guardian statue (below) at Fushimi Inari shrine in Kyoto with a messenger scroll in its mouth. Olivier Lejade/Flickr.com.

The Edo Period and Obakemono

The Edo period (1603–1867) is the golden age of Yokai. During a period of isolation, Japan experienced an explosion of art, literature, theater—and Yokai.

The Edo period was a perfect storm of invention. Newly discovered printing techniques brought entertainment to the masses. *Kabuki* theater was invented in Kyoto. And a parlor game called *Hyakumonogatari Kaidankai* swept the nation. In this game, players lit a hundred candles and took turns telling spooky stories. With each tale, a candle was extinguished. The atmosphere thickened as the room grew darker and darker. *Hyakumonogatari Kaidankai* was a test of courage; someone always stopped the game before the final candle went out.

Artists and writers found supernatural works in high demand...too much demand. There was a larger appetite for works of the weird than there

was for traditional folklore. Not ones to pass up opportunities, artists and writers began inventing new Yokai, or Obakemono, as they were known.

KINMOZUI – ILLUSTRATIONS TO INSTRUCT THE UNENLIGHTENED.

Japan's first illustrated encyclopedia, *Kinmozui*, was compiled by scholar Nakamura Tekisai in 1666. Combining illustrations with descriptions in both Chinese and Japanese, this was intended to teach children about the natural world. While a catalog of the natural, and not the supernatural, there are several entries for Yokai. During the Edo period these were considered real creatures.

WAKAN SANSAI ZUE – ILLUSTRATED SINO-JAPANESE ENCYCLOPEDIA

In 1712, Doctor Terajima Ryoan from Osaka created *Wakan Sansai Zue* containing entries on astronomy, botany, and biology. Considerably larger than *Kinmozui*, there are multiple entries for Yokai including the oldest known illustration for Kappa.

GAZU HYAKKI YAGYO – ILLUSTRATED NIGHT PARADE OF A HUNDRED DEMONS

A four-volume series by artist Toriyama Sekien, *Gazu Hyakki Yagyo* revolutionized the representation of Yokai. Instead of treating them as a group, it created individual accounts of Yokai, giving them set locations and identities. This series is the ancestor of all subsequent Yokai encyclopedias, including the venerated *Pokédex* of the media franchise Pokémon and the book you are reading now.

Obakemono is written **お化け物**
お (o) – an honorific meaning "honorable"
化け (bake) – changing
物 (mono) – thing, object, evil spirit

Bakemono and the diminutive Obake are still in use in modern Japanese. They are colloquial terms. Children especially use Obake over the more formal Yokai. You also hear the terms when referring to haunted houses, known as Obake Yashiki.

With a literal meaning of "changing things," Obakemono originally referred to shapeshifting creatures. With time it evolved to encompass all manner of monsters. Bakemono was used by artists for picture scrolls such as the *Bakemono no e* (17th or early 18th century).

In the Edo period that Yokai developed identities and personalities. Many folktales had previously been auditory phenomenon.

But artists cannot sell the invisible. Characters were envisioned for them. An example is yanari, meaning strange noises in a house. An artist cannot sell you a picture of strange noises, so Toriyama Sekien envisioned miniature elf-like creatures running around shaking a house to produce the sounds.

The Meiji Period and Yokai

At last, we come to when Yokai became Yokai. Although it has ancient origins, the word Yokai is a modern term that refers to Japan's supernatural creatures. It came about around the Meiji period, with the advent of academic Yokai research.

When the Edo period ended, Japan was pushed into the modern world. It was a rude awakening for the technologically stunted nation. Change was rapid as Japan adopted revolutionary advancements in technology and science. It was during this era, the Meiji period, that scholars first began researching Yokai. Professors needed to call them something, and Yokai was the chosen word. Researchers attempted to explain Yokai, define them, and structure Japan's eclectic supernatural world. They largely failed to bring about concensus, but their research was invaluable.

Kasaobake (facing page) stands on its one leg. G.Rena/Shutterstock.com.

A Tanuki (below) prepared for a journey and ready for adventure. Stygian_Art/Shutterstock.com.

TONO MONOGATARI – TALES OF TONO

Inspired by the Brothers Grimm, in 1910, folklorists Yanagita Kunio and Sasaki Kizen headed to the northern region of Tono to capture vanishing folklore and oral traditions. Writing down tales of Kappa and Zashiki Warashi, their book *Tono Monogatari* became the foundation for all folklore studies to follow.

The Showa Period and Manga

The Showa period was a turbulent time, from the destruction of World War II to the heights of the economic miracle and the Bubble Era then crash and crescendo all over again. For Yokai, it was a period of transition from folklore to pop culture.

Manga artist and folklorist Mizuki Shigeru was almost single-handedly responsible for the Showa Yokai boom. His comic *Kitaro* ignited a national mania for Yokai. Mizuki branched out beyond comics, creating Yokai encyclopedias, Yokai art books, and Yokai cartoons and films. His influence on modern culture cannot be overstated.

Others took up the torch, such as Takahashi Rumiko with her Yokai series *Urusei Yatsura* (1976). and *Inu Yasha* (1996). Her work inspired others, and Yokai steadily became a vital part of Japanese popular culture, which they remain to this day.