

Dreadful charm: *Yōkai* that resides at the threshold of the unknown

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One morning, you wake up and find a sharp but painless cut on your arm that seemingly appeared during the night. For a moment, your doughy head wonders how it happened – I don't have a cat or any animal of that kind in my household. I don't have anyone sleeping next to me. Did I happen to scratch myself while I was in dreamland? Well, it is neither bleeding nor painful. Nah, it is nothing serious, probably done by *kamaitachi*. Let's wake up and wash my face...

In Japanese folklore, this sort of harmless yet distinct cut that appears without one's knowledge is attributed to an imaginative species called *kamaitachi* (kama/sickle + itachi/weasel), a hybrid creature with weasel whose hands are sickles, who appears riding on the wind and cuts people with its hands leaving a visible but painless slit. *Kamaitachi* is one of the hundreds that are classified under the term *yōkai*, a word composed of *yō* (bewitching; attractive; calamity) and *kai* (apparition; spectre; strange; mystery; suspicious). In contemporary Japanese culture, *yōkai* is a handy concept to encompass virtually all the unaccountable, strange phenomena as well as monsters, spirits, ghosts, demons, supernatural entities and creatures. There are countless *yōkai* with elaborated characterisation which have been developed over long periods of time. They could be in humanoid figures, animals, plants, objects, hybrid imaginative creatures or architectures, while others don't accompany discernible shape. Some are naughty, malicious or mischievous, others are friendly and helpful. Some appear as a bad omen, others as a good one. Some exercise supernatural abilities such as shapeshifting, others don't. There is even a kind that does neither harm nor good, just residing so comfortably and rightly wherever they appear. Just to name a few; *azukiarai* ('azuki'/red beans + 'arai'/washing) refers to a ghostly phenomenon in which an unidentified sound as if beans are being washed is heard near a river or other type of water area. It is conceived as a grotesque hunched man with a naughty nature, who washes beans in water and drags people into the water if they approach him. *Nurarihyon* ('nurari' and 'hyon' are considered to derive from onomatopoeic expressions of the slippery and the ungraspable), which appears in a figure of an old man with a large bald head, enters a house unannounced in the evening and then drink tea and smoke as if it owned the house. *Kappa* is a mischievous hybrid creature with a human and turtle who lives in a river and loves cucumbers...and so on.

The types of *yōkai* are too numerous to mention, but their common feature is that they lurk in every corner of our living environment and appear as a continuation of daily life. This uncanny nature is most explicitly seen in one specific type of *yōkai* called *tsukumogami* ('tsukumo'/ninety-nine + 'kami'/deities). It refers to organic/inorganic things, objects, or tools that lived a hundred years and become alive and sentient. Old items that lived long enough to be *tsukumogami* make a procession at night, conspiring vengeance on the human. Probably, when Franz Kafka conceived of a strange animated object-creature named Odradek in his short story *The Cares of the Family Man* (1919), his imagination had an affinity for something like *tsukumogami*. This object-creature

Odradek, which looks like a flat star-shaped spool for thread, comfortably resides on the threshold area of the household such as the doorway, the corridor or the attic. It appears in front of the family man and makes him uncomfortable, sometimes speaking and answering to his questions in a quite infantile manner but mostly it stays in silence. It apparently looks innocent and fragile but also shows a naughty nature as if playing with the family man's perplexity, standing on its own in a peculiar upright posture mocking bipedal humans perhaps. Odradek manipulates, betrays, performs and laughs in response to the family man's presence. All in all, it is harmless but disturbing, and precisely because of its obscure being, it evokes an existential question to the family man; The idea that Odradek might outlive him and continue to appear in front of his descendants makes him anxious and painful. This peculiar story of Odradek has been variously discussed by major Western thinkers of the 20th century such as Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno whose project was to challenge the unitary system of Western thought and politics long defined by the monotheistic nature of Christianity. They saw Odradek as a prototype of distortion, the remnant of an entity produced at a tangent to itself by the anthropocentric forces at work in forming the 'human' subject as well as history. Tsukumogami in light of Odradek, or vice versa, gives us a glimpse into what appears at the limit of the human agency, where the idea of 'the human' fails, where the world of non-human unfolds.

Behind the world of *yōkai* lies animistic imagination that gives representations to the unknown and the unfathomable. It originates in the idea of *yaoyorozu no kami* ('eight million gods'), a belief that finds deities or supernatural entities inhabiting all things, which is a kind of animism that took root in Japan's ancient belief system – Shinto. Shinto is the oldest native ritual tradition which started as a form of nature worship and then evolved into a polytheistic belief system involving the conception of many deities. It is generally considered that when monotheism takes over one civilisation, a polytheistic belief system is pushed away to the peripheral area of spiritual life. Curiously enough, in Japan, Shinto has somehow managed to survive symbiotically with Buddhism which arrived in the 6th century from the Korean Kingdom of Baekje via China (Buddhism is arguably considered to have both polytheistic and monotheistic nature). The tradition of *yōkai* is the remnant of animistic thinking that has been preserved in the survival of Shinto. It has been exercised beyond the conventional form of religion, permeating all aspects of contemporary life, deeply rooted in people's psyche that is willing to see something other than itself.

In this context, wide varieties of *yōkai* have been developed down through the ages in an amalgam of folklore, myths and superstitions conglomerating Shinto, Buddhism and various local folk beliefs. The original meaning of the term *yōkai* merely referred to inexplicable phenomena or situations mysterious to people's minds and didn't carry such flamboyant representations and storytelling as it is today. They have been enriched by various writers and artists from generation to generation, particularly flourishing since the 18th century onwards following an ukiyo-e artist and scholar of Japanese folklore Sekien Toriyama's attempt to catalogue all species of *yōkai* in the *Hyakki Yagyō* ('Night Parade of One Hundred Demons') series (1776). Numerous popular ukiyo-e artists of

the 19th century such as Hokusai, Kuniyoshi and Kyōsai contributed to the kaleidoscopic world of *yōkai* by making up meticulously visual and narrative interpretations of what formerly didn't have clear description or figuration. It is quite common that there are several different versions of stories built around one *yōkai*. These stories were sometimes entirely fabricated by artists' imagination with a humorous twist, gradually acquired an entertaining quality and evolved into a form of popular horror and spooky stories and comedies. Still, reinterpretation and reinvention of *yōkai* are ongoing projects in contemporary Japanese culture. Among others, we can name Shigeru Mizuki, a 20th-century manga artist, historian and specialist in *yōkai* studies who published numerous mangas that represent encyclopedic varieties of *yōkai* based on traditional Japanese folktales as well as his imaginative creation. Mizuki, who served in Second World War, invigorated the field in the contemporary context of 20th century Japan incorporating wartime experiences of violence and inhumanity, animating the darker of the human psyche that was revealed in the extreme state between life and death.

Today, the world of *yōkai* appears as a living archive of collective imagination at work at the threshold of the unknown, offering a narrative comfort to the unaccountable, thus sometimes dreadful phenomena to our minds. As scientific and rational thinking has taken over the way we perceive the world, many of these 'unknown' phenomena started to be scientifically explicable, identified then demystified. Nonetheless, *yōkai* has existed and will always do, sending us a signal of distortion that illuminates the limit of what comprises the intelligible world. *Yōkai* lurks as the doppelganger of 'the human' for whose quotidian mind this world never stops being unfathomable.