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**Monsters Re-Visited: The Fantastic Creatures of Japan**

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# CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF BAKÉMONO IN ANCIENT, MEDIEVAL, EARLY MODERN, AND POSTMODERN JAPAN: THEIR SIGNIFICANCE TO THE JAPANESE PEOPLE

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## Introduction

The Japanese understanding of supernatural beings differs significantly from that of Western and Middle Eastern societies, which are rooted in Abrahamic monotheism. Monotheistic traditions draw a sharp ontological distinction between God as Creator and all created beings, including humans. In contrast, Japanese cosmology regards both *kami* (deities) and *bakémono* (monsters) as beings possessing extraordinary power beyond that of ordinary humans. In Shinto, when enshrined by the people, or in Buddhism, when ritually offered up, a *bakémono* once perceived as a threat can be transformed into a protective *kami*. In other words, the determination of whether a powerful presence is viewed as a benevolent *kami* or a malevolent *bakémono* depends on human perception and ritual engagement. This deeply embedded collective worldview may explain why Christianity has never gained more than 1% of the Japanese population, and why Judaism and Islam, despite centuries of missionary activity, have remained marginal.

Having been born in Japan during the mid-20th century—a period of rapid economic growth following the national crisis of wartime defeat—I perceived overwhelming supernatural forces not as medieval *yokai* (specters), but as *kaiju* (monsters) like Godzilla or Gamera. The Scientific Special Search Party (SSSP) functioned as a modern analogue to yin-yang masters and esoteric Buddhist monks, responsible for sealing away these monsters. However, when such monsters exceeded the limits of human science and technology, Ultraman emerged as a *deus ex machina*, instantly restoring a chaotic world to its original peaceful state. For digital natives, particularly Generation Z, who have grown up amidst the proliferation of personal computers and mobile devices, Japanese animation works such as “Pokémon” depict cooperative relationships between humans and creatures. The global popularity of these Japanese anime works may even signal a shift away from the monotheistic worldview that has dominated much of the world for over two millennia.

This paper explores the evolving concept of *bakémono* in Japanese culture by tracing its transformation across four historical periods: ancient, medieval, early modern, and postmodern.

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## 1. The meaning of “bakeru” in Japanese

Before delving into the historical trajectory of bakémono in Japan, it is essential to consider the meaning of the Japanese verb *bakeru*. According to Shogakukan’s “Digital Daijisen,” the Japanese verb “bakeru” has four main meanings.

(1) To change one’s original form or shape into something else—for example, a fox transforming into a human.

(2) To conceal one’s true identity and assume another—such as disguising oneself as an employee to gain unauthorized access.

(3) To undergo a complete transformation in purpose or nature—for instance, money intended for a book being spent on alcohol instead.

(4) To change suddenly or unexpectedly—for example, an actor’s reputation improving after a major incident, or dramatic fluctuations in stock prices.

Thus, the verb “bakeru” encompasses both positive and negative connotations, fundamentally referring to a significant transformation in state or condition. It is quite fitting that in the middle of the 19th century, the Japanese of that time translated “chemistry,” a field of natural science introduced from the West, into the Japanese word “bakegaku (study of transforming).” A familiar example is the chemical reaction whereby hydrogen and oxygen gases combine to form water. However, this transformation does not occur simply by mixing the gases; it requires a catalyst—such as a spark—to initiate the reaction. In other words, for transformation to occur, cause and effect alone are insufficient; in Buddhist thought, the concept of karma serves as the mediating link between them. Thus, karma emerges as a key concept in understanding the historical development of bakémono in Japan.

## 2. The Ancient Period: *Onryō* (Vengeful Spirit) and *Mononoke*

In both Western and Eastern primitive societies, humans were largely powerless in the face of natural disasters and infectious disease outbreaks (Tamas & Tanaka 2020: 5). Throughout the world, *Homo sapiens*—so-called “wise apes”—commonly posited invisible spiritual beings as working hypotheses to explain the seemingly irrational cruelty of nature. Especially in the Japanese archipelago, where the frequency of natural disasters—earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, and typhoons—far exceeds the global average, people came to recognize and revere the forces of nature themselves as *kami*. This aligns with the definition of *kami* proposed by the 18th-century physician and literary scholar Motoori Norinaga, who wrote: “Whatever it may be, that which is extraordinary, virtuous, and awe-inspiring, we call *kami*.” (Hirota 2022: 122-123) In such a worldview, *kami* does not always act in favor of humans and may at times bring harm. Conversely,

yokai—typically associated with negative traits—can also bestow blessings (Komatsu 1982).

What, then, determines the variable attributes of kami in the Japanese context? According to folklorist Kazuhiko Komatsu, benevolent kami are divine spirits rendered controllable by humans through the act of ritual enshrinement. In contrast, demons or yokai are considered beyond human control precisely because they have not been ritually enshrined (Komatsu 2017: 87). The most well-known example is Sugawara no Michizane (845–903), who, after being falsely accused by political rivals, was demoted and sent to Dazaifu in Kyushu, where he died harboring a deep grudge. After his death, he was believed to have become a vengeful spirit who caused natural disasters in the capital, Kyoto. These disturbances were eventually quelled when the Imperial Court built a shrine in his honor and enshrined him as Tenman Daijizaitenjin.



Onryô by Adam Cooley

During the Heian period (794-1185), the word “mononoke” was frequently used to refer to grudge spirits. At the time, most mononoke were believed to be the spirits of individuals bearing grudges, and they rarely manifested directly before people. When represented in paintings or sculptures, they were often portrayed as muscular ogres with horns and skin colored red, blue, or green.

In the medieval period, however, a new interpretation emerged: mononoke were sometimes understood as *tsukumogami*, spirits dwelling in aged household objects. These yokai were incorporated into the ranks of oni (demons) and

became associated with the concept of the “Hyakki Yagyō” or “Night Parade of One Hundred Demons.” Alternatively, disembodied human features such as eyes, mouth, arms, and legs appeared as independent supernatural entities. Some yokai even took hybrid forms, combining human body parts with everyday objects such as lanterns or umbrellas.

### 3. The Middle Ages: Tsukumogami and Mononofu

What exactly are tsukumogami? The illustrated tale *Hijō Jōbutsu-e* (“The Scroll of Sentientless Enlightenment”), believed to have been written during the Muromachi period (1336–1573), is commonly known as Tsukumogami Emaki due to its depiction of tsukumogami in the opening scene. According to this scroll, tsukumogami are household items or utensils that, after a hundred years of use, acquire a spirit and begin to tempt or haunt humans.



Chōchin Obake (“a transformed lantern”)—Tsukumogami by Adam Cooley

Does this imply that mononoke in the Heian period referred primarily to vengeful human spirits, whereas by the Muromachi period, the term came to include tsukumogami—specters originating from discarded household objects? By the era of Ashikaga Yoshimitsu, the third shogun of the Muromachi shogunate, powerful temples such as Kōfukuji and Enryakuji had significantly expanded their influence. In addition, financiers known as *dōsō-sakaya* flourished in and around Kyoto, benefiting from the vast wealth generated by trade between Japan and Ming-dynasty China (Miyake 2019: 138-144). With the advent of consumer society, affluent city dwellers began to discard old but still usable vessels.

A widespread belief held that after a hundred years of use, a vessel would acquire a spirit and begin to seduce or influence the hearts of people. Out of fear of this transformation, city dwellers would discard their old vessels during year-end cleanings—often one year before the centennial mark. In Japan, it was widely believed that all things in the universe possessed spiritual potential. Thus emerged the concept of *tsukumogami*, a compound of the *kun-yomi* “*tsukumo*”—meaning “ninety-nine,” one short of a hundred—and “*kami*”, meaning a spirit or deity. During this time, social authority shifted from the aristocracy—who had feared *Mononoke*—to the *mononofu* (samurai), who used military force to suppress such supernatural entities.

If we examine *tsukumogami* within the framework described in the second subchapter—where benevolent *kami* are spirits made controllable through ritual enshrinement, whereas demons or *yokai* remain beyond human control due to their lack of ritual acknowledgment—we gain a deeper understanding of their cultural function. In Japan, objects that were no longer used for their original purpose and were not properly ritually treated—neither offered in the Buddhist sense nor enshrined in the Shinto sense—were believed to transform into *yokai*. This serves as a potent reminder for contemporary society, which takes mass production, consumption, and disposal for granted.

#### 4. Early Modern Times: Ghosts and *Monoshiri*

It is perhaps surprising that the entities now commonly feared in Japan as *yūrei* (ghosts) did not emerge in their recognizable form until the Edo period (1603–1867), following the violent Sengoku (Warring States) era and over two centuries of relative peace. In culturally rich cities like Kyoto and Osaka, numerous scholarly works on Buddhism, Confucianism, history, literature, geometry, and pharmacology were published, giving rise to a class of intellectuals known as *monoshiri* (“those who know things”). During the Edo period, Japan is believed to have had one of the highest literacy rates in the world, particularly among the common people. While literacy rates in major European cities such as Paris and London during the same period hovered around 10–20%, Edo (now Tokyo) reportedly achieved an estimated literacy rate of 80%. Literacy extended beyond the samurai and merchant classes—whose professions required reading, writing, and arithmetic—to include craftsmen, children, and even courtesans. In Edo, a variety of printed media flourished thanks to woodblock printing. Popular genres included *akahon* (children’s folktales with red covers), *kurohon* (romantic tales), *aohon* (light entertainment fiction), *kibyōshi* (illustrated comic books), and *sharebon* (stories set in red-light districts). These books were widely circulated not only through bookstores but also via rental book services.

Numerous ghost story collections were published, including the “three great ghost tales of Edo”—*Yotsuya Kaidan*, *Banchō Sarayashiki*, and *Botan*

*Dōrō*—as well as works like *Totonoigusa*, *Kaii Zatsudanshū*, *Sorori Monogatari*, *Otogibōko*, *Shokoku Hyaku Monogatari*, and *Shin Otogibōko*. These stories inspired diverse media forms such as *rakugo* (comic storytelling), *kōdan* (oral narrative), kabuki theater, and ukiyo-e prints. As a result, ghosts and *yōkai* became consumable cultural icons for audiences seeking novel and sensational experiences.

Scholars have identified four recurring themes in Edo-period ghost stories: (1) the obsessive love or vengeance of women, often the cause of supernatural disturbances; (2) karmic retribution for the immoral acts of parents toward their children; (3) unexpected appearances of *yōkai* in various grotesque forms; and (4) animal transformations, in which familiar creatures morph into demonic entities (*Edo no Kaidan* 2021: 5-7). Thus, the *onryō* (grudge spirits) that once haunted the aristocracy in ancient times gradually evolved—via *tsukumogami* in the medieval period—into *bakemono* that served as popular entertainment for the common people in early modern Japan.

### 5. Modern and Post-modern Times: Kaiju and Pokémon

In the mid-19th century, under pressure from Western military threats, Japan was compelled to open her borders and subsequently transformed herself from a feudal polity under the Tokugawa shogunate into a modern nation-state in an effort to overcome her perceived backwardness. In the process, Japan adopted Western political systems and scientific paradigms, systematically discarding elements of traditional Japanese thought as “superstition.” Through these reforms, the country rapidly constructed a modern state apparatus and, by the early 20th century, had emerged as a peer among the Western powers. However, the animistic worldview that had been cultivated in Japan over millennia could not be eradicated overnight. This latent cosmology resurfaced following Japan’s defeat in World War II, as the Western model of civilization—based on wealth, power, and military dominance—began to lose its authority.

This resurgence contributed to a postwar boom in new religious movements and monster films, both of which gained a lasting foothold amid Japan’s era of rapid economic growth. As the role of monstrous threats and Ultraman as a *deus ex machina* has already been addressed in the Introduction, this section instead focuses on the postmodern era, characterized by the proliferation of digital and internet technologies. In this context, the releases of Microsoft’s Windows 95 operating system in 1995 and Nintendo’s Pokémon game in 1996 marked key turning points in the digital and cultural landscape. Originating as a single video game, Pokémon rapidly expanded into animation, card games, and merchandise, reviving the multi-platform media strategy that had historical precedents in the Edo period.

Pokémon is structured as a role-playing game in which a child protagonist collaborates with various creatures—such as Pikachu—to achieve shared

objectives. This collaborative narrative model—where humans and non-human creatures interact as equals—has found particular resonance in Japan, likely due to deeper cultural and religious foundations. One possible reason for the deep cultural affinity toward such narratives lies in the syncretism of Japanese religious traditions. Mahayana Buddhism, introduced during the Asuka period (mid-6th century), spread more rapidly in Japan than in China or Korea, with which it shares historical transmission. Its lasting appeal may be due to its successful integration with indigenous animistic beliefs, allowing it to coexist with Shintoism—the so-called “national religion” of Japan—for over a millennium. In particular, the Tendai Buddhist school’s interpretation of the Lotus Sutra—which holds that “all sentient beings possess Buddhahood”—had a profound influence on Japanese Buddhism after the Heian period, leading to the formation of numerous sects collectively known as Hokkemon. This doctrinal attitude resonates with the worldview presented in Pokémon, which emphasizes coexistence between humans and non-human creatures without hierarchical distinction.

Human civilization is now entering an entirely unprecedented phase marked by the rapid development and diffusion of generative AI. Given their long-standing cultural tendency to attribute personality or spirit to inanimate objects (mono), the Japanese may be particularly inclined to accept AI entities as having agency—much like they have done with monsters and robots in fiction and belief. It remains to be seen what forms of “new bakémono” may emerge within this technological milieu—and how they might catalyze transformations in the Japanese cultural imagination.

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