

The Obscuritan

Dipping one's toe into the murkiest depths of Lore.



About Us

The Obscuritan...

is a Student, Lay Occultist and quintissential Englishman, who gluts himself deep upon the dark, the dreary and the Weird, and occasionally displays the carcasses on his Blog. Updates 3-4 times a month.

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Sunday, 14 June 2009

Japanese Creatures I: Yokai

*Hello folks, and welcome to The Obscuritan. Our port of call this month is Japan, where we'll be taking a look at some of the Ghouls and Ghosts of Feudal Japan – the **Yokai** (Goblins), **Bakemono** and **Henge** (Shapeshifters and monstrous animals) and **Yurei** (Ghosts) and **Tsukumogami** (Living Objects). The terms Yokai and Bakemono (“thing that changes”) are often used interchangeably. For the time being, we'll be using the name Yokai to talk about the “species” of creatures – namely, those that are born as monsters – and Bakemono for creatures or objects which have become monsters. Expect more on these in the next 2 weeks.*

YOKAI

Simply put, the name **Yokai** (Yōkai, Youkai) is equivalent to Goblin or Monster, but just like the English words, this label encompasses thousands of different creatures. And, just like the Goblins and Monsters in the popular consciousness, stories of the Yokai include many thousands of miscellaneous “Goblins” for which there are no name, and indeed many entirely invented by the many artists such as Toriyama Sekien who popularized them (of which I have included a few). Nevertheless, there are many that have become popular characters, and we'll explore some of them here. Some appear to be explanations for various phenomena, others are merely creatures who enjoy doing (or are forced to do) such things. Some are mischievous, some are dangerous, and most are utterly bizarre.

Azuki-Arai

A little bearded man, the Azuki-Arai sits down by the river with a big pot of red Azuki beans, casually singing to himself “*Shall I wash my Azuki Beans, or shall I catch a human to eat? Shoki Shoki!* [the sound of beans being washed]”. The answer, thankfully isn't homicidal; the Azuki-Arai is very timid, and dives into the river, beans and all, at the mere sound of a person approaching.



Akaname

This creature takes the form of a small child, who visits the bathrooms and washhouses of the unhygienic, where it licks the surfaces of toilets, baths and sinks. While on the surface of it this makes them look clean, the saliva of the Akaname carries virulent disease. Speaking of nocturnal lickings, the **Tenjo-Name**, a similar spirit who is never seen but whose presence seldom goes unnoticed, licks other surfaces throughout the house, particularly the ceilings, leaving damp, worn-through patches.

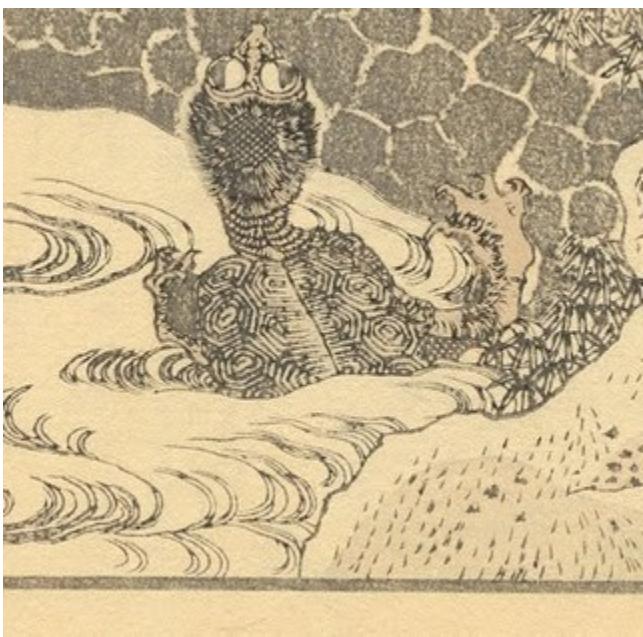
Betobeto-san

Those who find themselves walking alone at night may get the feeling that they are being followed, and sometimes even hear faint footsteps on the road. The Betobeto-san is invisible, and seemingly does not harm those who it follows, but for those who become increasingly disturbed by this presence, one only has to step aside and indicate for

the creature to go ahead for it to carry on about its way, leaving you to go about yours.

Hitotsume Kozo

A small childlike spirit sometimes dressed in monk's clothing which frolics around settled areas causing mischief and scaring people with its large, cyclopean eye. Although it usually does not do any harm, it is also said to be a harbinger of disease, and can usually be shamed into fleeing by hanging up a collander, mocking the Hitotsume Kozo's one eye with its many.



Kappa

A malicious water-spirit which appears as a short, man-sized bipedal turtle with an apelike beaked face and a hollow indentation in its skull filled with water. This creature lurks in waterways, drowning swimming children and killing people relieving themselves in the river by ripping out their intestines via their anus. Mothers would throw cucumbers in the water to appease the kappa while their children swam, and warriors could easily defeat them in wrestling matches by bowing to them - returning the favour, the water of life would fall out of the Kappa's head, weakening it greatly.

Nobiagari

This creature takes a variety of forms, often appearing as a living shadow or in the form of a priest. Either way, it

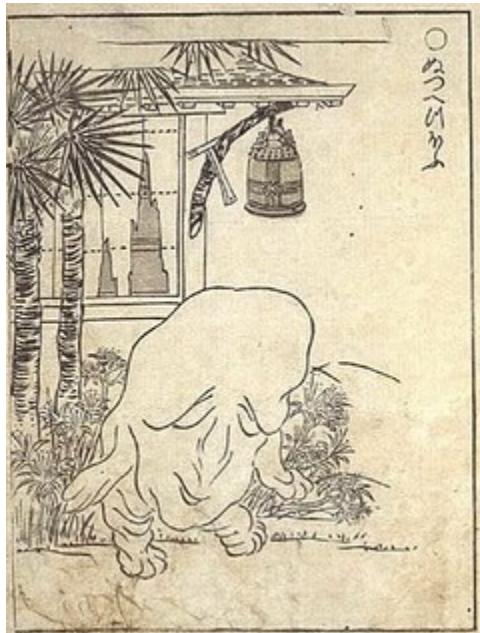
assails humans by creeping up behind them in their shadow. Once the unwitting person notices the presence and turns round, the Nobiagari grows quickly to a tremendous height as the person cranes their neck to look further and further up. Usually this is merely a prank designed to make the victim fall flat on their behind, though in some accounts the creature uses this opportunity to lunge at the victim's throat. Said in some cases to be a manifestation of a Henge, either a fox, a badger or in one region the (now-extinct) Japanese River-Otter.



Noppera-bo

A being which takes the form of a normal human being, save for a smooth, featureless face, which enjoys using this form to torment humans. However, some accounts may place it as a **Bakemono** (therefore a human who has had their features removed somehow). Those who travel late at night are often harassed by Noppera-bo in teams, where one will converse with the traveller for a while before revealing its disfigurement, whereupon the traveller will flee to a nearby food-cart or somesuch and frantically explain their plight to the owner, describing the creature's appearance. The owner will then turn round to face the victim, revealing its own blank face and ask "Like this?".

This being is often mistakenly given the name **Mujina**, which is in fact the name of the Henge goblin-badger (more on Henge next month). This problem derived from Lafcadio Hearn's *Kwaidan* (Stories of Strange Things, one of the earliest English collections of Japanese folklore) giving it that name, though it is possible that the shapeshifting Mujina may assume this form, as can other Henge.



Nuppeppo

These creatures wander aimlessly around settled areas in the dead of night at years end. Roughly humanoid, they appear as large, blobby mountains of flesh with no visible eyes or mouths, and reportedly stink of rotting flesh. They pose no threat to humans, and if one can manage to kill and eat one, its flesh is said to bestow eternal life and vitality. One was reported to have appeared in the court of Tokugawa Ieyasu, who only found out about its properties after he had had it safely released.

Oni

Often used generically to mean "demon", Oni are actually closer to Ogres. Oni roam the land in packs or gangs, and appear as large, muscular men with sharp claws and teeth, horns and manes of hair, often wearing Tigerskin loincloths. This combination of Tiger and Ox

features stems from their origins in the Northeast direction - North and East being represented in Astrology by these animals - in which lies the Kimon Gate to the underworld. Though these creatures often get drunk and commit wanton destruction, there are tales of repentant Oni becoming monks and priests. Furthermore, at the start of the year, villagers would parade through the village throwing Azuki beans to repel the Oni, shouting "Oni out, Good Luck In!"



Otoroshi

This creature lurks at the entrances to Shinto temple-complexes and acts as a sort of nocturnal guardian. When impious or hostile people attempt to pass through the entrance *Torii* gate, the Otoroshi leaps down upon them and devours them. However in other accounts, it also does this in other high places and generally preys upon humans.

Shōjō

The first occurrence of these spirits was in China, where similar creatures called Xīng Xīng or Shēng Shēng (fittingly meaning “Lively-lively”) were recorded in the ancient bestiary “Shan Hai Jing” (Classic of Mountains and Seas). In the Shan Hai Jing, however, accounts vary as to its appearance, being either green or blue, an ape or a hog with a human face. The Japanese incarnation, however, takes the form of a short manlike spirit with a mane of flame-red hair (sometimes a whole hairy body) and matching skin. Much more friendly than most Yokai,

in stories where it occurs it is perpetually drunk with Sake, and is more than happy to share with humans. In one folk story it grants Sake with healing properties, but with a catch that only the pure hearted gain any benefit, and in the Noh play *Shojo Midare*, it rewards the owner of the wine-cart it frequents with a jar that never empties. Shares its name, fittingly, with the Japanese name for Orang-utan.

Tengu



Its name meaning "Heavenly Dog", derived from the Chinese Tiāngǒu, a dog which would devour the sun during eclipses, these are perhaps the most Goblinlike of the Yokai, appearing dressed as men in the garb of the mystic mountain priests (Yamabushi) either in humanoid form (**Hanadaka-Tengu**) or as crowlike beings (**Karasu-Tengu**). Though very powerful, Tengu are generally ambivalent, and spend their time in the mountains away from people, tricking those that do pass by. However, many stories have featured the Tengu manipulating events in the background, whether by starting wars through their shapeshifting abilities, or by training great heroes in the warrior arts, such as Minamoto no Yoshitsune.



The Night Parade (Hyakki Yakō)

During the summer nights, Yokai, Bakemono and other spirits are believed to gather together and march through the streets, the crowd growing larger and larger as they go as the many creatures of the city join them. A popular choice for artists, allowing them to draw many different sorts of Yokai as well as make up their own. Though artists usually depicted these phenomena as humorous, and as long as one remains in the home one is usually safe, these parades included creatures both mischievous and dangerous.

This is only a brief glance at a few of these creatures - there are far, far more I haven't yet talked about. Expect a follow-up series in the near future featuring more.

Monday, 15 June 2009

Japanese Creatures II: Bakemono and Tsukumogami

Hello and welcome to *The Obscuritan*. This week we continue our tour of the critters of supernatural Japan with the Bakemono and, because we're so nice, the Tsukumogami as well.

What distinguishes the Bakemono from creatures such as the Yokai is that, rather than born-and-bred creatures of a certain species which in some cases happen to appear human (mostly in order to prey upon or mock them), the Bakemono are initially ordinary humans or objects. However, the residue of strong emotions, particularly violent ones such as hatred, causes these creatures to develop in strange ways. In the case of humans this emotion is one that drove it in life or tainted its death. While objects can't feel these emotions, they can, in certain circumstances, absorb them.

Battlefields



As you can imagine, the Battlefield is one such circumstance where both objects and humans both experience these kind of emotions. A couple of Bakemono particularly associated with these places include:

Abumi-Guchi

Wandering alone or in groups in remote fields late at night are small furry creatures that shuffle around in the long grass. On closer inspection, these creatures have torn ropes for limbs and the footplate of a stirrup for a mouth. The Abumi-Guchi are in fact these stirrups, broken off in the heat of some ancient battle and never collected by their slain masters. These abandoned objects crawl around the battlefields to this day.

Odokuro

Occurring not only in battlefields but also in other places where one finds large heaps of anonymous corpses. The bones of these beings, left stewing in their own rage and rotting remains eventually become one collective entity, driven by their hatred of the living. These bones join together, as one colossal skeleton or a construction of individual bones, hunting and devouring living humans, adding their bones to their bodies. One of these creatures famously occurs in Kuniyoshi's painting "*Mitsukuni defying the skeleton spectre invoked by princess Takiyasha*". Here, it is an apparition of a single, large skeleton, which looms over the horizon similar to the **Kerakera-onna** (more on her next time).

Jubokko



While the Odokuro was formed from the bones of dead soldiers, the blood of those slain and wounded in battle can also transmit their rage. Soaking into the soil, taking the anguish and battle-lust with it, it is soaked up into the roots of trees, infecting them in turn. These trees outwardly show no sign of change, and indeed appear fully nourished. However, should one seek shelter underneath this tree, its branches will snatch you up and drain you of your own blood, your bones left to feed its roots.

Me-kurabe

Similar to the Odokuro we have discussed, this being has only been seen once, and for a very good reason. Taira no Kiyomori, a warlord of the 12th Century, rose to power through a series of bloody battles, famously warring against the Minamoto clan and establishing what would go on to be the Shogunate government system. All this war, however, produced a lot of casualties, and upon one occasion it seems some of them took it upon themselves to highlight this, appearing in his garden in a great horde before rolling together and staring at him ominously. Taira, unperturbed, stared right back until they left. Hiroshige depicted these skulls as appearing from the very trees and rocks of the garden itself – see if you can spot ‘em all.



Humans

While furious death in battle are the surest way to an unhappy afterlife, there are other means of becoming a Bakemono. Some even become these entities while still alive, and appear to be human to outward appearances.

Dorotabo

Unlike many Bakemono, the man who becomes one of these creatures is entirely a victim of circumstance. All his life, this farmer lovingly tilled his fields of crops, putting his sweat and tears of effort into it to produce crop after healthy crop until the day he dies. Trouble is, his descendants have fingers far less green, and promptly let the field go to waste.

However, the furious spirit of the farmer returns to the field it tended, rising from the waist up from the mud and howling in its fury for the return of its land.

Futa-kuchi-onna

This female Bakemono is primarily fuelled by greed. Throughout Japanese history, large portions of the population were living in deep poverty, and for some women (and in a few stories men) their own hunger was more important to them than that of their families, particularly any stepchildren or foster-children. This hunger never truly leaves them, however, as a second mouth, ravenously hungry, grows from the back of their head. Long snaking tendrils of hair will reach out as the creature sleeps, devouring the piles of food that it otherwise ceases to eat during the day.

Hari-onago

Walking the road at night, one might encounter a woman brushing her long, long hair. If you strike her fancy, she may laugh at you. Laugh back, and she will chase you down and dismember you with the razor-sharp hooks on the end of her long hairs.



Ohaguro-bettari

Ohaguro means Blackened Teeth, a common practice amongst soon-to-be-Brides, and a mouthful of blackened teeth is the distinguishing feature of this female creature, and indeed the only feature on its blank, smooth face. Unlike the Nopperabo we looked at last time, this creature's appearance is a result of its own resentment of married women – in some stories it is the merchant who sells the squid ink for blackening, in others an unattractive (therefore unmarried) woman.



A similar creature, the **Ao-Nyōbō** lurks in abandoned castles. Like the Ohaguro-bettari, she has blackened teeth, but also dresses in Heian courtly robes, and devours any young men who pass her way. Curiously, lends its name to a sexual slang term for a woman faint from, *ahem*, “over-activity” with a well... *equipped* husband.

Rokuro-kubi

Another predominantly female variety of Bakemono, and another one that has suffered a mis-labeling (once again, blame Lafcadio Hearn). Of the two similar types of creature, the Rokuro-kubi is the better known. While otherwise a normal woman, who perhaps is a little shy, but can have families and children in the usual fashion, at night the sleeping head reawakens, and stretches itself out via its long, rubbery neck in order to explore. It feeds on insects at night, though in some tales it absorbs the Qi energy from other sleeper's breath.



The other variety of note is the **Nuekubi** - this being is the same, but in local legend these women detach their heads entirely and float about their business. Hearn noted that, if the body was moved from its sleeping place and hidden, the head could not find it, and would dash its head against the ground until it died.

Tesso

This Bakemono, literally the "Iron Rat", dates back to the Heian period and a monk named Raigo. Raigo died as a result of a hunger strike - the local Lord promised the temple would be refurbished if the monks prayed for a royal son, but the due reward was stalled by political rivalries. The end result was that the monk's gnawing hunger and anger at the rival temples led to his rebirth as Tesso, a huge, mansized Rat in

monk's clothing, who also commanded swarms of normal rodents. These rats proceeded to devour their way through a large portion of the Enryaku temple's Buddhist artifacts before being sealed underground. However, rats are nothing if not born survivors.

Wanyudo

Originally found in Kyoto during the Heian period, but encounters have been reported across Japan since then. A certain local Baron, corrupt and tyrannous, was assassinated one day as he was traveling in a horse-drawn carriage. His sheer indignant fury at being cut down led to his being reincarnated as a burning cartwheel with a roaring human head in the centre. He now tears down from the mountains on certain nights and speeds through the main street of town in the dead of night, and any who cross his path or even look upon him are instantly incinerated.

Tsukumogami

The clue to these being's natures are in the name, the characters of which (付喪神) can also be read as “99 Gods”. When a well used and/or beloved household object reaches 100, or in some cases when it is thrown away, the emotions invested in that object of love and respect lead to it taking on a life of its own. Usually merely choosing to embark on a campaign of mischief, enjoying their new-found lives, sometimes they bear a grudge against the people who threw them away. They are often drawn out for the Night Parades through the city at certain times of the year (See last month's article). Dolls, being the most humanlike of these objects, have for many years been taken to the Kiyomizu Kannondo Temple in Tokyo for the Ningyo Kuyo ceremony. Here, they are thanked for a lifetime of happy memories, before being burned and sent on to the afterlife, and into the arms of the Bodhisattva of compassion, Kannon.

Many of these creatures occur often in artwork and stories throughout the years. Some of the more frequent include:

Bake-Zori – A discarded sandal which scampers through the house muttering to itself.

Biwa-bokuboku – An enchanted Biwa lute that can only be played by certain people.

Boroboro-Ton - A ratty old bedding sheet, which presses down upon the sleeper and suffocates them.

Bura-bura – A ripped, ragged lamp which floats in the air spewing fire.

Kameosa – A bottle of Sake which, having received a good life from its many owners, is benevolent to humans, providing an unlimited amount of whatever fluid is put in.

Kara-kasa - A battered umbrella with a hairy leg for a pole, a long tongue and a cyclopean eye.

Kosode no Te - A child's Kimono, handed down for years but often the first thing to be pawned in hardship, it channels the will of those who used to wear it.

Koto-furunushi – Another enchanted instrument, a doglike creature born from a Koto (slide-guitar).

Mokumoku Ren – A battered screen door in abandoned houses, which glares at those who sleep behind it with eyes in its holes.

Seto Taisho – Soldiers made of cutlery which attack Kitchen staff. Mostly harmless, and prone to dashing itself apart when it charges, only to piece it together and start again.



Shamisen-choro -

There are, however, some which are unique. These two panels come from a children's book featuring the Hyakki Yako night parade. From what we can tell, one of the creatures on the left is born from a Calligraphy brush, and one of the two on the right from rolls of Yen coins. They don't appear to have a name, and since they come from a children's book, we wouldn't hold out much hope on their being from Ancient Lore or Legend, just perhaps from a house where people don't take enough care of their things.

Since this article's a little earlier than last week, we'll give the Henge a separate article this week as well. Trust us, there's so much lore on them, they need all the space I can give 'em.

Posted by The Obscuritan... at [17:45](#)

Labels: [Asia](#), [Japan](#), [monsters](#), [spirits](#), [transformation](#)

[liluna73](#) said...

hi! I would like to know if you could give me some tips on books about japanese folklorical creatures.
thks!

[6 October 2009 20:48](#)



[The Obscuritan...](#) said...

Some of the more useful ones i've found are U.A. Casal's "The Goblin Fox and Badger and other witch animals of Japan" which you can get in PDF form pretty easily. Hiroko Yoda's "Yokai Attack!" is good too, and Stephen Addiss' "Japanese Ghosts and Demons" is very in-depth and scholarly. Hope that helped!

Friday, 26 June 2009

[Japanese Creatures III: Henge](#)

Hello, and welcome once again to The Obscuritan. We continue our tour of supernatural Japan with a look at the Henge, or monstrous animals. Many of these creatures have whole volumes worth of stories associated with them, and would require entire articles each to do them justice, but for now a summary will have to suffice.

Often classed as either forms of [Yokai](#) or [Bakemono](#), the **HENGES** are different enough so as to deserve their own category. Much like the Bakemono, the Henge are initially ordinary creatures of their own type. However, it is not extreme emotion that usually leads to their transformation but extreme age – usually reaching the age of 100 is seen as bestowing supernatural powers and a malevolent consciousness upon an animal. These powers are apt to vary from creature to creature, and in different regions such individual creatures may be venerated in dedicated shrines much like minor Kami spirits, for fear that they should be angered into a destructive rampage.



Kitsune (Fox)

One of the most widely recognized of all Yokai, Henge and Bakemono put together, both at home and abroad, the Kitsune is an import from China, though scholars have traced possible influences as far back as India. The power of the fox is tied into the number of tails it possesses – more than one tail being the hallmark of specifically a Kitsune, a new tail is said to grow every 100 years, although sometimes a Kitsune may “earn” a new tail through great deeds. The greater the number of tails, and thus age, of the Kitsune imbues many insidious powers, typically of illusions and shapeshifting, although some are able to fold the very fabric of space in an area to create a whole home under a floorboard, for example. Many Kitsune may team up to create the illusion of whole forests of trees and villages of buildings. Folklorist Kiyoshi Nozaki described there being thirteen “types” of Kitsune, in a hierarchy related to the elements. On the whole, Kitsune are ambivalent creatures, prone to proud behaviour and vindictive cruelty if angered. However, their shapeshifting is sometimes put to use in taking human form to seduce unknowing people, who may well take them for a spouse and sire (perhaps not entirely?) human children by them. However, the Kitsune is frequently fulfilling their own agendas by doing so – as a type of spirit, they are often symbiotically linked to elements occurring in nature or to shrines and sacred spaces, and if a Kitsune links itself to a human, it may suck their life-force from them. Kitsune do, however, co-operate with humans in many stories, and have even been made use of in the past by humans against their will. Witches



(usually termed *tsukai* or ‘users’ of various spirits) may have small fox spirits bound in pipes as **Kuda-gitsune** familiars, and in some northeastern regions, foxes were starved to death with food just out of their reach (similar to the Inugami we shall discuss in due time) and the food would be mixed with clay and shaped into a fox, possession of which granted prophetic powers.

A related phenomena is the **Kitsune-bi** or foxfire, a baleful green-glowing flame which the Kitsune can generate, and amongst other things be utilized in lamps for their nighttime processions. The name also can denote the phenomena occurring on its own or being caused by other creatures.

The Kami (deity) of fertility, Inari, is commonly associated with the Fox, and statues of Kitsune dedicated to him can be found in the vast majority of Japanese villages and towns, as well as in shrines in modern megacorps seeking prosperity.

Tanuki (Raccoon-Dog)

Of a much more friendly and humorous nature than the Kitsune, the Tanuki has found equal favour amongst the Japanese, and through media such as Miyazaki’s film *Pom Poko* are slowly being noticed in the west as well. Tanuki are based upon the Japanese Raccoon Dog, a canine despite its similarity to the Raccoon, although Tanuki is often



mistranslated as either Raccoon or Badger (for Badgers, see **Mujina** below). Known perhaps even more so than the Kitsune for its shapeshifting, the power of the Tanuki lies not in its tail but in its scrotum. Depicted as unusually large in artworks, their scrotums could be stretched out, shaped and to all appearances become anything from a table to a boat. Indeed, one tale recounts a man taking shelter from the wilderness for the night in the house of a friendly person. Gratefully receiving food and other hospitalities, it is only when the traveller carelessly drops their lit pipe on the floor, that the whole house and its contents are revealed to be the illusion of a somewhat scorched Tanuki. Sometimes Tanuki illusions are undone by their failure to think ahead – one for example successfully fooled a Samurai into thinking he was a tree-branch, until he spread both arms out, lost his grip and fell out of the tree. This shapeshifting often leads the Tanuki to take the form of other supernatural beings and phenomena. In the Kajawa region, the Ashi-magari, a supernatural force which trips up travellers, is envisioned to be the tail of a mischief-minded Tanuki, and others may take the form of notorious Bakemono (see last week's article) to scare townsfolk.

The most famous tale involving the Tanuki is **Bunbuku Chagama**, variously known as *The accomplished and lucky tea-kettle* (or simply *The magic Tea-Kettle* in Lang's Crimson Fairy Book version), which is illustrative of the ease with which these friendly creatures form bonds with humans.



Mujina (Badger)

These Henge have seen their place in popular consciousness fade somewhat in recent years, both due to the popularity of the Tanuki, as the similarity of these two creatures leads to a blending of the folklore, and a misappropriation of the name Mujina to the Nopperabo (a faceless humanoid Bakemono we looked at last time) by early folklorist Lafcadio Hearn. The confusion with the Tanuki has unfortunately infiltrated even the academic forum, making distinguishing lore for each distinct creature difficult.

While capable of being as friendly to those who show it favour as any other Henge, the Mujina is more ambivalent than its jovial peer, and accidentally disturbing its den or killing a mate or cub may lead to an individual being terrorized by the vengeful being in the many forms it may take. It may also take on human form for protracted periods, but unlike the Kitsune, who usually takes the form of a beautiful woman (the Fox

Princess of many stories) in order to entice men, the Mujina takes the form of a man, usually a Priest or Abbot, and can live undetected for years at a time, and is not generally believed to feed upon human energy. Whether this choice of disguise is in order to allow for mischief or simply the Mujina's desire for a quiet, civilized life is perhaps debateable. This laid-back existence is sadly prone to a rather abrupt end, as the careless creature forgets to tuck its tail under its robe, and is revealed.

Neko (Cat)

Perhaps the only purely malignant of the Henge, the many stories surrounding the Bakeneko (freak cats) are almost universally of a horrific and insidious nature. Being an animal far more pampered and nurtured than any other, and without the threat of being sacrificed that that other domesticated pet, the Dog (see Inugami below), the Cat is most likely to live to a far riper age than most wild species, and holds a special relationship with humans.



Commonly living to an old age is one means of a cat becoming a *Bake*, in other cases it is feeding a cat in the same place for Thirteen years (in some stories only three!), or allowing it to reach around eight pounds (one *Kan*) in weight. This propensity may be why there are so many stories of such cats becoming malignant, and possibly also the reason why they are said to exhibit such a wide-range of powers. These powers have included the ability to reanimate the dead by leaping over the corpse (though whether as a resurrection of the soul or the creation of a revenant is unclear), the summoning of mysterious fireballs, similar to the *Kitsune-bi*, and the ability to mimick human voices in order to lure people to an ill fate. Cats owned by the recently deceased were also seen as suspicious, perhaps due to a link with a type of ghostly spirit, called *Kasha*, which fed on the corpses of the dead and often appeared to be like cats [note – **The Obscuritan could find very little on these Kasha, but will continue to look. Any findings will appear alongside the Yurei in the next article.**].

The very oldest cats undergo another “evolution” in their lifetimes as their tails split in two, the sign of becoming a **Nekomata**, the most dangerous of cat spirits. These beings, monstrously large and possessing most of the powers their weaker cousins gradually accumulated, possessed one even greater trick, an example of which is found in the following story. A young man who lived alongside his family and elderly mother noted a sudden change in her behaviour – she would stay locked in her room all day, not coming down for her food and speaking little to others. Peering in through a crack, the family were shocked to see a giant goblin cat wearing the grandmother’s clothes and eating small birds and mice as any other cat would. The man was forced to slay this creature, which shrunk back down to a normal size, and upon excavating the floorboards he discovered the woman’s gnawed bones.

Nezumi (Rat)

While in China the Rat is considered a melancholy animal, generally speaking the Nezumi, like their originators the Rats, are highly sociable animals, and imitate human society to a far greater degree than most other Henge. Stories in particular make mention of their weddings (something which only the *Kitsune* are *recorded* as regularly practicing), which take place on the 19th day of the first moon, when humans will make sure to stay indoors for fear of disturbing them. Indeed, if Nezumi lived apart from humans for a long time, they were said to sometimes become massive Goblin shapeshifters. However, such shapeshifters were even more prone to discovery than the *Mujina* or *Tanuki*, as they could seldom resist scratching and gnawing at their skin as rats are prone to do.

One story in particular features a particularly large goblin rat. A young boy, training to be an artist after being obliged to leave the monastery he had lived at, was forced to seek shelter at night in an abandoned temple his teachers had warned him about. This temple had been abandoned after a colossal Nezumi had taken up residence, and had stood empty since. To comfort himself, the boy drew his favourite subject upon the walls until he slept – cats. The next day, he found the body of the Nezumi in the room with him, and bloodstained pawprints leading back to the cats upon the walls.

If this Nezumi favoured a temple lair, perhaps it could have been a relative of Tesso, the former monk and were-rat Bakemono?

Orochi (Serpent)

The most infamous serpent of Ancient mythology was undoubtedly the Yamata-no-Orochi, a colossal eight-headed wyrm from the *Kojiki* (the earliest of Japanese mytho-histories) which terrorized a feudal lord by devouring seven of his eight daughters until it was tricked and slain by the heroic demigod Susano.

Snakes themselves were seen as being able to take human form in order to feed upon humans, though in a more direct form of blood-drinking vampirism than the energy-leeching *Kitsune*. However, in later lore, snake shapeshifters were depicted in gradually more favourable light as being able to marry humans and bear children; a change which this observer would speculate as being related to the Chinese influence both of benevolent

Dragons and of perhaps the goddess Nu Wa, who was part woman part snake and created the human race from clay and water droplets. Japanese dragons, taking their cues from China, Korea and the Indian Naga, are associated with the element of Water, and are apt to ally themselves with humans who earn their trust. In “The Invincible Pair” (a version of which can be found in Tyler’s *Japanese Tales*), a dragon is saved in its miniature form from a Tengu’s cave and certain dehydration by a monk, who he goes on to reward later in life.

Also worthy of note is the **Tsuchinoko**, a cryptid (form of creature which is either considered extinct or nonexistent by modern science, but believed by some to exist) breed of snake notable for its fatty body and supposed ability to bite its own tail in an Uroboros-like circle and roll around. Being a Japanese creature, it has of course been associated with the ability to talk, although it was apt to lie and had a fondness for alcohol.

Kumo/Gumo (Spider)

Instances of spiders achieving giant, monstrous form have occurred from around the 7th Century. One example (the name of which eludes us) occurred during the lifetime of the first emperor Jimmu Tenno, which stood on two legs with six arms and had long red hair and huge teeth. Able to defeat whole armies, it was finally suffocated in its den with smoke from a fire at the entrance. Regular spiders were also feared to be able to suck human blood at night. Giant spiders that can take on the form of humans have occurred in several forms, two of which are especially noted – the Jogorogumo and Tsuchigumo.



The **Jogorogumo** was similar to a form of ogress, lived in remote places and only revealed its spiderlike form at night – during the day it was an attractive human who dawdled outside her lair waiting for passers-by. One such man who stopped sat awhile with the maiden, only suspecting foul play when he noticed the silk winding itself around his legs. Distracting her, he slipped the silk onto a log and tightened it – the Jogorogumo, thinking its trap was secure, yanked the silk, only to find the log. The man, of course, had long since made a run for it.

The other form of the Goblin spider is perhaps not even a Henge, or indeed a creature, at all. The name **Tsuchigumo**, or ground-spider, was in fact applied to an early tribe of Aboriginal Japanese, the Yatsukahagi, who lived in the Japanese alps. To quote from one source:

“Quite possibly the ancient Japanese believed in Human Spiders dwelling in the ground. This, at any rate, was the name – Tsuchi-gumo, Earth-spiders – which they gave to an aboriginal tribe, whose identity has been the subject of much controversy. They appear only in the

oldest “history”, and according to one record had “short bodies and long legs and arms”. An Ainu myth makes them so tiny that ten of them could easily take shelter under one burdock leaf [note – the author may be confusing the Tsuchi-gumo here with the Koro-pok-guru, a race of tiny people in Ainu folklore] [...] More probably they were simply pit-dwellers of small stature and perhaps of such ugly aspect, for crude features and garb, to be considered “as repulsive as a spider”. Japanese History, at any rate, would make them a rather defiant, savage folk which had to be tackled with circumspection.” (Casal – The Goblin Fox and Badger and other Witch-Animals of Japan, pp 89)

One cannot help but mentally compare this with the idea in Occultist/Conspiracy theorist circles of subterranean or otherwise lost races such as the reptilian Lemurians, a conflation perhaps of the Indian Naga spirits, the Naga tribes of Cambodia and a host of other such “Lost Lands”, found in books such as Blavatsky’s *The Secret Doctrine*. However, like almost all of the events featured in the mytho-historical early histories of Japan such as the Kojiki, the events are too vague and shrouded in mythology for there to be any comparison between the Yatsukahagi and bona-fide Aboriginal Japanese people such as the Ainu. The name Tsuchigumo was later

applied to bandits and thieves who lurked in the mountains during more lawless periods of Japanese history, and thus was the idea of a race of monstrous man-spiders preying upon mountain travellers most likely born.

Although it is also called a Tsuchigumo, there is another slightly different form of the goblin spider that may be noted. This story concerns Raiko, retainer and member of the Minamoto clan, who battled with many demons, and mortals, throughout his career in the Heian period. Upon one such adventure, Raiko falls ill and is nursed for several days in a lodge. Gradually he comes to suspect the activities of the servant boy who brings him his medicine, and strikes the boy with his sword. The boy flees, and Raiko snaps out of an illusion to find himself coated in cobwebs. Upon freeing himself, he and his followers track the boy by his blood trail to a cave lair, where they find the body of a giant spider. In other versions, the spider is defeated but instead pledges fealty to Raiko, and saves his life on three further occasions.

Inugami (Dog)

We have included these creatures as Henge, although given that they are created by humans, rather than bred, one could almost call the Inugami a type of Tsukumogami.



Dogs have various supernatural connotations in Japanese folklore. Dogs are believed to be able to see spirits and bakemono, and in many stories it is heeding the dog's alarm that saves the protagonist from calamity, or ignoring such warning which leads to it. This protective power of the dog did not always work out in its favour, since the blood of a dog was used to consecrate the ground around a newly established village, and royal processions would sometimes crush a dog under the wheels of the carriage to bless the journey. In the Oki islands, pet dogs are used like a witch's familiar by *Inu-gami-mochi* (dog-god possessors) and will issue forth from their bodies to cause calamity to the owner's enemies. However, the dog's material body could wither and die while its spirit was *in absentia*, which would lead to the malevolent ghost possessing its former owner.

From this, the more widespread practice of creating an Inugami has developed for two ends. In the former, when one is faced with an overwhelming hatred and frustration against a certain foe, one either tethers up a dog or buries it up to the neck, and places food just out of its reach. When the dog is just about to die of starvation, one tells it the name of the person whom you wish to suffer and what to do, before hacking off its head. The dog's spirit will hunt down this person accordingly, but will understandably bear a grudge against its owner. This is where the second means may come in. Often owners who wish to prevent the spirit's hostility, or sometimes for this purpose alone, will install the dog's head in a shrine in the home, or bury it in the garden under a statue of another deity (usually a cylindrical stone representing Jizo) and will venerate the spirit so that it will continue to serve its owner by guarding the home. However, many are the tales of such a spirit refusing this service and haunting its former owners, even after they move.

As one can see in Seiken's illustration, he has chosen to depict the spirit itself in the afterlife, wearing courtly robes and being served as one would expect for a god.

Other creatures

These Henge I could only find a few references for, and only have a few properties associated with them.



Ao-Sagi-Bi (Heron)

Appearing from a distance to be an instance of foxfire, this fire upon the surface of a lake is in fact wreathed around a heron with glowing eyes, and often accompanied by smaller fireballs. It is rather uncommon in folkloric sources, and may just as likely be a mere manifestation of a different animal – particularly as fire is associated with the Kitsune – or a confusion with the Hito-Dama, the souls of the newly dead which hover as ghostly fireballs similar to Will ‘o’ the Wisps.

Basan (Cockrel)

Once night falls in the Ehime region the Basan, said to be a large fowl with spectral fire spilling from its mouth, emerges from the bamboo groves and stalks through the village making a rustling “*basabasa*” sound, though by the time people emerge to investigate, it has disappeared.



Kama-itachi (Weasel)

Deep gashes, to the legs in particular, suffered during high winds were attributed in the Koshinetsu region to an attack (Kametachi) of an unseen creature who raced along such sudden blasts, and which slashed at people it passed by. Seiken, who compiled the first written account, twisted the name with a pun to Kama-Itachi, or Scythe-Weasel. In Gifu, on the other hand, such injuries’ tendency not to bleed or be noticeably painful at first was put down to there being three creatures at work – one which stunned the victim, another who cut, and a third who applied medicine to stop the bleeding, all in the span of one instant.

Okami (Wolf)

As one may note from the name, this creature’s name derived from “great god”, though this is perhaps a linguistic slip from Kamu (which would mean “big mouth/biter”), and has been depicted as attending

upon various deities. There appear to be two separate bodies of lore concerning the wolf, possibly owing to there being two (now extinct) species of Japanese wolf. The first of these two is very similar to accounts of the Bakeneko, being able to devour people and assume their form. The other generally concerns a spirit of the high mountains which, though not outright malevolent, does pose a threat to travellers of the high passes. One curious habit of the Okami is that, upon encountering an unburied corpse, it senses the impropriety of the situation and performs its own impromptu funeral by jumping over the corpse (again as the Bakeneko would to reanimate a body), urinating upon it – much as a coffin in a funeral would be sprayed with water – before devouring the body.



Ten (Marten)

A phenomena recorded in Toriyama Sekien's *One hundred demons night parade*, depicting a gathering of Martens who wind and bundle together into a stacked pillar and glow with a ghostly flame similar to the Kitsune's foxfire. As one can imagine, the Google results for Ten Martens Japan are somewhat inconclusive, but The Obscuritan shall keep his eyes peeled.

Monday, 29 June 2009

Japanese Creatures IV: Yurei

Hello and welcome to The Obscuritan. For the last (for now) in our Japanese Creatures articles, we're departing from the previous format and discussing one creature in particular – the Yurei or ghosts – and the various forms in which they appear.

Ghosts (靈 – Rei) in Japan come under a variety of names. The most common is Yurei (faint spirits), although Borei (ruined spirits) and Shinryo (dead spirits) are occasionally used. In some popular culture, Ayakashi is also sometimes used, although this is technically only used for those who have drowned at sea. The process of becoming a ghost was, to the Japanese, similar to the one most people who believe would subscribe to, in that it arises from complications in “passing on”. Japan, like many Asian countries, maintains a strong belief in Ancestor Spirits, the ghosts of departed family members and historical clan members, some of whom over time may be promoted to the status of minor deities, particularly if they were the clan founders. Furthermore, the spiritual dimension of the afterlife was distinct from that occupied by gods and spirits, which overlapped closely with the material realm. This then necessitated a “crossing over” that the spirit (Reikon) must achieve in order to depart the mortal realm, a process aided by the prayers and offerings of incense given at funerals. However extreme emotion, usually of anger, hate and so forth, though sometimes of simply things like envy or grief, can cause either the person’s spirit itself or a part of it to remain behind, either seeking vengeance for its being wronged (assuming it can even remember the life it had) or simply expressing its fury and grief to anyone who crosses its path. Some are simply a “loop” of such anger that lashes out at bystanders, and as such are extremely dangerous. In some cases, too, the spirit of a living person can enter this state as an Ikiryo, similar to Astral Projection, as the result of great rage or hate, in order to deliver a curse to the object of their feelings.

As one might expect from a feudal (and therefore patriarchal) civilization where hardship was a common factor of the majority of the population’s lives, women faced a hard life and thus many of the more popular archetypal Yurei have been of women wronged by husbands, lords or just the simple facts of life. This is so prevalent that many associate the term Yurei exclusively with such female spirits (perhaps due to its similarity to the feminine

name *Yuri* or *Lily*). Below we have illustrated some of the most well-known of these wronged women and their origins.

Oyuki

Famously illustrated in the painting “The Ghost of Oyuki” by Maruyama Okyo, Oyuki was the ghost of his mistress in one of the *Geisha* (escort) houses who died young, but appeared to her deeply grieving lover in a dream, thus inspiring the portrait. Although not illustrating the depth of emotion on her part that characterized many Yurei before and after, she is notable for having inspired many of the features of the Yurei, particularly from the Edo period onwards, which would become hallmarks of ghostly apparitions – long dark hair, a frail body hidden under long white robes (white being the Japanese funereal colour rather than black) even when frailty was not one of their living characteristics, and the tapering off of their bodies at the legs which, particularly when such characters appear in Kabuki theatre, is often the first confirmation that the character is a ghost (alongside, in the theatre, their makeup).

The Nightly Weeping Rock

This tale takes place on the Tokaido highway, a road stretching from Kyoto to Edo (now Tokyo). Travelling upon this road one night on her way to see her husband, a pregnant woman is ambushed and murdered by a brigand. After she does not arrive her husband, chancing upon the site of the murder, is confronted by the ghost of his wife, which was ensorcelled into the rock when her blood splashed upon it. The ghost then hands their child to her husband alive and well, as the Bodhisattva Kannon had taken the child into her care after the murder.

Okiku

This tale concerns the local baron Tessan, who owned ten porcelain plates given by a Dutch merchant, and his beautiful maid Okiku. Many times he tried to seduce her, only to be rebuffed. Finally, Tessan hid one of the ten plates, and demanded that Okiku bring out all ten plated for him to use. She counted them time and time again, but could not find the last plate, and either (according to the teller) was thrown down the well by Tessan or jumped in herself. However, Tessan was plagued for many months afterwards by the spectre of Okiku rising up from the well, counting mournfully to nine, before breaking down into sobs, sometimes as many times a night as the times she counted the plates before her death.

Oiwa

This story takes place as part of the famous play *Yotsuya Kaidan*, by Tsuruya Nanboku IV, and concerns perhaps the most destructive and well-known Yurei of all. This story begins with the young couple of Oiwa and her husband Iyemon. Iyemon was a samurai, but due to his wife’s frailty, was forced to become an umbrella-maker to support them, a fact which led him to hate and resent his unknowing wife. The daughter of a rich local family also loved Iyemon, and her parents were eager to see her married to a man who, once no longer forced to perform menial work, could regain his status as a Samurai. They finally made their move by providing Iyemon poison in the guise of medicine, to give to Oiwa. However, the medicine failed to kill her, instead horribly disfiguring her. In her last moments, Oiwa realized Iyemon’s deceit and cursed him with the same level of hate that he felt for her, the fury of which finally killed her. Not wishing to bear the shame and eager to be wedded soon, Iyemon simply dumped Oiwa’s body in the river, along with a servant who saw him do it, and the wedding took place a few days



later. When Iyemon lifted his new bride's veil, however, he was confronted by the leering, disfigured face of Oiwa, and struck out at her with his sword and killing the girl. Fleeing the wedding, he ran to confess to the girl's parents, but was accosted in the road by Oiwa and the servant. Slaying them again, he found the bodies of his mother- and father-in-law at his feet. In once infamous scene Iyemon, having fled, tries to take solace in the wilderness by fishing, only to dredge up the bodies of his first two victims, miles away from the river where he dumped them. Finally, he flees to an abandoned shack on Snake Mountain, where the ghost of Oiwa finally comes to him through a leering, burnt-out lamp (as seen in the picture), as the very vines of the mountain itself writhe and come alive around him...

Two things are of particular interest in the case of Oiwa. Firstly, although she is horrific in appearance, and leads to the death of many people, Oiwa is not at heart a malevolent ghost, and those that die are merely the corrupt people who conspired with Iyemon to kill her. Secondly, to some in the audience, it is perhaps debatable whether Oiwa is indeed a ghost at all – an equally compelling explanation is that these apparitions are merely the unravelling of Iyemon's sanity after killing the woman he once loved.



The Ghosts of Matahachi and Kikuno

In many stories, particularly those adapted for Kabuki theatre, the suicide of two lovers – each damning the other with their love – is represented by the two spirits, bound together by a length of cloth or rope, haunting future couples whose love is similar to their own. An interesting reversal of this, however, is the story of Matahachi and Kikuno, who instead found the younger brother of the man whom Matahachi served and Kikuno was the concubine of, having an affair with his deceased brother's widow, who was now a nun. The younger brother kills them before they can tell anyone, but that night the two illicit lovers are interrupted in their bedchamber by the bloodied ghosts of the murdered pair who appear between them.

Yuki-onna

This spirit, unlike the ones we have looked at so far, is more of an apparition, and a predatory one at that, than a Yurei as such. Lurking in the mountains during the dead of winter, this spirit is sometimes depicted

as a long-lost victim of freezing, and upon encountering a wanderer, she will open her arms and offer them a warm embrace. Though she is usually quite beautiful, accepting her embrace allows her to draw the life out of the traveller, leaving them a frozen corpse. Although feared by early winter travellers, modern depictions of the Yuki Onna have been more favourable, most likely stemming from the account of her given in Lafcadio Hearn's *Kwaidan* (**him again**) of her sparing a man from his fate after having fallen in love with him.

A similar creature, the Yama-Uba (mountain hag) is often confused with the Yuki Onna, both living in the mountains and preying on humans. However, the Yama-Uba is more akin to the Yokai, and exhibits many forms which include features resembling Bakemono such as the Futakuchi-onna and the Hari-Onago, as well as the defining feature of the

Kuchisake Onna

Another departure from the standard Yurei archetype, this spirit has taken on a life of its own as a wildly popular Urban Legend amongst school-age Japanese teens. The form it takes in the modern day is as follows: A man (usually) is wandering through the streets at night on his way home from either the office or a bar, when he spots a woman approaching in the opposite direction. It is very late, and in concern he pauses. She is quite attractive from what he can see, even though she is wearing a white surgical mask over her face, common in Japan for people suffering from a cold. She looks up and asks him; "Do you think I'm pretty?" The man, seeing

no reason not to play along, replies “Yes”. At this point, the woman quickly rips down her mask, revealing a horrifically wide mouth, seemingly slashed open from ear to ear yet nonetheless bristling with teeth, through which she asks “...How about now?” The victim has no time to reply, however, as she invariably flicks out a switchblade and slashes their throat.

Being a popular tale, though this story is thought to have began as the tale of a Samurai’s jilted lover, it has spread to just about every city in modern Japan, and from each locale (and indeed each teller), the manner of warding her off varies, from offering it hard candies to muttering the word garlic under one’s breath while drawing the Kanji for “Dog” on one’s palm.

Funa Yurei

We have already noted the Ayakashi being the souls of the drowned. However, another group of spirits of drowned sailors are just as well-known, and far more feared. The **Funa-Yurei** are a troupe of sailors which sail alongside a boat during a storm, and ask the sailors for a ladle. Failure to provide one would cause the ghosts to sink the ship in anger, but providing one would mean they would begin ladling water *into* the boat instead of out, sinking it as well. Canny captains, however, would keep on board a ladle with no bottom, meaning the ghosts could ladle all they wanted, without sinking their ship.



Ao-Andon

During the long summer twilight in the Edo period, many groups of people would play the game *Hyaku Monogatari*, or 100 ghost stories. Sat in a room with 100 candles, each person in the circle would tell a ghost story and blow out one candle. When the last one went out, a leering apparition would loom out from the blue andon lamps the candles were placed in – the Ao-Andon.

Aokigahara

Worth mentioning at this point is this small forest at the base of Mt Fuji, which has developed a reputation for both its beautiful scenery and abnormally high number of suicides – some 30 a year, and more than 500 in the past 50 years, making it the most ‘popular’ suicide spot after the Golden Gate bridge in San Francisco. While the choice to die in such a beautiful place is perhaps a deciding factor for some, it may also have something to do with its appearance in the books *The complete manual of Suicide*, written in 1993 by Wataru Tsurumi, discussing the issue of suicide in Japan (rather than being some grisly how-to) and mentions Aokigahara as a hot-spot, and *Kuroi Jukai* by Seito Matsumoto, in which the protagonists finally commit suicide in the forest. This high instance has apparently had an effect upon the area, with spiritualists reporting a deep-seated malevolence in the very trees themselves (perhaps similar in nature to the Jubokko tree we discussed alongside the Bakemono), perhaps the reason why compasses have been claimed to go haywire inside the forest, although military-grade ones have been shown to work. Teams of searchers now patrol annually in the forest looking for any such victims, and are often alerted to any potential suicides by the practice, which has somehow gained prominence in Japan, of taking one’s shoes off and leaving them behind when one commits suicide, as one would when entering a house. The bodies themselves are housed in the Park-keeper’s lodge, where a person must stay with the body overnight for fear of its soul screaming all night and causing the body to get up and move about.

Exorcisms

As we have discussed, many of these spirits pose an active threat to the living, due to the sometimes irrational nature of their complaints, and all of these spirits, malevolent or no, were seen as objects of pity that lived tortured existences separate from the love of either dimension. But how then did one go about redressing the issue? In cases where the death was recent, the spirit may simply be pacified by allowing it some measure of closure; in popular stories, relatives of the deceased would find and punish (usually kill) the wrongdoers, or find their remains and bury them. In hauntings motivated by love, merely a chance to ensure that their feelings are heard is enough to allow the Yurei to find peace. The spirit does not always receive the closure it seeks, however. Okiku's haunting, for example, was ended when a neighbour of Tessan's agrees to exorcise her, and does so by hiding in the bushes until she begins her counting, and cutting her off at the end by yelling "TEN!", at which point she shrieked and vanished, with no mention ever made of whether Tessan was punished for his actions. Given his status as a baron, however, it seems unlikely.

Sometimes indeed this is altogether impossible, as the passage of time has erased any possibility of finding the culprit – suspects and witnesses die, evidence is destroyed and so on. In other cases, there are spirits who have continued to haunt even after gaining some degree of vengeance. Oiwa, for example, is sometimes depicted to have remained on the mortal plane after aiding in the demise of Iyemon, her anger not having subsided (though this may just be an addition by later storytellers hoping to add a little more shock to their retelling). This may be as a result of the "loop" we mentioned earlier; what remains behind is not necessarily the individual, but a manifestation of their anger as an entity all of its own, whether or not it bears their name. In cases such as these, an exorcism may be required, for which there are four distinct schools of practitioners. The Kitoshi, a certain caste of Shinto priest (Kannushi) dedicated to healing practices were adept at exorcising, utilizing the Shinto rituals of purity and natural order to placate the spirit and restore harmony. A similar goal was the aim of the Buddhist monk (Bonze), who would recite mantras and prayers to the Buddha and other saints, or reciting passages of the sutras, in order to calm both the possessor and possessed. Two other schools of practitioners were more esoteric in nature, but seen as even more effective if the former two failed. The Onmyoji, practitioners of ancient Chinese customs, performed similar rites to the Kannushi, but combined with Taoist geomancy and other formulae. The Buddhist equivalent was the Yamabushi (whom we mentioned as being connected to the Tengu mountain Yokai), who would combine similar Chinese practices with the Buddhist approach. Often these placations would involve the use of Ofuda, strips of hemp cloth with the name of a deity or saint or excerpt from a sutra upon it, which was either used to keep the Yurei out, or attached to its forehead to forcibly dispel it. In the most severe cases, shrines had to be built and prayers offered, much like a minor Kami or particularly powerful Yokai/Henge.