

**LITERARY LIGATIONS:  
THE *UBUME* IN EARLY MONSTROUS  
MATERNITY NARRATIVES**

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**Introduction**

The *ubume* (産女) is a figure of Japanese folklore, once a living woman, who died during either pregnancy or childbirth. After situating this gendered apparition within the broader context of Japanese folklore, I show the literary foundations that paved the way for the first textual reference to an *ubume* that appeared in the *Konjaku monogatari*, a work compiled around 1120. This early example of the *ubume* in literature is explored within its historical context in order to best understand what meanings this maternal figure held for people at that time and if they have changed. These cultural values, and the actions taken to avoid becoming an *ubume* or interacting with one, contributed to a metanarrative that aids in our understanding of the historical experience of women.

Beginning with the mytho-historical *Kojiki* (712) and *Nihon shoki* (720), I contextualize this literature within the historical developments of attitudes towards women, which were heavily influenced by the indigenous traditions associated with Shintō and the spread of Buddhism in Japan. By examining these works, I show that the religious and secular developments of the *ubume* and related figures created a dichotomy of ideologies that continue to both condemn and liberate women in their roles as mothers.

As recently as the 1950s, there were steps taken to avoid a woman becoming an *ubume*, and the practice of separating an unborn fetus from the deceased mother was still being performed.<sup>1</sup> Considering that “before the advent of modern diagnostic techniques and the development of emergency medicine...women of all classes were suffering violent deaths in childbirth and failed pregnancies,”<sup>2</sup> it is not surprising that certain practices, both

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<sup>1</sup> Manami Yasui, “Research Notes: On Burial Customs, Maternal Spirits, and the Fetus in Japan.” *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal* 24 (2003), 110.

<sup>2</sup> Hank Glassman, “At the Crossroads of Birth and Death: The Blood Pool Hell and Postmortem Fetal Extraction,” in *Death and the Afterlife in*

religious and medical, developed to help individuals and communities cope with this reality. Figures of folklore solidified these anxieties and ideas in narrative form, spreading them from rural to urban spaces, from the elite class to the commoners, beginning with the didactic literature examined in this article.

*What is an ubume?*

An *ubume* is a phenomenon of Japanese folklore most often categorized as a *yōkai* (妖怪), an ambiguous term which can be translated as ghost or monster. The ideographs used to write “*ubume*” allude to her appearance and the way in which she died: birth-giving (産) and woman (女). Many *yōkai* have been labeled in such a way that denotes their physical characteristics. For example, the *kuchi sake onna*, or “slit-mouthed woman,” (口 *kuchi* meaning mouth, 裂け *sake* meaning slit, and 女 *onna* meaning woman), is the name of another female *yōkai* that literally has a mouth that is disfiguringly torn.

There are two basic narratives of an encounter with this maternal apparition. If the woman’s unborn baby perished with her, the *ubume* will attempt to pass it off to someone (consistently a man) who will care for it. Once taken, the ghostly infant typically either becomes as heavy as a stone or turns into a stone, and the *ubume* disappears. In some cases, the person who agrees to take the child is rewarded with great strength if they are able to continue holding the increasingly heavy baby.

If the woman perished while her baby survived, she is usually referred to as a *kosodate yūrei* (子育て幽霊, child-rearing spirit). The term *yūrei* (幽霊) is most comparable to the ghosts in Western literature and cinema. This apparition will search for food to provide for her living offspring, either by stealing temple offerings or visiting a candy shop night after night. When she is followed by a curious monk or shopkeeper, she will disappear near her grave. The observer will discover that the apparition has been providing sustenance for a living baby, which is then taken in and raised by the living, generally growing up to be a remarkable person, such as a man of great strength or prosperous monk. In one *kosodate yūrei* narrative, villagers find a skeleton of a woman clutching a living baby. The skeleton only releases its

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*Japanese Buddhism*, ed. Jacqueline I. Stone and Mariko Namba Walter (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008), 180.

grip when a living woman proves that she can properly care for her baby by showing she is lactating.<sup>3</sup>

Another set of ideographs that are often used interchangeably with 産女 refer to another layer of this figure, the *kokakuchō*, 姑獲鳥, which literally means 姑 mother-in-law, 獲 seize or find, and 鳥 bird. *Kokakuchō* is the Japanese pronunciation of a monster of Chinese legend, the *gūhuoniao*. This figure also originates from the ghost of a woman who died during childbirth, but unlike the Japanese *ubume*, which is fairly innocuous, this spirit is malevolent and attempts to steal the children of living women. This figure is not explored in this paper but is important to note as it explains why some depictions of the *ubume* by Japanese authors and artists depict her with birdlike features and may use the 姑獲鳥 set of characters. It also shows that figures like *yōkai* often have multiple layers and inspirations, making them rife with cultural significance. As we will see, the first literary reference to an *ubume* was the inspiration for the first basic narrative.



**Figure 1. Tokugawa period (1603–1868) artist Sawaki Sūshi's (1707–1772) rendering of an ubume<sup>4</sup>**

<sup>3</sup> Michiko Iwasaka and Barre Toelken, *Ghosts and the Japanese: Cultural Experience in Japanese Death Legends* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1994), 64.

<sup>4</sup> Money L. Hickman, “Views of the Floating World,” *MFA Bulletin* 76 (1978), 33 (accessed May 19, 2019, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4171617>, one time fair usage).

*Forming the Metanarrative*

Why did these narratives develop, and in what context? Folktales do not just appear out of nowhere, for no reason. As Iwasaka and Toelken point out, "...if the same themes, anxieties, concerns, and values found in a group of legends are also prominently displayed in the daily lives of the people who tell them... these legends offer one of the best possibilities for insight into an ongoing culture."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the *ubume* and *kosodate yūrei* still figure into contemporary literature, media, and religious spaces such as the Ubume Kannon Temple in Shizuoka.

Within the context of the ideology of motherhood, the quote from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, "one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one,"<sup>6</sup> takes on a particularly potent meaning in Japan; to be a woman is to be a mother. The ideology of motherhood creates pressures for women to have children and stigmatizes non-reproduction. The social norm is for women to have children, with pressures coming from various spheres.<sup>7</sup> Despite shifts in attitudes towards women's bodies over the course of Japanese history, which can be exemplified by attitudes and actions taken towards figures like the *ubume*, women were still expected to produce children and have consistently been situated within society based on their relationship with men. Figure 2 shows a graph detailing the overlying ideology of motherhood, the underlying factor of the stigmatization of non-reproduction, and the *mélange* of indivisible cultural attitudes and religious beliefs in which the narratives of figures such as the *ubume* are situated. These, in turn, form and inform the metanarrative, or everything that happens surrounding the narratives. In other words, the realm of folklore can offer

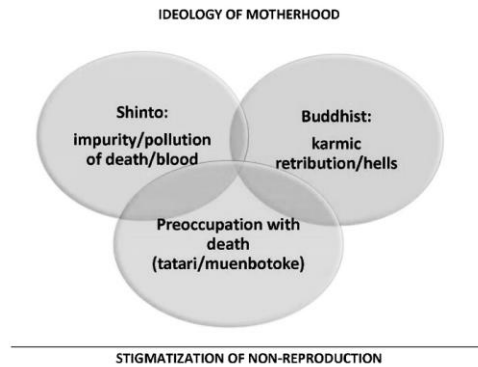
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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>6</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 301.

<sup>7</sup> For an in-depth look on this specifically, see Kumiko Nemoto, "Postponed Marriage: Exploring Women's Views of Matrimony and Work in Japan," *Gender and Society* 22/2 (2008): 219–237 (accessed April 4, 2019, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27821634>) and Rebecca L. Richko, "Social and Economic Factors Influencing Japanese Women's Decision about Childbearing in Post-Bubble Japan," Master's thesis, Florida International University, 2016. FIU Electronic Theses and Dissertations (accessed May 19, 2019, <http://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/etd/2451>).

insight into the current reality of gender equality from angles differing from, but not unrelated to, politics or economics.



**Figure 2. Ideology of motherhood, the stigmatization of non-reproduction, and cultural influences**

It is helpful to address briefly the “vivid manifestations of belief, psyche, and imagination”<sup>8</sup> that contribute to the themes in the chart above. Nature and the belief in the transformation of animals, as well as objects, contributes to an animistic worldview, emphasizing that anything and everything can be “potential abodes for spirits and deities and that they must be treated with care and respect.”<sup>9</sup> Although there are separate spaces for deities, the living, and the dead, these are incredibly liminal and interconnected. Because of this, interaction with deities and spirits was not seen as completely out of the ordinary. *Tatari*, which originally referred to repercussions from kami, came to be seen as misfortune caused by spirits, who were most often *muenbotoke*, or “restless spirits with ‘no relations’ (*muen*) to ritualize them properly.”<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Akira Y. Yamamoto, introduction to *Japanese Ghosts & Demon: Art of the Supernatural*, ed. Stephen Addiss (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1985), 9–12.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Helen Hardacre, *Marketing the Menacing Fetus in Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 2–3.

Another important aspect of the spiritual landscape in Japan is the syncretism of Shintō, Buddhism, and the state. While the power dynamics of these three institutions have continuously shifted throughout different periods in Japanese history, their interconnectedness contributes to a religious atmosphere that categorizes the three domains by an indivisibility. Buddhism was used as an ideological tool of those in power as early as the Asuka period (552–645), as various competing families came to adopt it. In opposition, there were also powerful families that asserted adherence to kami.<sup>11</sup> In this respect, the religious atmosphere in Japan can be considered to be made up of various religious *ingredients* and not so much a cookie-cutter religion.

How did these ingredients contribute to the development of the *ubume* narrative? The notions of the impurity of blood hindered living women. The fear of *tatari* and *muenbotoke* put women who died particularly violent or tragic deaths at a disadvantage. Since death as a result of pregnancy, before the advent of modern medicine, occurred regardless of class, the figures of the *ubume* and *kosodate yūrei* developed, in addition to measures taken to avoid becoming one and to avoid interaction with one.

### Literary Ligations

What led to the first textual reference to an *ubume*, found in the *Konjaku monogatari*, compiled around 1120? This article explores the literary foundations that paved the way not only for later Japanese literature but the flourishing of the performing arts during the Tokugawa period in which the *ubume* and other folkloric figures proliferated. Throughout this early literature, the feminine was consistently and overtly used to represent chaos while the masculine to represent order. However, the feminine was not always treated with disdain, and many works make it clear that from the fecundity of the feminine comes life-giving benefits. It was from these irresolute attitudes towards the female body that the figure of the *ubume* developed.

The aesthetics of Heian period (794–1185) court literature stressed that “emotions had to be carefully packaged in poetic expression” and the emotions of women were often “expressed metaphorically” with demons. The “didactic lesson” of such a metaphor warned women not to show “rage

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<sup>11</sup> William E. Deal and Brian Ruppert, *A Cultural History of Japanese Buddhism* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley, 2015), 28–29.

and jealousy (lest they turn into demons) and men against pursuing affairs with an unknown woman (lest she turn out to be a cannibalistic demon).<sup>12</sup> This trend echoes the stories found in the preceding Nara period (710–794) *Kojiki*<sup>13</sup> and *Nihon shoki*<sup>14</sup> in that it shows the man to be more innocent and the woman to be demonic, sometimes literally, and again emphasizes the themes of order (male) and chaos (female). While in some cases, as in the story of a pregnant mother facing an oni in the *Konjaku monogatari* discussed below, “...it is undeniable that the tales simultaneously were influenced by and contributed to the growing demonization of women and their bodies from the Heian period...” onward.<sup>15</sup> The overlying anxiety related to the Buddhist concept of *mappō*, or the notion that the further in time from the death of the Gautama Buddha the more difficult it is for a person to be able to achieve salvation, made the lessons held in such literature all the more important.

*Early Inklings of Defining the Ideal Female Gender Model*

Before discussing the first textual reference to the *ubume*, found in the *Konjaku monogatari*, the largest compilation of *setsuwa*, or doctrinal tales, it is necessary to examine briefly the literary foundation in which this text appeared, beginning with the *Nihon shoki*, or *Chronicles of Japan*, compiled in 720.

Because the transmission of Buddhism to Japan was “intimately connected with struggles over the consolidation of political power,” it is not surprising that the “imperial command” had the *Nihon shoki* compiled in a time when various clans were all vying to legitimize their claims to power.<sup>16</sup> While Deal and Ruppert point out that the *Nihon shoki*, as the “official” account of the transmission of Buddhism into Japan, is “retrodictive,” it is still important because it stressed the materiality of Buddhism (such as sutras)

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<sup>12</sup> Barbara R. Ambros, *Women in Japanese Religions* (New York: NYU Press, 2015), 60–61.

<sup>13</sup> Donald L. Philippi, *Kojiki* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968) (accessed May 6, 2019, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt183pkqk>).

<sup>14</sup> W.G. Aston, *Nihongi: Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest of Times to A.D. 697* (Rutland, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 1972).

<sup>15</sup> Ambros, *Women in Japanese Religions*, 60–61.

<sup>16</sup> Deal and Ruppert, *A Cultural History of Japanese Buddhism*, 13–31.

and treated Buddhism itself as an object that was to be used by those in power.<sup>17</sup>

In other words, this was the beginning of the control of the state over religious practices and ideologies that were eventually emulated by the majority. The *Nihon shoki* was written to be an ideological collar and leash. If Buddhism was indeed such a tool, we can see how easily the non-elites would adopt the practices that the elites adopted, such as reading and copying sutras for deceased family members. Beginning in the Nara period (710–794), the state began setting forth rules and regulations for monastics. While these did not initially single out females, they were influenced by “Confucian values of loyalty, fidelity, and filiality,” which place women in an inferior position to men. Ambros stresses that during this time, the more severe notions of female defilement and pollution were not present, and did not take firm root until the Heian period (794–1185).<sup>18</sup> Still, the *Nihon shoki* contains the notion of karmic retribution, as opposed to *tatari* (punishment from kami) and although it does not yet necessarily single out women and their various transgressions, there are stories that foreshadow the themes of the literature in which the *ubume* was included. Before turning to the first compilation of *setsuwa* tales, it is helpful to note one such story from the *Kojiki*, compiled shortly before the *Nihon shoki*; the creation myth of the Japanese island and its people. The tale involves a pair of deities, Izanami (female) and Izanagi (male). Izanami discovers that her body is insufficient, while Izanagi discovers that his “is formed to excess,” and inserts this part of himself into her to procreate. However, because Izanami speaks before Izanagi, their child is “malformed.”<sup>19</sup> The version found in the *Nihon shoki*, while not as damning for Izanami, still depicts femininity as “dark, yielding, and destructive.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ambros, *Women in Japanese Religions*, 45–47.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 27. Interestingly, they send the child off into the ocean, not unlike some of the practices of *mabiki*, or infanticide, practiced by individuals who for various reasons did not feel that they had the means to raise a child. In some cases, this was seen “less as a desperate act in the face of poverty than as a form of family planning.” Thomas C Smith, Robert Y. Eng, and Robert T. Lundy, *Nakahara: Family Farming and Population in a Japanese Village, 1717–1830* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1977), 61.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 28.



Particularly pertinent to the formation of the *ubume* trope is the ending to the tale found in both the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon shoki* versions. Izanami dies after giving birth, and although she is not referred to as an *ubume*, in death she vows to wreak havoc by taking “1,000 lives daily,” while “Izanagi counters that he will ensure the birth of 1,500 daily.” As Ambros points out, Izanagi, the male, represents order, while Izanami, the female, represents chaos. While it would be overly simplistic to impose this story on gender relations of actual living people, it still embodies the ambivalent attitudes of purity and the duality of the female body as both polluted and fecund.<sup>21</sup> Hardacre also points out the following:

...within this relation of *gender complementarity*, the male should take the initiative, and the female should yield and assent. When those conditions are met, their union is successful, but when the female usurps the male prerogatives, deformities or incomplete creations are the result. This construction assumes that the female is incomplete without the male, and that female initiative lacking male guidance is doomed to failure.<sup>22</sup>

In other words, this story lays out the ideal male/female relationship dynamic. Again, it should be stressed that the mythologies contained in these works do not necessarily reflect the beliefs and actions of the people living at the time of their compilation. However, in them we can see the seeds of the patriarchy in which eventually the *ubume* would become such a threat to as the inverse of what an ideal woman should be: a mother.

#### *Setsuwa*

*Setsuwa*, written as 説話 (the ideographs for explanation and tale), is a literary genre distinct from the earlier works of “mythological nature”<sup>23</sup> like the *Nihon shoki* mentioned above. They can be considered anecdotes,

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 29–30.

<sup>22</sup> Helen Hardacre, *Shinto: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 52.

<sup>23</sup> Kōzō Kurosawa, “Myths and Tale Literature,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 9:2/3 (1982): 115–125 (accessed April 4, 2019, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30233943>).

“defined as the narration of an individual event, or a series of events.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, the potency of *setsuwa* derives from their connection to our world, not the world of gods, although many do include trips to hell, such as chapter nine of the *Konjaku monogatari*, or miraculous tales, such as those found in chapters sixteen and seventeen of *Konjaku monogatari*. Because the “life of any *setsuwa* is derived from its interest,” the stories combine elements that are “out of the ordinary” with real individuals, real people, and real places.<sup>25</sup> As Davidsen points out in regards to the efficacy of the supernatural to afford religious belief, “a text must present those supernatural beings as real within the story-world; to afford ritual interaction with said beings, a text must include model rituals and inscribe the reader into the narrative; to afford belief in the historicity of the narrated events, a text must anchor the story-world in the actual world.”<sup>26</sup>

*Setsuwa*, which developed as “the earliest attempt in Japanese Buddhism to find a popular literary genre capable of expressing complex aspects of abstract doctrine in concrete, sensually verifiable, and compelling narrative terms,” were “also linked intimately to performance, to the public and popular venue of the sermon.” This was extremely important in that it allowed them to “transcend class boundaries”<sup>27</sup> in a time when only the elites could read and write. Due to this performative nature, this genre also helped pave the way for the development of “pictorial preaching, known as *etoki*,” popularized in medieval Japan and still performed today.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ury describes *Konjaku* as “an anecdote depicting a world,” and indeed it covers “all three countries of the known world, all provinces of Japan, and the activities of persons of every class of society.” Marian Ury, *Tales of Times Now Past* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Center for Japanese Studies, 1979): 3–10.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Markus Altena Davidsen, “Fiction and Religion: How Narratives About the Supernatural Inspire Religious Belief – Introducing the Thematic Issue,” *Religion* 46/4 (2016): 489–499.

<sup>27</sup> Charlotte Eubanks, “Illustrating the Mind: ‘Faulty Memory’ *Setsuwa* and the Decorative Sutras of Late Classical and Early Medieval Japan,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 36/2 (2009): 210–211 (accessed April 4, 2019, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40660966>).

<sup>28</sup> Ikumi Kaminishi, *Explaining Pictures: Buddhist Propaganda and Etoki Storytelling in Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 3.

*Nihon ryōiki*, the first *setsuwa* collection and predecessor of the *Konjaku*, is short for “*Nihonkoku genpo zen’aku ryōiki* (日本国現報善悪霊異記)” or “Miraculous Stories of the Reward of Good and Evil from the Country of Japan.”<sup>29</sup> Its pages are full of karmic retribution, not just in the afterlife but in this life as well. One of the recurring themes is “immediate” penalty or reward, stressing the “different ways in which the law of karmic causality is manifested.” Like many of the stories in the *Konjaku* (which may have derived inspiration from this earlier work) the *Nihon ryōiki* is an attempt to spread Buddhist doctrine to the “lower level of society.”<sup>30</sup> Although many of the stories are set prior to the Heian period, the idea of *mappō* still underlined the urgency of the events. Stylistic of *setsuwa*, the stories in the *Nihon ryōiki* are short, “plot and action driven,” and arranged in a decisive manner, in this case chronological.<sup>31</sup>

How are women treated in the *Nihon ryōiki*? Raechel Dumas addresses the contradictory unease with which the female body is, “figured as an object of simultaneous desire and disgust.”<sup>32</sup> The *ubume* does not appear in this text but many of the narratives and their themes mirror those found in the *Konjaku* and profoundly affected the perception of not only the female form but *giri* (duty), karmic retribution, and attitudes towards family and the dead. Because the stories found in this text are “thought to have been transmitted outside of religious sites and among listeners residing within both trade cities and peripheral communities,”<sup>33</sup> it offers invaluable insight into the cultural atmosphere at that time beyond what the state demanded be included in the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*.

Tale thirteen of volume one offers a story about how a mother should act. It features an incredibly pious woman who bore seven children and, despite being poor, cleans herself every day and provides clothing and food for her offspring. One day, she flies up to Heaven. The ending remark

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<sup>29</sup> Haruo Shirane, introduction to *Record of Miraculous Events in Japan*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 4.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 1–3.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>32</sup> Raechel Dumas, “Historicizing Japan’s Abject Femininity: Reading Women’s Bodies in “*Nihon Ryōiki*,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 40/2 (2013): 247–248 (accessed April 4, 2019, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23595655>).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

of the story is, “Even though you live the life of a layperson, if you sweep the garden with a pure heart, you will gain five kinds of merit.”<sup>34</sup> This story not only demonstrates immediate karmic reward for her actions, but also ties in the notion of purity by stressing cleanliness.

Other tales, about one-fifth of them, address “female transgression.”<sup>35</sup> Story nine in volume three details the account of a man who travels to hell where his wife was suffering after dying in childbirth. He learns from King Yama (the king of hell) that “she has been condemned to suffer for six years. She has already spent three years here and has three years to go.”<sup>36</sup> His wife requested that he suffer with her for the remainder of her sentence, but when the man agrees to copy the *Lotus Sutra*, his wife and King Yama agree to let him go back to the world of the living. This is an early example portraying the idea of a family member atoning for a loved one who is suffering in hell. Like the tale of Izanami and Izanagi, however, the female in this story suffers while the male does not.

#### *Konjaku – The First Textual Reference Explained*

The first textual reference to an *ubume* is found in the *Konjaku monogatari shū* (今昔物語集) “*Tales of Times Now Past*,” compiled during the Heian period, most likely around 1120.<sup>37</sup> “*Monogatari*, literally ‘a telling,’ is a word for tales or narratives of any kind; *shū* means collection or anthology; *konjaku* is the Sino-Japanese pronunciation for the two Chinese characters in the formulaic phrase with which each tale opens.”<sup>38</sup> This is often translated as “at a time now past” (as in Marian Ury’s translation) or “in olden times.”<sup>39</sup> Although the compiler, or compilers, are unknown, Ury points out that “...the motive was religious and behind the compilation was a very practical intention: to provide a handbook of stories which preachers might use to enliven their sermons,”<sup>40</sup> and indeed the *Konjaku* is the largest collection of *setsuwa* tales.

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<sup>34</sup> Watson, *Record of Miraculous Events in Japan*, 33–34.

<sup>35</sup> Dumas, “Historicizing Japan’s Abject Femininity,” 261.

<sup>36</sup> Watson, *Record of Miraculous Events in Japan*, 146–148.

<sup>37</sup> From here on referred to as *Konjaku*. Marian Ury, *Tales of Times Now Past* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Center for Japanese Studies, 1993), 1.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Naoshi Koriyama and Bruce Allen, *Japanese Tales from Times Past* (Rutland, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2015), 26.

<sup>40</sup> Ury, *Tales of Times Now Past*, 2.

Despite the lacunae within the text itself—some sections are missing or lost while some information has been intentionally left out—much can be derived from the tales with which we are left.<sup>41</sup> Because the *Konjaku* pulls inspiration from Indian, Chinese, and Japanese sources, it is not an easy task to identify which tales were from the oral tradition; this must be done through process of elimination. If a story resembles a Jataka tale (narratives of the Buddha's past lives) or a story from a sutra, we can deduce that it was not told orally amongst Japanese villagers. On the other hand, if a story does not have a precedent in literature from India or China, it is safe to assume that it was most likely collected from, or inspired by, an oral tradition. In other words, “motifs, incidents, or tales that do not derive from Buddhist literature can be taken as Japanese, and as part of their ancient conceptual framework.”<sup>42</sup>

Another clue is in the language used in the tales. Robert Smith points out that in the tales from India, the phrases “‘in a previous rebirth,’ ‘the way of merit,’ ‘the acts of devout monks,’ ‘the power of the Lotus,’” or “‘the true teaching,’” are prevalent while in the Japanese tales there is a focus on this world and ordinary people: “‘grandsons are now living,’ ‘the province was well content,’ ‘all blamed the wife,’ ‘the fortunate man.’” In other words, “the Indian religious tales continually look before and after this life, while the Japanese tales speak of supernatural occurrences of everyday life.”<sup>43</sup> Instead of focusing on the *next* life, they focus on *this* life.

Though not untypical of this time, Ury stresses another aspect of the *Konjaku*: the “magpie tendency”<sup>44</sup> with which the stories were collected. However, this does not mean that the compilation lacks order. On the contrary, “[w]ithin each chapter the stories are meticulously arranged. As a rule, they appear in pairs joined by a common theme; in addition, each

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<sup>41</sup> William Ritchie Wilson, “The Way of the Bow and Arrow. The Japanese Warrior in Konjaku Monogatari,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 28/2 (1973): 177–233.

<sup>42</sup> Robert Smith, “On Certain Tales of the ‘Konjaku Monogatari’ as Reflections of Japanese Folk Religion,” *Asian Folklore Studies* 25 (1966): 221–233.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Ury, *Tales of Times Now Past*, 2.

member of the pair will have associations with the other story adjacent to it through some common motif.”<sup>45</sup> The chapters are arranged as follows:

CHAPTERS ONE TO FIVE: Tales of India, beginning with the founding of Buddhism  
 CHAPTERS SIX TO TEN: Tales of China, beginning to the establishment of Buddhism  
 CHAPTERS ELEVEN TO TWENTY: Tales of Buddhism in Japan  
 CHAPTERS TWENTY-ONE TO THIRTY: Secular tales of Japan.

The “secular” designation is a bit of a misnomer, as even within the stories in these chapters it is clear that the “compiler’s stance... is determinedly didactic.”<sup>46</sup>

The story in which the *ubume* makes her first textual appearance is found in chapter twenty-seven, “tales of malevolent supernatural creatures.” According to Kunisaki Fumimaro, “the chapters of secular tales of Japan in turn reiterate the Buddhist ones in overall arrangement,” and therefore the story of the *ubume*, tale 43 in chapter twenty-seven, falls within “instruction... paralleling chapters 19–20.” Chapters nineteen and twenty consist of “tales of religious conversion; strange tales illustrating the principle of karma” and “a few tales of a kind of goblin called *tengu*; tales of visits to hell; tales of karmic retribution in this present life,”<sup>47</sup> respectively.

In terms of chapter twenty-seven, it would be helpful to consider the perspectives on supernatural creatures in *setsuwa* collections laid out by Mori Masato that the compiler utilized.<sup>48</sup> Editorial refers to the actual collecting of the tales and the previously discussed order they were placed in, while selection refers to meaning assigned to the tales “in order to fulfill the editorial plan of the collection.” Narrative, Mori explains, is “the concrete choice of words to clarify the function and meaning of each individual tale.” Mori uses this structure “to clarify the meaning assigned to supernatural

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 2–4.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 4–5.

<sup>48</sup> Masato Mori, “‘Konjaku Monogatari-shū’: Supernatural Creatures and Order,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 9:2/3 (1982), 147 (accessed April 4, 2019, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30233945>).

creatures during the Heian period,”<sup>49</sup> which will be discussed now before turning to the story of an *ubume*. Or, rather, the story of the man who meets an *ubume*.

When examining the supernatural world of *yōkai*, *yūrei*, and *kami*, some consistency does emerge, just as with the natural world. As Mori points out, there are three types of “rules” that supernatural creatures in the *Konjaku* tend to adhere to: time, location, and the more thematic “as opponents of order.”<sup>50</sup> This “order” refers to the world of humans.

Time and location are incredibly important when navigating the world of *yōkai*. During the Heian period, supernatural creatures were perceived as tangible threats. For example, the court employed *Onmyōji*, or “practitioners of *Onmyōdō*, a complex system of divination and geomancy based on principles of yin and yang,”<sup>51</sup> to determine when the *hyakkiyagyō* would be appearing in the capital. *Hyakkiyagyō*, written in Japanese as 百鬼夜行, refers to a night procession of one hundred demons, the character for demon being 鬼, or *oni*. *Oni* are another category of supernatural entities in Japan, and during this period (pre-1185), the word was used as an umbrella term for “any sort of nasty and threatening creature.”<sup>52</sup> The key here is “night,” and as Mori points out, “the reader of Volume XXVII [of *Konjaku*] will soon be struck by the fact that supernatural creatures are active primarily during particular set time periods... Nighttime seems indeed to have been the time period made especially for these creatures. Nighttime was clearly a special time, one exempt from order the controlled by humans during the daylight hours.”<sup>53</sup>

Furthermore, these creatures “lived, or appeared, at certain fixed locations.” Hence, the compiler of the *Konjaku* “added a detailed geographical explanation of places considered haunted” since “spirits controlled such locations, and it was necessary for humans to learn that they should not invade them.” Interestingly, these places “frequently were bridges

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 147–148.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>51</sup> Foster, *The Book of Yōkai*, 15.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Mori, “*Konjaku Monogatari-shū*,” 148.

or riverbanks,”<sup>54</sup> and, as we will see, the *ubume* appears in a river.<sup>55</sup> They also often appear near gates, which, when considering that a gate, a bridge, or a river marks a boundary or separates one place from another, they have the same function. This also explains why these creatures can be seen as opposing order, as they occupy liminal spaces close to, but not always under, the control of humans.<sup>56</sup> In a way, the meticulous order in which the stories are compiled is a means of control, or “bringing light into the darkness of confusion and providing order.”<sup>57</sup>



**Figure 3. Toriyama Sekien’s *ubume*.**<sup>58</sup>

Where does the *ubume* fit within this chaos and order? First, let us look at the story itself, which appears in the 2015 English translations by Naoshi Koriyama and Bruce Allen as “Taira no Suetake, a Retainer of

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 149–151.

<sup>55</sup> When the *ubume* was later depicted in Edo Kabuki plays, the playwright that most frequently invoked her image consistently placed her in or near water: Shimazaki, “Figures of the *Ubume* and the Breakdown of Theater Tradition,” 218.

<sup>56</sup> Mori, “Konjaku Monogatari-shū,” 155.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>58</sup> Shimazaki, “Figures of the *Ubume* and the Breakdown of Theater Tradition,” 203.



Yorimitsu, Comes across a Woman with a Baby.”<sup>59</sup> The tale begins as follows:

In olden times, Minamoto no Yorimitsu was the governor of Mino Province. One time, he went off to a certain county in the province. One night, a number of samurai were gathered in their quarters, engaging in idle talk. Someone said, “I hear a certain woman has been showing up with a newborn baby at a place called Watari in this province. When someone goes across the river, the woman appears with a crying baby and requests of him, ‘Hold this baby. Won’t you hold this baby, please?’” Hearing this, one of the men said, “Is there anyone here brave enough to go across that river to Watari right now?” A man named Taira no Suetake replied, “I could go there even at this very moment.” Some other men said, “No, you might be able to fight a thousand enemies, but you won’t be able to cross that river now.” But the man insisted, “It’ll be nothing for me to cross that river.” The others chided, “No matter how brave you may be, you’ll never be able to get across that river.”

The men place wagers. Suetake is to prove he has crossed the river by placing an arrow on the other side of it but three of the men follow him in secret:

It was a moonless night, near the end of September. They could hear Suetake wading through the river with loud splashing. Presently, he reached the other side. The three men listened.... Then Suetake must have quickly pulled out an arrow and struck it into the ground, for soon he seemed to be wading his way back. Straining their ears,

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<sup>59</sup> Interestingly, in their translation, they do not call this woman an *ubume*. However, the title of the story in Japanese is 頼光郎等、平季武、値産女語、which Reider translates as “Yorimitsu no rōtō Taira no Suetake *ubume* ni au koto” (Yorimitsu’s retainer, Taira no Suetake, meets an *ubume*), Reider, *Seven Demon Stories from Medieval Japan* (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2016), 34.

they could hear a woman's voice calling out to him from the middle of the river. "Hold this baby," she said, "Won't you hold this baby, please?" And then they also heard the squealing voice of a baby. At that time, an awful, fishy smell drifted over the river to their side. Although the three men were together, they were terribly frightened. Just imagining the fear of the man wading across the river gave them the chills.

Suetake then takes the baby, but the woman demands it back and tries to follow him. He refuses and goes back to meet up with the other men. He attempts to show them the baby but finds in its place just tree leaves. Still, the men that had followed him confirm that he did indeed cross the river. When they try to give him the wagers he has rightfully won, he refuses to take them for completing such a simple task. The story ends, "Those who heard the story were deeply impressed and praised him. Some said that the woman with the newborn baby was a fox trying to bewitch humans, while others said that she was the ghost of a woman who had died in childbirth. Such then is the story as it has been handed down to us."<sup>60</sup>

First, we should discuss the characters that are specifically named. Minamoto no Yorimitsu<sup>61</sup> was governor of Mino, which at the time was "the highest official of the provincial bureaucracy... appointed from the capital."<sup>62</sup> Yorimitsu actually appears in multiple stories within and beyond *Konjaku* and is associated with another yōkai, the *tsuchigumo*, or earth spider.<sup>63</sup> Taira no Suetake, his retainer, was also a living person, and accompanied Yorimitsu on perhaps what is his most famous adventure: the defeat of Shuten dōji, an oni that had been causing harm in the capital.<sup>64</sup>

What would life have been like for these men? Wilson points out that the *Konjaku* "was compiled at a time of social change. In the capital, the system of aristocratic rule, which had been in its glory a hundred years earlier,

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<sup>60</sup> Koriyama and Allen, *Japanese Tales from Times Past*, 206–208.

<sup>61</sup> Also known as Minamoto no Raikō.

<sup>62</sup> Wilson, "The Way of the Bow and Arrow," 184.

<sup>63</sup> Noriko T. Reider, "Tsuchigumo Sōshi: The Emergence of a Shape-Shifting Killer Female Spider," *Asian Ethnology* 72/1 (2013): 55–83 (accessed April 4, 2019, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41958916>).

<sup>64</sup> Foster, *The Book of Yōkai*, 41.

was under strain, while in the provinces the military families which by the end of the century would provide the de facto rulers of Japan were gathering strength.” Within this climate, “the warriors of the *Konjaku* tales were armed men living on the land on the fringes of an expanding agricultural economy,” and throughout the collection, “the general attitude toward warriors is one of admiration.”<sup>65</sup> As mentioned, the *ubume* falls within chapter twenty-seven. Chapter twenty-five deals exclusively with warriors, but the theme of honor is “central” to most of the tales that deal with warriors. Suetake exemplifies this honorable ideal by his bravery and selflessness in refusing to take the wagers he had rightfully won.

Next, we should consider the other tales in chapter twenty-seven that deal with similar themes, characters, and locations. As mentioned, the layout of the *Konjaku* was painstakingly meticulous. Stories feed into one another, characters reappear, and plots overlap. From them, we can discern attitudes that help explain the significance of the *ubume*. Story 15 of chapter twenty-seven, titled “How a Woman Who Was Bearing a Child Went to South Yamashina, Encountered an Oni, and Escaped,” deals with an “intelligent woman” who “found herself pregnant without a proper husband.” With no one to help her, she decides to find a secluded place to give birth and abandon the child. This suggests that to have no relatives, and to become pregnant without first being married was a source of anxiety. She was “ashamed to confess her condition,”<sup>66</sup> and hence felt the need to hide it.

After venturing off into the woods, she comes across a secluded estate occupied by an old woman who offers to help her. Believing that the Buddha “had come to her aid,” she “had an easy delivery,” and decides not to abandon the baby once she sees it is a “beautiful little boy.” The old woman says to her, “Old people like me who live in countrified places like this don’t need to worry about taboos. Why don’t you stay here for seven days, until your defilement is over,”<sup>67</sup> suggesting that customs were already in place to separate pregnant women due to their impurities.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Wilson, “The Way of the Bow and Arrow,” 184–189.

<sup>66</sup> Ury, *Tales of Times Now Past*, 161.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>68</sup> This theme is discussed at length in the next chapter. Interestingly, the last parturition hut used for childbirth “was in use until the 1950s.” Hardacre, *Marketing the Menacing*, 24.

The woman's happiness is short lived, however, as she overhears the old woman exclaim, while looking at the baby, "only a mouthful, but my how delicious!"<sup>69</sup> The woman and the baby escape and the story concludes with, "Now think: ancient places of that sort always have supernatural beings living in them... only an oni could have looked at an infant and said that. This shows that you should never go into such places alone."<sup>70</sup>

Unlike the *ubume*, barring the fact that she may well have been a fox simply playing a trick, the mother in this story ultimately is able to fulfil her duties to her child. It also seems that the compiler was suggesting that to think violent thoughts towards an infant would be demonic, although the main point is to stay clear of old places. This message is explicit, while in the *ubume* story the actions of a character (Suetake) are the main point.

Story thirteen of chapter twenty-seven follows the construction and plot of the *ubume* tale, with a much more violent ending. A group of men also make a wager to test their bravery and, as with the *ubume* narrative, it opens with them discussing a location, in this instance a bridge, that people have been avoiding.<sup>71</sup> The emotions of the warrior who agrees to cross the bridge are stated more explicitly than Suetake's. Perhaps the storyteller wished to create a sense of unease to foreshadow the grim ending. He sees a woman on the bridge but reasons it must be a demon and rides his horse right past her, which greatly angers the demon.

He is able to escape, but his troubles are not over. "Sinister things began to occur at his house," and the man consults an Onmyōji who tells him to seclude himself on a specific time and day.<sup>72</sup> He shuts himself in but when his younger brother comes knocking with news of their mother's death, the man lets him in. The wife of the man later hears the two brothers fighting and her husband demands she get his sword. However, she hesitates, not knowing the younger brother is actually the demon, and in that instant he bites off the head of the older brother. A cautionary summation after this grisly scene states, "and so we can see what happens when a woman interferes and tries to act too clever."<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Ury, *Tales of Times Now Past*, 162.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>71</sup> Koriyama and Allen, *Japanese Tales from Times Past*, 192.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

These three examples of female abjection and ineptitude were originally told and retold by men. Men promulgated even the first two, which deal with the immensely personal female experience of birth, with the *ubume* narrative taking it a step further by including the tragedy of death as a result of maternity.

At this time, historically, women were still “engaged in devotional practices as nuns, pilgrims, and patrons,” but “marriage and inheritance patterns shaped women’s religious choices and opportunities.”<sup>74</sup> In short, husbands and sons held more power than wives and daughters, and attitudes towards the female body, exemplified by the Heian period literature, suggest that the laws in place to protect women from offenses such as rape were geared more towards assuring “patrilineal authority” and not so much to protect women.

While individuals were becoming increasingly concerned with their afterlife, living women were being excluded from certain religious spaces, such as the Shingon sect’s Kōyasan, the monastic center of Shingon, and the Tendai sect’s Hieizan, the monastic center for the Tendai sect. At the same time, “belief in blood pollution (through menstruation and childbirth) slowly began to gain currency among nobility and in monastic circles alongside the Confucian concept of women’s Three Obediences and the Buddhist notion of women’s Five Obstructions. Given the proliferation of such beliefs, the notion that women were innately flawed and sinful spread.”<sup>75</sup> *Setsuwa* were one way in which the laity came to be familiar with such ideologies.

#### *Summary*

In the *Konjaku monogatari* the *ubume* is used as a terrifying female figure in opposition to warrior (male) order. She is associated with a specific location, typical of the supernatural in *setsuwa*. However, there is a stronger focus on the men who encounter her. In this instance, a warrior bravely seeks out the spot she is known to haunt and comes away unscathed. Despite the fact that the emphasis is on Suetake’s bravery and honorable act of refusing to take the wagers he won, this text indicates that it was already known that should a woman die while pregnant, she could potentially become an *ubume*, although perhaps not viewed as quite a grave a sin as it would later come to be.

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<sup>74</sup> Ambros, *Women in Japanese Religions*, 56–59.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 66–69.

If this story was used to enliven sermons, then we can infer that monks were promulgating the notion that to die during childbirth would lead to the horrible fate of becoming an *ubume* into a society that had already absorbed the idea of karmic retribution and the defilement of blood and fear of the dangers the improper care for a dead mother and infant posed, whether the baby survived or perished with the mother. If the story was also meant to be an attempt to bring order to the supernatural world so prominent in the Heian period, it would seem to both warn of the Watari area, but also imply that if one is brave and honorable, one can escape an encounter with an *ubume*.

### **Conclusion**

#### *Retracing the Ubume*

The *ubume* began her journey into the fixed pantheon of *yōkai* around 1120 when she was confined to the pages of the *Konjaku monogatari*. However, this would not have been enough to warrant the repetition in which she was invoked during the arts of the Tokugawa period, nor would it have been enough to spur the development of rituals performed for a natural occurrence that should have resulted in life that instead results in death. Entire areas developed out of these practices, such as the Shōsenji temple and town surrounding it, or more obviously, the town of Ubume in Shizuoka, home to the Ubume Kannon Temple.

By tracing the chronology of such a figure, it becomes clear that the *ubume* narrative informed, and was formed by, the metanarrative. In other words, the general attitudes towards the dead, mainly notions of *tatari* (spirit attacks) and the anxieties of *muenbotoke* (spirits with no relations), merged with the attitudes towards women and the female body, creating a specific afterlife for women who died either during pregnancy or childbirth. These were further enforced by the notions of impurity (specifically of blood), karmic retribution (immediate and after death), and specific hells for certain transgressions.

It becomes a bit of a “chicken or the egg” dilemma when trying to determine exactly what came first. Based on the language of the *Konjaku*, we know that the chapter in which the *ubume* appears consisted of stories most likely derived from Japanese vernacular culture. Put another way, by process of elimination we can make an educated guess that that chapter did not derive inspiration from previous histories or sutras. We also know that in order for *setsuwa* to function (mainly, to make more easily accessible the teachings of Buddhism), they had to be relatable to the audience. From this, we can assume that whoever compiled the *Konjaku* did not make up the figure of the

*ubume*, regardless of whether or not people believed it was actually a fox playing tricks or a woman who died during pregnancy.

Whatever the case, by the time Banryō included the illustration of the *ubume* passing her baby off to Suetake in his edited Tokugawa version of the *Konjaku*, and removed the part that she may have been a fox, her figure was already recognizable. I argue that the religious ramifications surrounding maternity contributed to the popularity of the *ubume* trope, which became so popular that by the 1800s one author lamented that she was invoked too often. In an illustration meant to be comedic, she was drawn with a ghostly husband who proclaims, “You! You’re just a female ghost, but you’re an incredibly immodest one! You’ve been popping up totally randomly... and as a result no one takes us ghosts seriously anymore.”

But ghosts do not pop up randomly. In the past, they were real figures that inspired fear and action to be taken in this life to prevent others from becoming one and from interacting with one.

#### *Further Research*

During the Nanbokuchō period (1336–1392), a wooden statue of a seated Jizō Bodhisattva was carved. In 1678, to memorialize his dead son, “a merchant by the name of Obiya,” put two of his sons books inside the statue, to ensure “the boy’s connection to Jizō in the afterworld.”<sup>76</sup> Even though the books inside were discovered in 1915, they were “largely disregarded until 1980,” when a scholar insisted they be reexamined.<sup>77</sup> Dated between the years 1667–1677, the books give scholars valuable insight into the “reading material that would have been deemed appropriate for merchant-class boys” of that time. In their case, they included “monsters, anthropomorphic animals, silly jokes, and violence,” and in one tale “two men who, in parallel dreams, ran away from the same blood-stained *ubume* 産女 (the ghost of a woman who died in childbirth).”<sup>78</sup>

What this example shows is that new discoveries always await. We may one day find yet an older extent copy of the *Ketsubonkyō* or a textual reference to an *ubume* that predates the *Konjaku monogatari* compilation.

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<sup>76</sup> R. Keller Kimbrough, “Bloody Hell!: Reading Boys’ Books in Seventeenth-Century Japan,” *Asian Ethnology* 74/1 (2015), 112 (accessed April 4, 2019, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43610654>).

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

The crisis Japan is facing in terms of its aging population and low-birth rate is not going to be alleviated any time soon, which means gender, and more specifically, maternity, will continue to be a contentious issue in contemporary Japan. Certainly, within this climate, the ideology of motherhood and the stigmatization of non-reproduction persist. As Foster points out, “we humans have created monsters over which we have no control.”<sup>79</sup> Yōkai, and to an extent more overtly religious figures such as Kannon, cannot easily answer or stand in for the problems of the twenty-first century. However, when examined empirically, they offer insight into how those problems arose.

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<sup>79</sup> Foster, *The Book of Yōkai*, 243–245.