

Yokai Comic “GeGeGe no Kitaro” & Japanese Society

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Bronze statues of Shigeru Mizuki & his wife

By Isao ADACHI

“GeGeGe no Kitaro” is the popular hero of a *manga* (comic) series familiar to Japanese people of all generations. Kitaro, a resident of the supernatural world, punishes evil *yokai* (specters) troubling humans. Japanese children grow up watching Kitaro and friendly *yokai* pull off breathtaking duels in *manga* books and TV *anime* programs. Shigeru Mizuki, the author of the Kitaro series, is one of those cartoonists who have been instrumental in shaping contemporary Japanese *manga*, along with Osamu Tezuka, Fujio Akatsuka and others. The popularity of Kitaro, whose origin dates back to the 1950s, remained strong in the 21st century, so much so that Japan Broadcasting Corp. (NHK), the public radio/TV network, dramatized the life of Mizuki and his wife in a serial. It makes me wonder why Japanese are attracted to *yokai* so much.

The word *yokai* is often translated in the Western world as “monster,” but that is far from the image Japanese people have of *yokai*. *Yokai* are to Japanese what fairies are to Germanic and Celtic peoples, except that *yokai* play tricks on people and are sometimes harmful. In *yokai*, I see Alberich appearing in Richard Wagner’s opera “*Das Rheingold*” (*The Rhine Gold*) – the dwarf who seizes the gold guarded by three Rhine maidens in the river bed.

Yokai appearing in the Kitaro series come in all shapes and sizes. *Nurikabe* (plastered wall) blocks people walking at night. *Sunakake Babaa* (sand-throwing hag) sprays people walking in the wood or at night with sand. *Ittan Momen* (roll of cotton) is a flying strip of white cloth that wraps itself around the human body.

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Main characters of “GeGeGe no Kitaro” comic series

These friends of Kitaro come to the rescue of humans placed in harm’s way by less humanized and more magically powerful *yokai*. It is later learned, however, that *yokai*’s aggression often results from the very acts of humans who destroy and pollute the woods and rivers *yokai* inhabit. At the end of each episode, Kitaro narrates the plight of the evil *yokai*, speaking on their behalf. Kitaro’s *manga* is about the feeling of awe for nature and warning against human society that lost it.

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Mizuki Shigeru Road is lined with more than 100 “yokai” (specter) bronze statues and various “yokai goods” shops in the cartoonist’s hometown of Sakaiminato, Tottori Prefecture, in western Japan.

Children used to listen to their grandmothers telling the tales of *yokai* and ghosts haunting night-time woods, rivers and large houses, nurturing their image about the supernatural world around them. Those tales of *yokai*, ghosts and mysterious phenomena were compiled into books by Kunio Yanagida (1875-1962), the “founder” of Japan’s folklore. He authored the highly acclaimed “*Tono Monogatari (The Legends of Tono)*,” a compilation of tales orally handed down from generation to generation in Iwate Prefecture in the northern part of the Honshu main island. It depicts a variety of *yokai*, including *kappa* (water imp), *zashiki-warashi* (house spirits) and *yama-otoko* (mountain men). Some of Mizuki’s *yokai* were inspired by Yanagida’s folktale study.

Kappa inhabit rivers, sneaking up on nearby villages and seizing livestock. With a figure somewhat resembling that of a human the size of a child, a *kappa* has a short bill, a shell on the back and webs between fingers. *Zashiki-warashi* are child *yokai* living in the corners of large houses. They are more fairies than evil spirits, showing up once in a while in front of family members, causing absolutely no harm. Rather, as it is widely believed, the house left by *zashiki-warashi* is doomed. Folks therefore take good care of *zashiki-warashi* so they may stay on.

With animism still held at the center of their religious belief, Japanese people see gods in mountains, rivers, paddy fields and wells. Likewise, *yokai* inhabit various places between human society and nature. Some are incarnations of animist gods. As grannies lost their traditional role in our modernized society, Kitaro took over, telling children about how Japanese see and feel about nature.

Godzilla, which Hollywood made into a movie, is not *yokai* but a monster originating from the Japanese filmdom. Japanese love the monster. Godzilla is portrayed in the movie world as a creature that grew gigantic under the influence of a nuclear test explosion in the South Pacific. What is unique about the Godzilla movies is that despite all the destruction of buildings after its landing in Tokyo, an air of sadness oozes from Godzilla’s behavior and people who try to kill it know that. The Godzilla movies will not stand unless there is a sense of animism behind them. Japanese do not admit the made-in-Hollywood Godzilla is the same as the traditional one because it has nothing to do with the view of nature based on animism. JS

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